

Care of Magical Creatures

by mia madwyn

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

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Proposed

Chapter 1 of 92

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Thanks to Leigh-Anne, my fabulous beta!

1. PROPOSED

She flung the door to the Potions classroom open with a bang, her robe billowing around her. "Professor!"

Snape raised his face from the papers on his desk. If he was startled at her sudden entrance, he certainly wasn't showing it. "Ten points from Gryffindor," he drawled, then lazily lifted his wand. "And term hasn't even started yet."

She felt something—a force—hit her square in the chest and her heels dragging across the floor. He was ejecting her from the room!

"*Expelliarmus!*" she gasped. His wand flew through the air, and she had to lunge to catch it. She stood up, feeling quite smug.

Until she saw the expression on his face. Those narrowed black eyes and thin lips were frozen, expressionless, but those eyes burned. Oh, my.

She gulped. She had disarmed a *teacher!*

She scurried forward, placed his wand on his desk and backed quickly away. Cleared her throat. Tried to appear calm. "There. Now that I have your attention..."

"Quite." His voice was barely more than a whisper, but even so, his tone was acid.

Hermione glanced nervously at the door. She waved her wand quickly so that it closed a lot more quietly than it had opened. Another flick of the wand and it was locked for good measure.

She looked at him, determined. "I need your help, Professor!"

Professor Snape slid his eyes toward the locked door, and back at her, without moving any other part of his body. And remained silent. Scarily silent. In fact, he was more frightening while silent than if he'd raged at her.

She closed her eyes. *Breathe, Hermione.* And realized, of course, that he was proving her right. Everything about his reaction to this horrid visit was supporting her theory. And after that quick sense of relief, a surge of self-righteous anger filled her.

She opened her eyes and glared at him. "Do you know what they're going to do to me?" She couldn't stand still. She dragged her free hand through her hair, took a few steps toward the window, whirled back. "Have you seen my list of?" she could barely choke the word out "*suitors*?"

Finally, he moved. He eased back in his chair, relaxing. "I can't see any reason why such a subject would be of any interest to me, Miss Granger," he hissed, but she got the distinct impression he was enjoying her situation.

She clenched her wand more tightly and snapped, "I never implied that it was. I simply asked if you knew. But I suppose that doesn't really matter..."

A sneer twisted his lips. "I'm thinking I've been remiss not keeping up with your love life."

"Love life!" She stopped herself just short of stomping her foot, but noticed his gaze flicker to her knee-twitch as if he realized what she wanted to do even before she stopped herself. "Draco Malfoy? What kind of joke is this, Draco Malfoy wants to marry me? That's pure insanity." She stormed across the room. "And...Mundungus Fletcher!"

He covered his smirk with long fingers and leaned back in his chair.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, George and Fred Weasley, Ron, of course. And Viktor..."

"Herr Krum? Now that is a feather in your cap."

"Professor, suffice it to say, I have reason to know it is not! But that's not the least of it. It seems that I'm some sort of project like a virgin territory to be either conquered or protected!"

Other than a clever arching of one skeptical brow, his expression didn't change.

"Professor, surely you are not implying that I'm not a" She sputtered to a stop, unable to continue.

He smirked. "If I had reason to care, I'd have no problem finding the answer to that question, Miss Granger." He allowed the thought to hang there, pregnant, as it were, with meaning.

She huffed in a breath, quite speechless.

"You really must learn to keep your mind out of the gutter, Miss Granger. It's unseemly." One corner of his mouth slanted in a quick smirk. "I am a Legilimens, as I'm sure you know."

Bastard.

"Fortunately for both of us, I can think of few subjects that interest me less than the status of your hymen." He flicked an invisible speck of lint from his black wool sleeve.

This was not going well at all.

"I'm sure..." She tested her voice and found it relatively strong so continued. "Professor Dumbledore thinks he's being helpful, but the list includes oh, too many to name and some wizards I've never even heard of! Oh, and..." She fought to remember the name. "Wilbur Oro...Oro..."

"Orogrande?"

At her nod, he shrugged. "Perhaps you should consider that one, Miss Granger. The Orograndes are one of the oldest and wealthiest wizarding families in"

"I am not stupid, Professor."

"My apologies. I sometimes forget."

"They live in Cornwall! How could I study in Cornwall?"

"I had no idea you were such a prize, Miss Granger," he sneered. "I'm sure this will be an exciting choice for you, but again..." He pushed away from his desk and rose to his full height. "I can't see that it has anything to do with me. In fact," he glowered at her, "I cannot fathom why you are even here at Hogwarts four days before term starts, and furthermore, why you aren't taking your whining to your own head of house?"

"I thought it quite obvious why I can't go to Professor McGonagall!" She glared at him. "She can't save me, but you can."

If he had any clue of where she was going, he wasn't revealing it. He just ... waited. For her to continue.

Oh, god.

"Professor Snape, you aren't thick," she snapped. "I want you...*I need* you to marry me."

His glance raked her coolly from top to bottom and back up again.

And then, dismissively. "Do you have fever with these fits? Perhaps a visit to Madam Pomfrey?"

She felt foolish tears stinging her eyes, and blinking them away, sniffed.

Disgust rolled off him in waves. "Please spare me displays of feminine weakness."

"I'm not weak!" she snapped. "I'm just...overwhelmed."

"Indeed."

Only Professor Severus Snape could imbue one word...two syllables...with such contempt.

She spun away nervously, pacing. "If I marry any of the men on that list, I'll have to leave Hogwarts! My life will be ruined!"

"And if I marry any of the..." She did an about-face, flung her wand hand in the air and waved for emphasis. "The *boys*..."

Her cheeks burned, but she forced herself to continue, whirling to glare at him, her hands fisted on her hips. "I refuse to be shackled to a teenaged boy who thinks I'm available for him to rut any time he gets the urge because I'd never get out of bed!"

He folded his arms in front of him and allowed himself to relax against the stone wall. And smirked.

He was taking pleasure in her dilemma, damn him. And she hadn't swayed him to help her at all. She leaned forward, bracing herself on the edge of his desk. "I have to be at Hogwarts, for my education and because" There went those tears again, she stopped, her throat clogged, unable to continue.

"Because...?" he drawled, studying a smudge of ink on one of his fingertips.

"I won't be safe anywhere else," she said. And met his hooded gaze. "*With* anyone else."

Silence.

She glared at him. "You are the only wizard I know who could actually protect me!"

"You clearly need to meet more wizards." He began gathering the papers on his desk. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Professor!"

He shot her a venomous look. "Aren't we quite through?"

She felt her last hope slipping through her fingers. And she'd been so sure...so very sure...that he wouldn't be able to turn his back on her. "It's obvious, you are a very powerful wizard and not afraid to fight dirty, I might add!" she pleaded. "I can't imagine a wizard anywhere who could protect me as well as you could."

He scowled at her but said nothing.

"Well, except for Professor Dumbledore." Honesty compelled her to add, "But he's clearly too old and well, very busy, and I couldn't ask him to do such a thing."

Snape's nostrils flared as he gave her a sharp look.

"And then, I thought I had derived the perfect solution when I realized that, well, I am sure I could convince Professor Lockhart..."

"Gilderoy Lockhart!?!"

"It makes a lot of sense, actually," she said brightly. "He's at St. Mungo's, so I can hardly be expected to live with him. I could continue my studies here."

"And pray tell," Snape drawled, "why aren't you at St. Mungo's at this very moment, throwing yourself on his mercy?"

"Well, then I realized the problem with the 'being protected' part which he clearly couldn't do, and of course, there's the...the..." Her stomach clenched with disgust. "Consummation part. With him! In St. Mungo's!" She shuddered. "I think I'd rather die!"

"Miss Granger..." His voice was low and almost, well, dangerous. "Did you forget that you'd also have to consummate the contract with me? Down here? In the dungeons?"

"Of course," she said primly, straightening her robe. "But that's different."

"How?" The word thudded between them.

She looked up at him, surprised. "I thought it would be quite obvious! Other than the, um, consummation part, we wouldn't even have to live together. You could continue doing everything you always do; I certainly wouldn't stand in your way, and I'd continue living in Gryffindor Tower with my friends, and nothing else would have to change at all!"

"Except tell me again, about the... consummation part?" He sounded almost intrigued.

For the first time, she felt a lilt of hope skitter through her. "But it's brilliant, isn't it! Neither one of us want to do it, and I'm sure we could get it over quickly and be done with it."

"Oh, please, do go on," he drawled.

"Why I thought it would be quite obvious!" she stammered. "You're a teacher! And I'm a student!"

"And your point is..."

She almost growled in frustration. Didn't anybody actually read anymore? "As if there weren't the obvious reason why it would be totally inappropriate, in *Hogwarts: A History*," she spoke slowly, as if to Ron, "it explains that ever since the rather scandalous tenure of Headmaster Darlingood in the sixteenth Century," she felt her cheeks burning again and rushed on, "professors have been required to take potions to, um, still their, um, desires, to prevent, well..."

She glanced nervously at him, but he merely inclined his head politely.

"Immoral acts with students." She heaved in a deep breath. She blinked. "Which of course, you already know."

"I might ask about the publication date of your source material, Miss Granger, but I'm too fascinated at this point to stop you. Please. Continue."

"Well, while I'm sure that precaution could be waived briefly so we could fulfill our, our contractual obligation, the fact is..." She raised her chin a notch and concluded triumphantly, "You don't even like me, so I can't imagine that you'd want to prolong the activity any more than I would."

"In...deed."

She thought she might grow to quite hate that word. "According to my research, it shouldn't take that long, anyway, as you're hardly a boy anymore."

"*Indeed*." It was a snarl.

She stared at him, confused. He needn't be so snippy. She raised her quivering chin. "You can deny any interest or concern, but I don't believe you. You are a teacher, and you are obligated to protect your students. Even...even the ones you don't like very much. And you've proven that again and again when you've protected Ron and Harry and me."

She pulled a folded piece of vellum out of her robe and offered it to him with trembling hands. He took it, flipped it open, read it.

"Death threats?" The words were casual, almost disinterested.

"Well. Only three." She glared at him. "I'm *not* afraid. But I'm also not stupid. I'm Harry Potter's friend, and Muggle-born, and that makes me everything they hate."

"And a Muggle-born witch with the *appearance* of a modicum of talent," he added. "Which gives them even more reason to hate you."

She glared at the floor and cursed inwardly that she'd never learned to control her infernal emotions.

"So. In review, you burst into my classroom in a manner that would justify me turning you over to Filch and his thumbscrews*you disarm me...*"

"I gave it back!"

"...and ask for my hand in marriage, assuring me I wasn't your first choice "

"I wanted you to know I'd considered all the other options!"

"...behind a centenarian and a lunatic..."

"You needn't take it personally!"

"...and that you are choosing me because I am too old *torut...*"

She choked.

"...and then you think by shedding an artful tear, leaning on my desk to expose a swell of breast..."

She looked down, horrified, and grasped her robe closed.

"...and attempting to arouse my pity by flourishing a death threat in front of my face, you think you can induce me to marry you?"

"Miss Granger..." His voice lowered to a gravelly whisper that sent chills skimming down her back. "Have you quite forgotten to whom you are speaking?"

She backed away, toward the door, and grasped it with her free hand. "I...I...I seem to have made an error in judgment."

When the door didn't open, she remembered her charm and waved her wand and turned the handle and...

It still didn't open.

She glanced over her shoulder to see

Professor Snape, his own wand dangling languidly from his fingertips.

"I don't believe I am quite finished with you."

Sealed

Chapter 2 of 92

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2. SEALED

A quick flick of Professor Snape's wand, and she found herself unceremoniously flung into a chair on the front row. She squirmed, but couldn't escape.

"So. You are offering me the most convenient type of marriage you can imagine. A wife who leads her own life quite separate from mine. A wife who other than the aforementioned mutually distasteful but legally required consummation makes no demands on me at all. Oh, except to protect her from death threats, to continue to hurl myself into harm's way every time she and her friends get themselves in trouble, but as you have pointed out so brilliantly, I do that anyway, so what difference would a signed marriage contract and a quick copulation in the dungeons make, after all?"

Her stomach twisted.

"Your presentation could have been more orderly, but you seem to have taken everything under consideration."

She dared look up at him with hope.

He glared back at her. "From your perspective."

"I analyzed it thoroughly!"

"I see. You considered that I would want to have a nubile young wife living in community with people I despise rather than warming my own bed?"

"Professor!"

"With all the accompanying whispering, giggling and speculation that would produce?"

"But everyone would understand you're a teacher! You wouldn't want people to think you have inappropriate thoughts about a student ... "

"About my own wife? What kind of half-man do you think I'd appear in a situation such as you have concocted? And what of my own safety when the Dark Lord knows that I'm marrying Potter's friend to save her from marriage to one of his loyal Death Eaters?"

She scrambled for an answer. How had she missed that?

"You have spun your little web so diligently and have dreamed up justifications that admittedly work from the perspective of a naïve little know-it-all whose experience ... such as it is ... comes from books. I do pity you, Miss Granger. How desperate you must be to humiliate yourself this way." But if he had any pity in him at all, it wasn't evident from his tone or his expression.

"I see." She fought the quiver in her voice and took a deep breath. She pulled out the list of those who had offered for her hand and gave it to him. "In that case, whom should I choose?"

"You ask me that?" He drew back, and she would have thought she'd finally said something to astonish him, if his eyes hadn't glittered quite so menacingly. He scanned the list dismissively, then folded it and slipped it into his own robe. "Miss Granger, it is a little late to be asking me to choose between your suitors. You made your own choice when you asked me to marry you. And until I say no, you can't accept an offer from another."

"But"

"I said your justifications were ill-considered and selfish, not that your conclusion was false. The fact is, now that you have thrown this all in my lap," he ground the words out, "I am forced to recognize the risk to us all if you end up in the wrong hands or, worse, die. It's bad enough that so much is riding on the Potter prat, without adding another loss another death to distract his focus. As it is, our hopes of defeating the Dark Lord are slim. If something happened to you?"

He left the rest unspoken.

"I accept your proposal."

It took a moment for her to truly believe what she had heard. He'd he'd agreed.

"And, I believe, as you were the one to propose the union," he added silkily, "it is up to you to initiate the sealing?"

She suddenly realized that nothing secured her to her chair. She was free to stand and did. She cleared her throat nervously. "Yes. Well. Then you realize, I will have to ..."

He raised his eyebrows in polite question. "From across the room? What an unusual skill. Pray tell, what book did you learn that from?"

She crossed the room, scowling. He was making it as difficult as wizardly possible, not even moving from behind his desk. In order to stand in front of him, she had to squeeze between his body and his chair.

My. She hadn't realized how tall he was.

She raised her lips and waited, staring up at him.

He stared down his nose at her.

"Professor! You have to at least lean closer if I'm going to kiss you!"

"Miss Granger, I don't have to do anything."

Exasperated, she stood on her toes and leaned into him, reached up and dug her fingers into his hair until she could pull his head down

And gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

She let go even more quickly.

It was all so fast, but still not fast enough; she was quite staggered by that off-center brush of her mouth against his rigid lips, even though she was pretty sure she'd done all the work and he hadn't even returned the kiss. Her lower lip absolutely tingled, and she found herself biting it, attempting to drive away the sensation.

She stammered, "There, is ... is it legal now?"

"Very," he said in a clipped voice, his black eyes unreadable.

"I ... I realize how odious this all is and how much you must loathe doing it, and for that I can only thank you, Professor." She suddenly felt quite weak-kneed and decided this might be a good time to leave while she could still walk. She slipped away from him, headed for the door, but all the way something was singing in her veins.

He'd agreed.

She was safe.

"Miss Granger. Our terms have yet to be settled."

She froze, afraid to face him lest he read the emotions on her face and mistake them for something more than ... well, relief.

"You will live with me. You will not spend time alone with any any males. No Slytherin would ever allow such liberties with any of his possessions "

At that, she spun on her heel, enraged.

"And all of our safety depends upon the illusion that you are a prized possession for which I am willing to die."

She caught her breath.

"There will be other details to work out, of course. But it is imperative that you understand that first and foremost."

"But I have to be able to help Harry and Ron!"

He watched her through narrowed eyes, cocked his head, waiting.

"Ginny. If Ginny is with me? With us, I mean?"

He nodded sharply. "Do not expect me to like your continued association with Gryffindors, but we will make our arrangements to allow for such occasional fraternizations, as long as your studies don't suffer."

She scowled. "You sound like a father!"

"I can assure you, you won't feel that way after our marriage."

Before she could ponder the ramifications of that statement too closely, he continued, "I hope you have no girlish fantasies about weddings."

"No! There can't be a wedding. At least, nothing formal, anyway. We have to do it quickly and quietly."

He seemed very relieved.

"Before my parents find out."

"Good god, don't tell me "

"It's one of the other reasons I chose you. You won't have any scruples about going against my parents' wishes."

"I see. My lack of scruples is yet another jot in the 'for' column. Fascinating."

"I'm seventeen. My parents can't stop me legally, but that wouldn't keep them from trying. They were so angry when I got the notice from the Ministry that I was required to marry a Pureblood, and do it immediately, that they refused to let me return to Hogwarts or to the wizarding community ... ever!"

"Yet you're here."

"I ran away to London and to the Leaky Cauldron, and of course, they know all about Diagon Alley so I couldn't stop there, so I got George Weasley to give me a ride to Hogwarts on his broom."

"You hate brooms. Weasley hates me. How exactly did you manage to do that?"

"As for the broom, I am a Gryffindor, and I am certainly able to show courage when the situation calls for it," she sniffed, offended that he even had to ask. "And as for George, well he... he might have thought I was coming to see Professor Dumbledore to ..." She cringed. "I think he might have assumed that, since I turned to him for help, I was choosing him."

"How ... sly." He watched her through narrowed eyes. "Of course, by now he knows better."

"How?" she asked, startled.

"The moment we sealed, all the suitors would receive a tactfully worded missive thanking them for the honor of their attentions, regretting most elegantly to inform them that you have accepted my offer."

"That's very efficient! At least I didn't have to write out a lot of regrets."

Though should she wouldn't have thought it possible, his scowl darkened. "Your concern for their tender feelings is almost Hufflepuffian in its depth."

"But we have to get married quickly before Professor Dumbledore realizes my parents are against it. There might be some silliness about me still being a student here, and I'm afraid he would feel compelled to ... "

As if in response to their turn of conversation, the flames in the fireplace flared, and Professor Dumbledore's astonished face appeared.

"Severus, George Weasley is in my office, quite distraught, and the owls are coming from all directions. Something odd has happened. You might want to investigate, as I'm sure there has been an error, but ... "

"Ah, Professor, just who we were hoping to see," Snape said smoothly, his strong fingers closing around Hermione's shoulder as he yanked her close to him in a grasp that felt more like a claim than a mark of affection. "I hope you will wish us well since I have been most *honored* ... " Oh, how that word seemed to curdle on his tongue. " ... to have Miss Granger accept my request to become... Mrs. Severus Snape."

"Ms. Granger," Hermione piped up. "I'll be keeping my maiden name." She managed to stifle a yelp when Snape's fingers tightened painfully on her shoulder. She smiled sweetly up into his furious black eyes. "And Severus has agreed."

For once, Albus Dumbledore seemed at a loss for words.

Defended

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Disclaimer: This is a non-profit spin on the works of JK Rowling who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein. No offense is intended, and it is hoped that none will be taken.

As always, kudos to my wonderful beta, Leigh-Anne!

3. DEFENDED

"Weasleys' Skiving Snackboxes," Professor Snape hissed with disdain.

Hermione could hardly believe her ears, but before she could speak, the gargoyle had opened the secret passageway, and Snape was dragging her up the spiral staircase.

He either had very long legs (as a matter of fact, he did) or was in excellent condition (obviously so) because by the time they reached the Headmaster's office at the top of the tower, Hermione could scarcely breathe while Snape was scarcely winded.

He gave her a hard look and then seemed to come to a quick decision. His head dipped low and to her shock, his lips closed over hers, his fingers dug into her hair

And the door to Dumbledore's office slid open to reveal their embrace to everyone inside.

Snape pulled away and the entire kiss was so brief, if she hadn't seen the startled expression on Professor Dumbledore's face, she would have questioned whether it had happened at all.

He brushed her hair out of her face. "You'll have to forgive us, Albus. We were celebrating our *..engagement.*" Despite his best efforts, she noticed he couldn't speak the last word without his lip curling.

As for Hermione, she was still gasping for breath from the forced run up the staircase and in no condition to speak at all. At least, she assured herself, it had to be the stairs. Even if the pulse at her neck hadn't started beating wildly until that blasted kiss.

"Come in, Professor," the Headmaster said, his brow furrowed with confusion. "I hope you don't mind that you and ... um ... Miss Granger ... aren't the only ones here for this meeting."

Snape stood aside to allow Hermione to enter, at which point she almost did an about face to leave.

George Weasley leaped to his feet and crossed the office, reaching for her. "What did that greasy git do to you?" he demanded.

Professor Snape blocked his path and fixed him with a deathly glare. But his words seemed tossed out almost with nonchalance as he drawled, "I must find some way to thank you, Weasley, for delivering my blushing bride safely to my care."

George slung his gleaming red hair out of his face and met Snape almost nose to nose. "It was a potion, wasn't it?" And then, to Hermione, "He gave you something to drink. He slipped you something!" He whipped his wand out of his robe. "Let me by, you slimy, toad-sucking "

A low growl came from deep in Snape's throat, and Hermione knew all too well that he didn't need a wand to flay George senseless. She flung herself between them.

"No, George, I swear he didn't!" She grabbed Professor Snape's elbow and pulled desperately. "Please don't hurt him. He he's mad. He's mad with grief. " She shot a desperate look at George. "George has been in love with me for years!"

From the expressions of disbelief on the faces of the three men most especially George she realized she had pushed the bounds of credulity.

But Professor Snape seemed willing enough to let her get away with it, even as George, cheeks flaming, bit back a protest.

"Because you ask so nicely," he shot a sneer at George, "I'll let this breach of propriety pass unavenged."

Professor Dumbledore rose from his desk. "Mr. Weasley, are you quite satisfied that all is as it should be?"

"Not a chance in hell," George muttered and shot Hermione a searching look.

"George, thank you," she said softly, feeling guilty as sin as she tucked her small hand into the crook of Snape's left arm, startling the professor so much she thought he might hex her before he caught himself.

"Then perhaps," the Headmaster said with as stern a voice as she'd ever heard him use, "we would all benefit from an explanation of why this contract has already been sealed? Isn't that a bit pre-emptive, Professor Snape?"

The professor slid a smug, sideways glance at Hermione, one eyebrow arched. His fingers caressed hers as he played with the hand she'd entrusted to his care, though now she'd quite like to take it back. "Headmaster, I feel it might be less than tactful to Mr. Weasley," oh, quite the sneer on that name, all right, "... and Miss Granger's own enthusiasm might seem less than what normal wizarding etiquette requires, so if I don't give a direct answer..."

"Oh, that's too rich," George snapped. "You're not claiming she sealed *you*?"

Belatedly, Hermione realized the brief kiss Snape had guided her to perform might not have been totally required. Bastard!

"Well..." She hid her flaming cheeks behind Snape's arm, longing to sink her teeth into it.

"I think quite enough has been said," the old wizard interrupted. "Tact, wizarding etiquette, etc., etc. as previously referenced. You must come back and visit soon, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said as genially as if a small war weren't about to break out before him. "Oh, and please thank your mother for the lovely pair of wool socks she knitted me this summer. I can't imagine how she knew they would be just the very thing!" He raised his robes to reveal multi-colored stripes of such garish hues, they almost hurt Hermione's eyes to look at them.

But it broke the tension. George shot Snape one last threatening glance and Hermione one last disbelieving one before excusing himself and taking his leave.

When the door closed silently behind him, Dumbledore gestured with long, age-spotted hands. "Sit down, sit down, please."

Hermione perched on the edge of hard chair. Snape remained standing behind her where she couldn't see his face, but she was very aware of his hands lightly resting on the chair back on either side of her head.

"Sherbet lemons?" Dumbledore offered. "We're only waiting on ah, and here she is."

Professor McGonagall entered the office stiffly, staring at everyone in disapproval. "What is the meaning of this nonsense," she demanded. "I have never heard anything so preposterous in all my years at Hogwarts a professor getting married. To a student! Whose insane idea was this?"

"Oh, but there's precedent," Hermione said quickly. "If you check page 734, second footnote, in *Hogwarts: A History...*" She almost yelped when she felt a sharp tug on her hair.

"Minerva," Snape said smoothly. "The insane idea is the Marriage Law foisted upon us by the Ministry of Magic, as you already agree. I believe what we have arrived at now is the only sane response for Miss Granger."

Well. Hermione nibbled her lower lip. Maybe she would just let him do some of the talking, after all.

"Sane?" Professor McGonagall demanded. "You call wedding this this child sane?"

Hermione felt a tiny bit of tension ease from her stomach. Professor McGonagall was nothing if not fierce when protecting her Gryffindors, and for a brief moment Hermione wished fervently that she could have married her instead.

Well. Except for the consummation part.

She shot her Head of House a grateful look, anyway.

Which Professor Dumbledore evidently misunderstood. "Miss Granger, are you quite sure this is an arrangement with which you can be comfortable?"

She opened her mouth to respond, and again, the hair-tug, and again, Snape's silky voice beat her to the punch.

"Miss Granger has received a number of offers for her hand, some quite impressive," Snape said. "And then there are the death threats."

Dumbledore sat up straight, and Professor McGonagall stared.

"Yes," Snape said, "I thought you would understand the awkward position this puts us in. I believe it is our duty to do everything in our power to protect her from those who see her as a pawn in the war against the Dark Lord. But it doesn't stop there, oh, no." His voice tightened. "Miss Granger has applied her somewhat formidable mind to this problem and has come up with a solution typical of her intellect."

She heard his faint sneer. Bastard.

"As she pointed out to me, not only will she be able to continue her studies, which we all agree are of no slight importance...?"

Dumbledore nodded, and Professor McGonagall sniffed but didn't dispute it.

"And not only will she remain safe as long as she is here with us... or if I might be so bold, under my protection?"

Hermione realized he was looking at her, waiting for her response, and she gave an emphatic nod of her own.

"But she had the wisdom and foresight to realize that I, too, am at risk of the Marriage Law."

She gulped. Even old gits like him?

"Which means the secrecy of the Order and everything we're fighting for will be at risk unless I marry someone who is already aware of my activities."

Why was he giving her so much credit? Clearly, he had ulterior motives.

Dumbledore gave Hermione a troubled smile. "Miss Granger, your plan is admirable, quite brilliant, I must say, but I'm sure if we all put our heads together we can come up with an alternative that is less ... distressing ... to all concerned."

"No, Albus. We can't." Snape finally stepped away from her chair, and she felt the air a little easier to breathe. "There is no other solution but this."

The Headmaster stared into Hermione's eyes, and she felt as if he could almost read her mind, taste her fear. "Minerva, could I impose on you to escort Miss Granger to Gryffindor Tower? I must discuss some matters in private with Severus."

Hermione reluctantly stood. "I do have reading to do," she said with a quick look at Professor Snape, who didn't bother to return her glance. "I've fallen behind on my studies since all of this Marriage Law nonsense came up!"

"My dear girl," Professor McGonagall said in clipped tones, shooting a glare at Professor Snape. That look he returned with a bland smile.

With one last sniff, Professor McGonagall led Hermione back down the spiral staircase.

XXX

He schooled himself to be still, to do nothing to betray his impatience and frustration as he watched Dumbledore study Miss Granger's list.

"Very thorough," the old wizard finally said. "As I would expect from Miss Granger."

"And half of them Death Eaters."

Dumbledore removed his half-moon spectacles and rubbed his watery eyes. "It's not as if there are any surprises here. But certainly George Weasley would be a logical choice. There are plenty of Weasleys to offer protection, after all. And now that I consider it, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have much in common "

"Precisely what does she have in common with him?" Snape bit out. "Surely you're not suggesting that because they are closer in age... "

Dumbledore fixed him with a piercing stare. "No, Severus, that never crossed my mind, though it's significant that it crossed yours. I was referring to the fact that in times like these they have perhaps the strongest bond that those entering an arranged marriage might have." He returned his spectacles to his nose, and Snape felt a tinge of irritation at the way the old wizard studied him. "They love the same people."

"I hope you'll forgive me if I find the sentiment overrated," he responded blandly. "And the only way George or Fred Weasley would have the attention span to keep adequate watch over Miss Granger's safety is if she periodically emitted sparks, smoke and whistling wheezes from every orifice of her body!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore clearly wasn't sure whether to laugh or reprimand, though Snape had a feeling laughter would win out.

Weasleys' Skiving Snackboxes, indeed.

"I think you underestimate Miss Granger," he continued. "She's done quite a thorough assessment of my potential as her husband. My ... maturity," best not linger on that one, "evil temper, my tendency to fight dirty as she so bluntly expressed it and my lack of scruples?" He allowed himself a satisfied smirk. "And those are just a few of my strengths as she perceives them."

The Headmaster drew back. "Hardly Gryffindor qualities."

"Her much-vaunted intellect finally makes itself known, perhaps?"

"Severus, this is simply too much to expect you to ..."

A sharp burning pain enveloped his left forearm. He winced and bit back an oath.

Dumbledore frowned. "Voldemort?"

"Good tidings travel with great speed," he ground out through the pain.

"Be careful, my boy."

The pain dulled to an ache. He drew in a shuddering breath. "As always."

Dumbledore lifted the painstakingly diagrammed list of suitors and then let it fall back to his desk.

Shamed

Chapter 4 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

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Many thanks to Leigh-Anne, my beta!

4. SHAMED

Hermione followed Professor McGonagall into the Gryffindor common room with a sense of homecoming and relief. She sank into an overstuffed chair, and even though the room was cold and the fireplace bare, she felt at peace.

Until she looked up into Professor McGonagall's stern face.

"Miss Granger, whatever are you thinking?"

"I know it seems odd "

"Odd is not the word I would have chosen," the older woman snapped.

"Everyone is upset and I understand that, but I don't really think Professor Snape can be that bad." She peered up hopefully. "Can he?"

"Is that what you think this is about?"

"Well, I realize he doesn't seem the most likely candidate, but I gave it a lot of thought and "

"Miss Granger! You gave it no thought at all! If you had given it thought, you would have realized that you are piling even more pressure and responsibility on a man who is already pushed to the breaking point. No one in the Order has as dangerous an assignment as Severus Snape, and you think I'm unhappy because he might not be a good husband?" She flung a handful of Floo powder at the fireplace and it exploded in flames. She whirled back to Hermione. "I can guarantee you he will not be a good husband. But I find myself hard pressed to care at this moment!"

Professor McGonagall pressed her fist to her mouth and exhaled. "And I believe I believe I have said as much as I wish to say at this time. You'll be alone here tonight but you'll be safe. You know how to order food from the kitchens, and the prefects' bathroom is available should you feel the need to freshen up. Good evening, Miss Granger!"

She stepped into the fireplace and vanished.

Hermione clutched her robes in her numb fingers and stared blindly at the fire. Professor Snape hadn't even been that angry when she'd disarmed him.

And she didn't believe she'd ever felt so stupid in her entire life.

An hour later, she stepped through the Fat Lady's portrait and into the dark corridor carrying a rucksack with her toiletries and nightgown and a couple of textbooks.

Never had she been at Hogwarts when it was so empty.

Which, logic told her, should make it feel safe, after all.

Nobody here meant nobody here to hurt her.

But her logic seemed to be a bit shaky these days, and it took all the courage she could muster to proceed to the fifth floor and the prefects' bathroom.

At the first turning, a familiar, milky-white figure sailed toward her. "Sir Nicholas!" she said, relieved. "I'm so happy to see you!" Then, as he drew nearer, she added, "Unless you're angry at me, too?"

"Of course not, my dear," Nearly Headless Nick said, his voice echoing and hollow and the most comforting thing she'd heard all day. "Do you perhaps need an escort?"

"Thank you," she sighed. And felt much better as they made their way companionably through the empty castle.

When they reached the fourth door beyond Boris the Bewildered's statue, she paused to thank Sir Nicholas. "And, would you mind too terribly "

"I shall wait for you here." He bowed deeply and doffed his plumed hat.

She smiled forlornly and entered the chamber.

In no time, the vast white marble tub was filling with pink-tinged apple blossom-scented bubbles, and she was ensconced in one corner of it, her Advanced Level Arithmancy text floating in front of her face as she soaked away the tensions of the day and read the chapter on divining arithmantic equations for charmed potions.

She could almost feel normal again, if she didn't have such guilt gnawing the edges of her attempts to focus on numbers and formulas.

Her plan had seemed so simple. She certainly hadn't meant to be a burden on anyone. Especially not Professor Snape. She shivered, even in the satiny warm water. He was not one to suffer burdensome Gryffindors with grace.

But Professor McGonagall had made it clear that she was being both selfish and stupid and these were two things Hermione rarely, if ever, could remember being.

She ducked under the water and held her breath, desperately trying to erase the shame that burned in her. Suddenly, something heavy landed on her head she came up sputtering.

Her Arithmancy text. When she'd gone underwater, the spell had broken. She touched her cheekbone and flinched at the pain.

She hurled the soaked textbook across the bathroom and burst into tears.

XXX

By the time he reached his private laboratory, the doors were slamming open before him without his bothering to even wave the wand.

Wave after wave of fury erupted within him, but only when the door had slammed shut behind him did he finally allow it to spill over.

With a vicious slash of his wand, he exploded a shelf of earthen beakers.

Another slash a stack of cauldrons melted one into the other until they were a mass of bubbling hot metal.

He flung his head back, whipped the wand again and again until the stench of sulfur and lacewing and copper and blood-ore rose in waves, choking him so that he dropped to his knees.

If it had been anybody but Draco Malfoy, he could have forgotten about it. But if Lucius wanted her for Draco, he couldn't stand back. He had to stop it before it was too late.

And the death threats. He wondered if Dumbledore recognized their source as quickly and certainly as he did.

He hurled a beaker across the room and watched it explode against the wall.

That that little Muggle-born fool!

And now, he was forced to marry her?

To bed her?

This was simply too rich.

A mirthless chuckle bubbled up from the depths of him.

If only she knew.

If only any of them knew.

And having her not just walk into it open-armed, but beg for it? Ah, now that was an unexpected boon. Because, suddenly, it gave him all the power.

And power was something Severus Snape understood.

She was lucky very lucky that she would not be in his bed tonight. He knew from long experience that this rage within him, so rarely ignited anymore, would not be exhausted quickly.

He staggered to his feet, coughing.

He turned his back on the destruction he'd wrought and sealed the door behind him. Time enough for it tomorrow.

Firewhisky and his bed were all that he wanted this night. Perhaps his last night in blessed solitude. He grabbed the bottle from a drawer in his desk and didn't bother to take a tumbler.

But when he arrived in his cold quarters, he found a stack of missives awaiting him on his bedside stand. A single floating oil lamp shed dim light across the room. Who had been here? Who had invaded the sanctity of his sleeping chamber? Again, the rage bubbled.

The familiar scrawl on the top sheet of parchment did little to calm him. He took another swig of firewhisky, savored its burn, and then lifted the sheet closer to the light.

"These arrived shortly after your unexpected announcement of impending marital bliss, Severus. The Ministry's efficiency is to be admired if not appreciated.

I assume all is well, but if you need me please feel free to Floo. I will see you in my office tomorrow morning. We have much to discuss.

A~~~"

Splendid. He crushed the note and tossed it into the cold fireplace.

Next on the stack was a form with the terms of the Marriage Law spelled out and a place for two signatures.

He tossed it aside.

A ring catalogue.

He tossed it aside as well.

Then. Wait.

He blinked, grabbed the catalog.

The Seal of the Ministry of Magic adorned the lower right hand corner. Officially "approved by" and, upon reading further, "required by" the Ministry, these rings would monitor

"What the bloody hell?"

He pointed his wand at it and watched it go up in flames.

There was not enough whisky nor would there be enough hours in the night to drown his fury, but he would be damned if he didn't try.

XXX

Hermione stood, wand raised and glowing in the inky dark, within sight of both the Potions classroom and Snape's office. She had no idea none at all where his quarters were, where he'd be. She just knew she had to see him, to explain.

She took a deep breath and aimed her wand at the door to his office. "*Alohamora!*"

Nothing.

Of course.

She waited, listened intently and then raised the stakes.

"*Mobili* door!"

She sighed, did a quick ward-releasing charm, which resulted in a burst of green sparks as the door quite visibly announced the attempted meddling.

And of course, still, nothing else happened.

Which was very strange.

"Bloody hell..."

At last. She raised her wand to peer down the cold passageway. A dark-robed figure stood there, leaning against the wall, watching her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Trying to get your attention," she replied. "It worked."

"You're lucky I didn't hex you, you little Muggle-born idiot."

"Are you feeling quite all right, Professor?" she asked, concerned.

"Splendid," he snarled. "Because having bratty little Gryffindors attempting to break into my office "

"If I'd wanted in, I would have broken in," she replied snippily. "I was just trying to get your " She craned her neck, squinted at him, saw him raise a bottle to his lips.

"Professor, are you drinking?"

"Fifty points to Gryffindor." She could dimly see his Adam's apple move and his throat convulse as he drank deeply.

She nibbled her lower lip, frustrated. She had so much to say to him, but not now. Not when he was

Like lightning, he closed the distance between them and roughly dug his fingers into her hair, grabbing a fistful and using it to pin her against the wall.

"Miss Granger," he hissed, "let me do that for you."

She tried to pull away, but her hair her scalp stung and suddenly his face was swooping toward hers and she couldn't move, and he was close so close staring at her, staring at her mouth.

And then she felt him nip ever so gently at her lower lip, and she gasped...and he sucked it into his mouth and laved it slowly with his warm, wet tongue.

And all the bones in her body turned to liquid.

His mouth released her, and a rush of cold air washed over her. "Oh, yes..." he purred. "Delicious."

She didn't know whether to run, or cry for help, or ... maybe, just wait. Wait and see what he was going to do next. She shivered and would have been lying if she claimed that shiver wasn't as fueled by fear as it was cold. But yes.... There was something delicious about that fear.

"You're so very intelligent, Miss Granger. Most brilliant witch of your age..." he whispered in her ear, and his hot whisky-flavored breath tickled as she squirmed. "Or so they tell me." He moved to the other ear. "Of course, I've never seen it."

He pulled away from her but never slacked his grip on her hair. He ran a free finger down her throat, let it draw a lazy circle on her collarbone. "I'm drinking because ... haven't you heard? I'm getting married."

She froze, ice in her veins at his words, his voice so seductive, but his meaning very different.

"Oh, what am I thinking, of course you know." He chuckled mirthlessly, wound his hand more tightly in her hair and pulled her toward him until she was pressed against his body. "And you'll be oh so very happy to know that the Dark Lord is angry, very angry that I'm stealing you from Lucius Malfoy, who was so dead set on introducing your muddy blood into his pureblood line through his son."

"That's that's why I'm here," she fought to say, the words raspy and hoarse. "To tell you that you don't have to marry me!"

But she could say no more because suddenly his mouth was closing over hers, hard and punishing and not at all delicious and wonderful, and it hurt her hair, her mouth, even her body where he pushed her against the icy-cold stone wall. He was so angry, and she didn't blame him, she blamed herself. There was nobody to blame but herself.

She willed herself to go limp. No fighting, no twisting to get away.

And when he broke the kiss, if that's what it was, with a harsh growl deep in her throat, she said, "I'll marry him. I'll marry Draco."

At first she thought he hadn't heard her. His hand stayed fisted in her hair, and he continued to press her against the wall, but finally he seemed to understand what she was telling him.

He snatched her wand out of her limp hand. "*Lumos*," he snarled and held it to her face. His black eyes drilled into her, and she couldn't look away.

"You will *not* marry Draco Malfoy!"

"Professor, don't you see? I can be a spy. I can report back to the Order like you do, and "

He released her hair and she gasped her relief, but then he jerked her away from the wall. With his fingers biting into her shoulder surely he had no idea how rough he was being, she thought desperately he forced her down the long passageway until they came to a shallow alcove where a shimmering, silvery-white marble snake twined itself around a woman's body as she appeared to writhe in pain.

He was going to shove her into the wall! She braced herself.

But he pushed her, and suddenly the alcove was gone, and she was falling through into a new chamber.

She whirled on him then, caught him off guard. Maybe it was the firewhisky, but for once she got the better of him and retrieved her wand before he could react. "Don't touch me!"

The opening behind him closed silently. He leaned back against the wall. Folded his arms. "Or ... what?"

She rubbed her head where her scalp still stung. "I'm sorry! That's all I came down here to tell you is that I'm sorry and that I never intended to be a burden on you! I thought we could just sign some papers and pretend to be married. I never intended..."

In the low light of the room, she saw his dark shirt hanging open over his black trousers.

But it was his skin, the angel-white skin of his sharply-defined chest that took her words away.

"The Dark Lord ... is very angry with me," he repeated. And lifted the bottle to his lips once more. And drank.

"I'm so sorry."

"Miss Granger, let me explain something to you. Very soon, in mere days, you will be my wife. You can't change that now. It's too late."

He put the decanter down and walked slowly toward her.

"You really have no choice. If you don't marry me, you won't survive until Christmas."

As the distance between them closed, he pressed on. "You can't possibly believe there was any intention of soiling the Malfoy bloodline. You can't possibly think you could survive as Draco's wife. You can't possibly think you could serve the Order in that way, as admirable as your desire to martyr yourself for the cause might be. You will marry me. You will be under my protection. You will share my quarters. And if you are really intelligent, you will learn how to do this with as little fuss as is humanly possible."

Her heart hammered in her chest. She looked around at the dark, almost monastic quarters. A narrow bed against a wall, surrounded by stacks of books. A small table with one chair. One leather reading chair. And walls filled with books. More books than she could comprehend in such a small place.

She had never seen so many books look so forbidding and cold.

She dropped her gaze to the floor and nodded.

"Miss Granger... I'm drunk."

She wasn't sure whether she was supposed to respond to that or not. But she felt way too vulnerable in this cold room in the dungeons of Hogwarts to risk speaking the wrong word.

"I'm drunk. I'm angry. I'm going to sleep now. And tomorrow, when we see each other again, it will be as if none of this happened. We will be polite. We will be " he heaved a deep breath, and she felt as well as heard the snarl deep in his throat as he finished, "adults."

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

"And we will marry."

She nodded, her mouth dry.

"And Miss Granger."

She raised her face to his in question.

"I don't know what is ahead of us. I don't know which role we will play for one another or for others. I am treading on dangerous ground and don't know whether to appear to treat you harshly or with tenderness. I don't know whether the Dark Lord is prepared to let this pass or whether he will allow Malfoy to interfere. I can protect you. I will protect you. But ... I don't know yet what 'protecting you' means."

His face was rigid, the contours a stark contrast in light and shadow. "Do not make the mistake of thinking I hate you, because I don't, even if my ways are sometimes difficult. But do not make the mistake of ... forming an affection for me. You are getting your wish. You are a spy, just as I am. You will have a role to play, just as I do."

"Even though we don't know what that means," she whispered softly.

"Precisely." He studied her through narrowed eyes. "Do you need help finding your way back to Gryffindor Tower?"

She shook her head mutely.

He waved his hand at the wall, and the stones rearranged themselves once more to reveal the passageway outside.

And wrapped in a tartan bathrobe, hair in disarray, and eyes wild with fury stood Professor McGonagall.

Mea Culpa

Chapter 5 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

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I am so astoundingly lucky to have a reassuring and fabulous beta, Leigh-Anne.

5. MEA CULPA

"Miss Grrrranger!" Her r's rolling like Scottish thunder, Professor McGonagall stormed into the chamber in a swirl of plaid. "And and you, Severrrus!"

A whisk of white behind her and Nearly Headless Nick peeked around her shoulder, stammering. "I beg your pardon, Miss Granger, but she was so distraught that you weren't in your quarters "

"I thought for a moment that I had been too hard on you," McGonagall said crisply. "Clearly, you found a way to console yourself."

Hermione looked down at her disheveled state of dress. She'd merely pulled the same rumpled jeans and jumper on over her damp skin once she'd decided to speak to Professor Snape. But her skintight jumper didn't cover her navel, and her jeans had worked their way lower on her slim hips than she'd realized, and cheeks flaming, she tugged things up and down, trying to make them meet in the middle.

Snape, in the meantime, just slouched on the floor. "Thank god." He tipped the firewhisky to his lips again, and watching that throat work, her own went dry. "Please take your little Gryffindor back to your tower, lock her up and lose the key."

Flames of humiliation licked through her and all she wanted to do was run. Run and run and run and never stop, unless and until she found a friendly Dementor ready to kiss her out of her misery.

But before she could flee this disaster that she had brought upon herself, the flames in the fireplace flared, and could it get any worse?

Dumbledore exploded into the room.

Even Snape jerked to his feet, tucked the decanter behind his back and attempted to look sober.

"Professors the Ministry of Magic has been alerted to improprieties at Hogwarts."

"Malfoy." Snape slammed the decanter on his bedside table and ground out a curse.

"We must have the wedding immediately before they attempt to stop it," Dumbledore continued. "To the Room of Requirement, immediately!"

McGonagall and Snape were halfway to the fireplace when Dumbledore realized Hermione was shrinking against the wall, unnoticed. "Severus, I believe you're forgetting your bride."

Snape looked between them, then with a barely audible snarl returned to grab Hermione by the hand. As Dumbledore attempted to step back into the flames, Snape stopped him with a forceful (if perhaps ill-advised) snag of the older wizard's robes.

"If you don't mind," Snape snapped and pulled Hermione into the flames with a toss of Floo powder. "Room of Requirement!"

And then he shoved her ahead of him, so that she would be the first out of the fireplace and into

A crypt.

XXX

Clearly, McGonagall was as taken aback as Hermione, but if Dumbledore was surprised, he hid it well. He moved genially toward the black-robed man waiting beneath a torch-lit Norman arch.

But the icy water lapping at their feet and the man whom Hermione knew all too well revealed to her immediately where she was.

The flooded crypt at Winchester Cathedral.

"Hermione!" Father Gadbury's eyes looked a little unfocused. Yet his face lit up when he saw her, and he pulled her into his warm embrace. He held her out at arm's length and studied her. "But look what has happened to you since last we visited. You've grown up!"

"Yes, sir." She aimed a smile up at him and hoped her lips weren't quivering as much as her stomach. She looked around at the familiar and eerie surroundings and wondered who in the hell knew about Winchester Cathedral, and why they were in the crypt beneath instead of a chapel, and how on earth they got Father Gadbury to cooperate if he really was Father Gadbury, that is....

"I'm using the original Cranmer rite," he beamed at her. "I thought our little scholar might approve."

It was indeed Father Gadbury.

Confounded, she looked to Dumbledore for help, but he seemed more intent upon scanning their surroundings, taking them in. So if he didn't choose the setting, who did?

Dumbledore's robes were no longer emerald green shot with orange, but rather somber and dignified, and Professor McGonagall was clad in a quiet grey tartan dress with its long skirt trailing.

And Snape. Snape wore an odd mix of frock coat and waistcoat and trousers all in black, of course. And odd as the garb was, it looked perfectly normal in a Snape kind of way. He slung a heavy wave of hair out of his face and glared at her.

Which left she looked down her own attire.

No longer in jeans, she now had on the most tasteful of long, white dresses, simple and unadorned, and it hit her like a thud in the solar plexus that the Room of Requirement had flat outdone itself.

Professor Dumbledore put his hand on her shoulder. "Quickly dear we need one more witness. Who...?"

She looked from one expectant face to another, her mind a blank. What was she supposed to do? Just think of someone?

Her rebellious brain was more than ready to flip through a treacherous series of beloved faces she didn't want within five miles of this spot. She seized upon the first safe face that popped into her head.

And with a loud "crack," Hagrid arrived, bent over to keep from bumping his head. "Aw gee, Hermione... " He snuffled and pulled out a huge tablecloth-sized handkerchief.

"I allus cry at weddings!"

Snape's look would wither juice-pumpkins on the vine, but Hermione raised her chin in defiance. Hagrid was her friend, damn it. And probably the only one who wouldn't try to stop her.

Professor Dumbledore stood beside Father Gadbury. "Well, then, I believe we are ready."

"Dearly beloved..." began Father Gadbury at the same moment that Professor Dumbledore began an entirely different ritual in a language she didn't even recognize. Words wrapped around her, sonorous and beautiful and ancient, and tears came unbidden to her eyes as she inhaled faint wafts of incense and heard the echoing prayers of centuries of pilgrims and tasted the metallic tinge of magic on her tongue.

The shimmering of wizard tradition twined its silken strands with holy psalm until she felt the bonds whipping between her and the severe man in black as surely as if they were visible.

She cast a cautious glance up at him and caught her breath at his profile, sharp and contoured in the dramatic shadows. He turned to look at her, and his black eyes as they fixed on her were unreadable.

And then the responses were drawn from her lips without effort, sometimes in English and sometimes in that other tongue. Their voices were part of the sensual tapestry woven in those moments, not even broken by Hagrid's loud, sniffling sobs.

Rings were produced from she knew not where. The ring sliding on her finger was too large, a twining of cold, molten metal snakes that tightened and wound around her finger until their two heads met and twisted and melted into one another, leaving behind nothing but a solid gold band.

She lifted it to her lips and without understanding why, touched her tongue to it, tasted it, and it tasted of lightning and spells, and she hoped she remembered that taste for all of her days. She raised her eyes to find Snape staring down at her with those burning black eyes, and she looked away to see his own ring melting into place on his hand, the last whisper of lions' manes shimmering into a smooth band much like hers, only heavier.

And when Father Gadbury wrapped the stole around their joined hands, silvery magical threads and ribbons joined the weaving, and what hath been joined together let man nor wizard tear asunder....

She looked up at the wizard the stranger to whom she was now bound and saw his forehead beaded with sweat, his jaw tight with anger.

"You may now kiss..."

His head jerked low to her, his face rigid, and his lips brushed hers with a lightning jolt, barely connecting but burning as if she could taste his pain and rage, a kiss ending almost before begun.

Swallows of the body and the blood.

Signing a thick ancient book.

And it was over.

XXX

Fuck, fuck, fuck, blast it to hell fuck.

He fought the bile that burned the back of his throat, the pain that seared his left forearm, forced himself to stand frozen until the bloody thing was over, willed himself to take her hand, her bloody hell damn it to hell far-too-delicate hand, and pulled her to the fireplace; where was the fireplace? He spun, not caring that his action wrenched her arm and she staggered to stay on her feet.

In all directions the crypt, walls, arches, shadows. No fireplace.

The priest was walking toward them, smiling

Albus not noticing anything was wrong

"... hope you don't mind our little surprise..." the priest was saying as he motioned to the stone steps that would take them back up to the Nave.

But he didn't want the bloody Nave; he was looking for the fireplace, the way back to his quarters.

He gasped as the mark burned hotter. Started for the stone steps, dragging her with him. And as they reached the top

Tourists, goddamned tourists waiting in line for their crypt tour, applauding and tossing rice. *Oh, what a clever entertainment we have provided you today.*

A shimmer of magic, and they burst through to the hallway outside the Room of Requirement.

But as he started running, dragging her with him, there was another shimmer, and they were back in the cathedral, running down the North Aisle, tromping over Jane Austen's headstone, and then, in a burst of desperation, he yanked out his wand "*Finite Incantatem!*" and ran straight into the wall

They burst through to the entrance hall of Hogwarts.

"What how did " Hermione gasped beside him, but he couldn't stop now, couldn't explain, not with the Dark Lord demanding his presence, which he could not would not do until the last bond, the last bloody bond was sealed, damn them all to the lowest level of hell.

He pulled her down the stairs to the dungeons, and deeper, deeper, until they could enter his quarters, and he could set the wards to seal them off from the world, and when he'd warded the fireplace and turned to face her, she was staring at him through huge eyes filled with confusion and wariness.

Blast.

Fucking bloody hell.

He had no time to coddle virgins.

He squeezed his eyes closed, fought down the acid in the back of his throat, fought the strengthening demands of the Dark Lord on his flesh how the ruddy hell was he going to do this?

Do this to her, barely more than a child?

When the pain racking through him closed off any pleasure centers he might ordinarily rely on to get him through it?

He staggered to his cabinet, rummaged through a few vials with shaking hands, finally found the ones he'd readied, and turned to give it to her

She'd stripped off her jeans and sweater, now that the glamourised white dress had faded into memory, and had her back to him as she folded them with trembling hands.

Seeing the boy-cut briefs low on her hips, the white bra, he let out a low groan. She turned, caught him staring at her, a deer in the headlights.

Was there anything she could have done, any goddamn thing, to make herself look more of a schoolgirl? He flicked his wand, replacing it all with black lace. Winced, flicked again, saw it mold into peach silk. Flicked again and left her naked.

She blushed, first reaching to cover herself, then, lowering her arms and raising her face to him. She was saying something the roar in his ears deafened him, he didn't know what she was saying, couldn't hear over his pain, over the blood rushing in his body, burning and boiling and threatening to knock him to his knees.

Time. He had no time. Already, he'd waited too long.

Already, he was facing the wrath of the Dark Lord for interfering, but he couldn't gasping for air couldn't go, couldn't leave without

He grabbed her, tried tried not to hurt her laughed bitterly (was he really laughing or was that the voice inside his head laughing?) that he should even play the game of not hurting her.

And then they were on his bed, him struggling to loosen his trousers, to free himself what was she doing? She was she was

Kissing him.

Salt.

He tasted salt.

She was weeping.

"I'm so sorry...."

What was she saying?

"... all my fault..."

And he had to shut her up, he had to close his mouth over hers and stop her before she destroyed what will he had to complete this bloody farce.

He reached down between them, probed, found her dry, of course, as dry as the bloody Sahara, but what else could he have expected, and dipped his fingers between her folds to find her moisture, to spread it, to slicken the way felt her twitch around him, gasp in his mouth, and knew the bitter irony that she would get no more satisfaction than that from him this night.

He poised at her opening, pushed his head in it, and pulled out. Next time, pushed further, and withdrew again. Felt her tensing beneath him and knew a moment's rage and guilt as he gritted his teeth and braced himself and let the roar take him so that maybe, maybe he wouldn't hear her scream

And before he could move, he felt her shift beneath him, her eyes hollowed and wide as she stared up at him and

Damn her to hell, she was trying to help but was doing everything wrong

She grabbed his forearms and shoved herself forward

He plunged into her in a spasm of agony as her fingers dug into the Dark Mark *His arm his arm his arm* And he felt ejaculate spurt from him, but felt no pleasure. *Only pain - the pain - the pain*

The scream he heard was his.

What hath been joined together let no one tear asunder.

It was finished.

They couldn't have lain there more than a minute, but it felt a tortured forever as he fought for air, for words to speak, and realized there were no words, there was no time.

He took the other vial of potion and tossed it beside her as he made a half-attempt to tuck his shirt in, leaving it half out. "For for the pain," he rasped. And then, as he grabbed his hated robe and mask from a hidden drawer in the old oak wardrobe, and saw the potion still beside her, he snapped, "Drink it!"

He uncorked the vial and forced her mouth open and tilted it to her lips until she choked and coughed and swallowed, tears streaming.

"Do not let anybody in. Do not speak to anyone. Do not leave. Do not do not " he choked... "Anybody."

She lay there, her legs closed, but blood visible beneath her and he winced. He tossed her another vial. "Use it," he snapped. "Internal and " His arm, his fucking arm "and external."

And as he left the chambers and the stones reformed behind him, he heard it again.

"I'm so sorry...."

And felt his lips twist in a familiar bitter twist.

I'm sure you are, Miss Granger. I'm sure you fucking are.

#

She fell back on the bed.

The events of the past twenty-four hours spun in her head, an ever-tightening vortex that ended with her here, tangled in sheets that smelled of him, her head buried in a pillow that still bore the imprint of his head from when, two nights before?

All she could do was breathe in his scent and suffer the torment of the damned because she was so guilty, so damned selfish and stupid and guilty, and what had she done? What had she brought about?

Her last thought before she succumbed to the potion he'd poured down her throat ...

Never had she felt so safe.

She slept.

#

He cast one last glance over his shoulder before entering the Forbidden Forest. Nobody watching, nobody to see.

Once in, he didn't have too far to go before he was hidden from view and could drop to his knee, bow his head, and touch his wand to the Dark Mark on his arm
And give himself over to his fate.

~~~~~

I'm greatly honoured to have been given this collage which was created by a Russian reader, Polina. The crypt, the bride, the groom (and the body!). And the mood is exquisite.



A/N More about this chapter here:

<http://miamadwyn.livejournal.com/5134.html>

## Punished

*Chapter 6 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*As always, anything you recognize isn't mine, and thanks, as always, to Leigh-Anne!*

### 6. PUNISHED

He knew without opening his eyes, just by inhaling, where he was.

"*Crucio!*"

Just as he knew, as soon as the bolt of pain struck his ribs, who had hit him.

He raised his head, ignoring Lucius, to find the Dark Lord watching impassively from his seat in Malfoy's candlelit drawing room as Lucius circled Severus warily, waiting for him to respond.

Severus staggered to his feet, went forward, and dropped again in front of Voldemort.

Lifted the hem of his robe.

Kissed it.

"My Lord."

And braced himself as Lucius came at him again and again. "*Crucio!*"

This time from the other side, a new set of ribs his target. Severus sprawled on the floor, never taking his eyes from those narrow red slits that studied him.

"Lucius..." the Dark Lord hissed. "Do you smell it? He dares come to us reeking of virgin blood..."

And again, the bolt of pain connected with flesh, with bone.

"*Crucio!*"

And again.



"Crucio!"

And again.

"CRUCIO!"

And the pain exploded in new places, with a crack of bone and tearing of flesh, but he didn't cry out, he didn't scream, he didn't protest.

He didn't fight back.

And when Lucius was gasping for air, dripping with sweat, the Dark Lord finally spoke again.

"Severus ... what have you to say for yourself?"

Severus staggered to one knee again, bowed his head again, and kissed the hem again. "My Lord."

He felt as much as heard Lucius approach and braced himself for another assault.

But Voldemort rasped, "Enough!"

"She was *ours*." Lucius fell back into his own chair, his mouth twisted in anger. "Mine and my son's."

Severus angled his face back at the blond man who had been his friend a very long time ago and managed to smirk. "She *is* mine."

Lucius grabbed the arms of the chair to hoist himself up, ready to charge Severus again, but the Dark Lord hissed and jerked a talon-like hand at the blond man, and he sank back down, seething.

Severus turned his face back to the Dark Lord, who looked at him and demanded in a lethal whine, "Why?"

He heaved in a shuddering breath. He'd bought himself a chance. That was all ... a chance. And this was it. He forced a sneer. "Because ... I wanted her."

"A Mudblood?" Lucius barked in triumph from behind him. "You lust after a filthy Mudblood?"

"I want to make her..." Severus said lovingly, "suffer." He heaved in a shuddering breath. "For six years she and that Weasley spawn and Harry Potter have stopped me from doing your bidding, Lord Voldemort. I deserve to be the one to make her pay."

"And Dumbledore... why would he let you?" the Dark Lord demanded.

"Dumbledore played into my hands. He thinks I am noble, that I am protecting her."

"Then how can you make her suffer?"

"The subtlety of pain is a fine art, my Lord, like poison: the superior sources are not always easily detected. There are many ways to cause suffering... as I use her proximity to learn more about our enemies."

The Dark Lord leaned back in his chair and allowed his red eyes to slant from one man to the other, back and forth, as he considered.

"You have made me angry, Severus."

Severus bowed his head.

"Lucius had every right to seek vengeance against you."

"As I allowed him to."

"Without fighting back."

"My Lord," Severus said, his voice dripping with acid, "I would not lower myself to fight for a filthy Mudblood."

He sensed it as much as heard it when Lucius leapt to his feet, enraged, but Snape continued, allowing the sneer to curl his lips, allowing his voice to caress and taunt, going for the kill.

"Especially when, as you point out, I've already tasted her virgin blood. I've already made her mine."

A wheezing cackle filled the room as the Dark Lord threw back his head and laughed.

#

She couldn't have said how it happened, but one moment she was so deep in sleep it felt like a drug, and the next she was leaping from the bed, pain throbbing between her legs, wand in hand, ready to hiss a hex...

And stopped herself a split-second before it was too late when she realized who was coming through the shifting stones.

"You you should have warned me!"

Professor Snape stopped, his cloak swirling around him, and dragged his eyes down her body.

Which she belatedly realized was quite available to be stared at when she looked down and saw her skin, pimpled with cold, and her thighs smeared with dried blood.

But before she could react to cover herself, cleanse herself, or just *Avada Kedavra* herself and end both of their misery

He took two steps forward.

And collapsed at her feet.

"Professor!" She jumped back, then cursing herself for being a coward, she dropped to her knees. "Professor?"

He didn't move.

In fact, so still was he

"Professor Snape!" she shrieked and pressed her fingers to his neck until she found his ragged pulse. "Thank god."

It took all her strength to heave him over onto his back where she yanked his cloak open. His white shirt was only half-buttoned, half tucked in, and she gasped when she saw the purpling bruises, the blood, the torn flesh. And, oh, Merlin, an odd swelling looked like there might even be something broken.

"Oh, my god, what have they done to you?"

*Think, you idiot!* She did all but slap herself before she finally calmed enough to act. A bit of silly wand waving and she had him half-levitating and she managed to get him onto his narrow bed.

Which was still soaked in her blood; why hadn't she done something about that? *Shut up, you twit*, she ordered herself and kept moving. She slung on a robe she found tossed over a chair his, clearly, as it dragged the floor behind her, but at least she was covered.

She dropped to the floor beside him.

"Professor Snape," she said gently. "Can you hear me?"

He moved, his face tightening in a scowl of pain.

"I'm going to get help. Professor Dumbledore, and and Madam Pomfrey!"

His hand closed on her wrist like a vise, and she gasped at the pain.

"Nooo..." he snarled. "No!"

"But you need "

His eyes were mere slits, but they bore into her with a threat that stopped her cold. "Nobody you will call nobody, Miss Granger."

She wanted to protest, to argue, but the power in those black, black eyes...

"Yes, sir," she finally choked.

He sank back onto his pillow, and it was several long minutes before she realized he no longer gripped her wrist.

*Well. Think, Hermione. You have a brain. Use it!*

In all these books, there had to be something about healing, didn't there? And if the Potions master didn't have potions available, he was a sorry excuse for a Potions master, and that was not an accusation anyone would make of Severus Snape.

She tugged the robe tighter around her and secured the sash, then with a whisk of her wand, shortened it.

God help Professor Snape if she were the best he could rely on, but he had nobody but himself to blame, damn him to bloody hell.

First, she scanned the bed for the vials he'd given her earlier. That was as good a place as any to begin.

Ah, one was on the edge, caught in a fold of sheet or else it would have already fallen to the stone floor. She snatched it up, sniffed it.

He'd given her three. Damn if she could remember which was which. She let her tongue test the inner lip of the glass bottle and winced. That was the first one; she'd remember that putrid flavor forever. That was before well, it was *before*. It was unlikely to be of help now since it was neither for pain nor healing *Most likely a contraceptive, or at least it had damn well better be*, she thought viciously.

She carefully tugged the rough sheet how could he stand them? and found another vial wedged beneath his leg. This one oh, yes, she remembered this one. As vile a concoction as she'd ever been forced to swallow, but even the merest taste on her tongue numbed her. It had to be for pain. She carried it to his potions cabinet and began trying to find a matching bottle.

And found several.

She uncorked one and sniffed, deciding it must be the same brew.

How was she ever going to get this down his throat? But without it, how would she be able to accomplish anything more?

Kneeling beside him once more, she braced herself against the side of the bed and slid her arm under his head. If she could somehow get his mouth to open with one hand, surely she could dump it down his mouth with the other before he had time to spit it out.

His jaw was clenched tight against the pain, even though he was unresponsive when she softly called his name. She tried a little louder. "Professor."

Not a stirring.

Grasping the vial securely in her right hand, she cradled his head in the crook of her left arm and gently probed his lips with her fingers. He groaned loudly. She jumped, and she almost dropped him.

But didn't.

She applied more pressure to the corner of his mouth.

"Open .... Please, Professor Snape, just a little bit " and when his lips parted on an indrawn gasp of pain, she tilted the vial and poured it went into his mouth and coated her fingers, and suddenly, his eyes were open, wincing blindly at the ceiling as he gulped, even sucking her fingers into his warm, wet mouth in his efforts to get more of the potion. The shudder that rippled through him vibrated from her fingertips to her core.

"Are your taste buds flat dead?" she muttered breathlessly, pulling her arm free of his head and rubbing her fingers in the folds of his robe.

She bent over him again. At least his breathing was less labored. She still needed to find a way to help him heal.

Which meant finding the last vial.

She scanned the sheets, the floor, where was it? Oh horrors. She saw something glint from beneath his inner thigh, from between his legs. She squeezed her eyes shut and gingerly worked her fingers under ... damn.

There was no way to do this with her eyes closed, of course, and it wasn't as if he was watching, but she was about to grope a

*Her husband*, she reminded herself firmly.

Somehow, that did not improve the situation.

She tossed her hair out of her eyes and gritted her teeth and probed deeper beneath his groin until she could finally grasp the stout bottle and pulled it free.

She braced herself, waiting and watching for him to react.

Nothing.

She hadn't even unstoppered it, which every movement she made confirmed. But the torn soft tissue she was all too aware of was nothing compared to what she saw on his body, and she could only be grateful to have the entire bottle for him. Internal and external, he'd said. She poured some of the thick creamy liquid into her palms and gently smoothed it over his skin, no longer angel-white but now horribly abused. Each tender stroke of her fingertips made her shudder in shared, sympathetic pain. Did this happen often?

Or was it all because of her?

She couldn't allow her thoughts to go into that vortex of guilt and shame. She had to be strong; she had to take care of him.

If she could just ease some of his discomfort, she could then dive into those books and find something stronger.

Finally, the bottle almost empty, she sank back on her heels and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Then brushed his hair out of his eyes.

It would have to do for now.

She let out a sigh of relief and padded back to the book-covered walls. If she killed him trying to heal him, he had nobody to blame but himself.

#

Of course, that attitude was all well and good when she could busy herself actually *doing* something, but much harder to live with when so many hours passed in silence.

She slept on the floor beside him when she could sleep. But mostly, she hovered, watched, and worried.

He didn't move, he didn't groan or moan, and he certainly didn't threaten, curse or glare.

Oh, how she wished he would threaten, curse and glare.

Occasionally, the slightest green flare in the fireplace would hint that someone might be Flooing in, and she grabbed her wand ready to well, she hadn't quite decided what she would do.

Deep down she wanted somebody to come and make sure he was all right, to take this awful responsibility from her shoulders.

Deep down, more than anything, she wanted to do exactly as he'd asked and curse anyone who dared breach his wards.

Deep down she had so many contradictory desires, she simply didn't dare think too much about all the things she was feeling deep down.

But the flares never materialized into anything more, so it was a moot point.

And she was left alone to worry and fret.

Dobby.

Dobby!

House-elves popped in and out as they pleased. Surely calling Dobby wouldn't break the spirit of his request.

Hermione leapt to her feet, heart pounding.

"Dobby?"

With a loud "crack!" the house-elf appeared, crouching low and covering his head and eyes and whimpering, "Dobby isn't looking, Dobby isn't looking, Master Snape!"

"Dobby, it's me, Hermione!"

He kept his eyes hidden. "Dobby can't be in Master Snape's quarters! Dobby isn't allowed! Dobby isn't looking!"

Before she could stop him, he grabbed a heavy book from the floor and began hitting himself in the head with it. "Dobby is sorry! Bad Dobby, bad Dobby for entering Master Snape's chambers!"

Hermione lunged across the room and yanked the book out of his hands. "Dobby, it's all right! I called you!"

Dobby raised a trembling face to her and broke out in a smile. "Mistress Hermione! Dobby is happy to see you here." He cast a wary glance around the room, then squeezed his eyes shut again and punched himself in the eyes.

Hermione dropped the book, grabbed his hands, and realized this was getting her nowhere. "Dobby, listen to me, damn it!"

The elf nodded his head vigorously. "Dobby is listening!"

"First, you mustn't tell anyone you've been here. Not a single soul. Not even ... not even Harry Potter!"

One eye popped open in shock.

"Not even Harry Potter or Professor Dumbledore," she said firmly. "Or Professor Snape will be very angry at both of us."

Both eyes popped open, cut sideways to the bed, then squeezed shut. It was through sheer force she managed to hold his fists still.

"Do you agree?" she asked.

"Dobby will not tell anybody he has been here. Dobby doesn't want Professor very angry at Harry Potter's friend!"

"Good. Now. I need your help. First off, I need clean sheets. And don't you have some that are softer?"

Dobby shook his head. "House-elves don't clean Master Snape's quarters or Master Snape's office or Master Snape's laboratory. House-elves don't bring him clean

sheets."

"Master I mean, Professor Snape does his own laundry?" she asked, stunned. Would his talents never cease?

"Master Snape burns his sheets. He doesn't want anybody getting anything that has been his."

Well, that was borderline psychotic.

*Which actually is not at all surprising*, she thought. It also explained their coarse texture. She wondered how fast he went through them.

"All right, Dobby. First, would you please bring my sheets from my bed in the Head Girl's room?"

"Dobby will have them laundered "

"No, there's no time for that. Just bring them. And then would you please send some..." What on earth should she request? "Nourishing broth. Yes, that's it. Nourishing broth."

Dobby nodded fiercely.

"And my tea things. And... for now, maybe that's all."

Clearly, this is what Dobby had been anxious to hear because before the word "all" was completely past her lips, he'd "cracked!" right out of the room again.

Crack!

He was back, his arms full of wadded red linens and her old, faded duvet which he dropped like hot potatoes and

Crack!

He was gone again.

Before she could sort out the sheets, top from bottom, he'd "cracked" in and out twice more, first with her grandmother's sterling silver tea tray and tea things, and finally with a covered tray from the kitchens.

She noticed he didn't stick around long enough for her to make any more requests, the wretch. She had half a mind to start knitting socks again.

She approached the bed once again. If ever there was a time when she did not want Snape to wake up, it was now. With a crisp flourish of her wand she whispered, "*Mobilicorpus*!"

Professor Snape rose slowly from the bed and hovered there.

Hastily (and nervously, since even though she trusted her charms, she felt very vulnerable crawling beneath his hovering body), she scrambled to yank the old sheets off and secure her own.

And he never moved.

Absolutely terrifying.

But she refused to think about that. She would simply thank her lucky stars that he wasn't able to order her not to continue.

Or be awake and aware as she continued.

Because, now, she was going to (Merlin help her) strip his ripped and bloody clothes off.

She rose on her knees and reached across his body and it was a much bigger body than one would think with robes out of the way and unbuttoned and tugged until his shirt was free. Then she eased it off his shoulders, down his arms, and tossed it to the floor atop the soiled linens.

And found herself nose to thigh with his soiled black trousers.

And that was where her Gryffindor courage failed her.

She snatched her wand, lowered him to the bed, and tucked the top sheet over him.

He looked very odd, enveloped in blood red with a fluffy, rose-spangled duvet covering him. She was quite sure he would dock fifty points from Gryffindor as soon as he saw it.

But it had to feel better against his bruised and battered skin.

And blood red was a very good color for him.

And that was that.

She took his linens, and without much more thought, his torn clothing, and tossed them in the fire and watched them blaze.

She stretched out in front of the fire and stifled a yawn. It was a rather satisfying way of handling laundry, at that.

#

## Wet

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*Thank goodness for the fabulously fantabulous characters and world that JKR created and for my wonderful beta, Leigh-Anne!*

**7. WET**

His neck was killing him.

Whiplash?

He opened his eyes to the dark.

Squinted.

Couldn't focus.

He raised one arm slowly, wincing.

Then, the other.

He tested his extremities methodically from long practice.

Ran his fingers along his ribs.

All the places that should be killing him weren't.

Which could only mean Poppy had gotten her hands on him. And she'd somehow missed the fucking whiplash.

He rolled over sideways, crooked and stiff, and bit back a cry as the pain knifed through him.

He gave himself up to it.

He would not be getting out of bed.

He willed the stiffness out of his neck, his shoulders. Willed himself to relax into the pillow. Closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and sank back into an uncomfortable dream that involved incarceration in an herbal sachet shop.

#

The smells.

The smells were driving him mad. Lavender, lemon verbena, eucalyptus, spearmint the air was heavy with moisture, and he felt as if he were drowning in an insipid brew of herbal tea. His nose twitched against a sneeze; his shoulder twitched, sending another pain spiking through him.

He really was going to have to get up.

*Splash.*

He stilled without actually having any movement to still. His eyes opened, and everything around him came into sharp focus despite the dim light.

He sat up quickly, despite the fucking Merlin-cursed whiplash.

Books were spread across the floor, opened. Bits of parchment tucked hither and yon, with notes in coloured inks. A cup of tea, half-filled, rested near the corner of a priceless first edition potions text, the only one of its kind.

His table had another collection of books, haphazardly strewn, and his potions cabinet gaped open. It didn't take an inventory to reveal that they'd been rifled through.

*Granger.*

He would have loved to snarl or roar ... yes, absolutely, roar but such action would give warning, and the one thing he did not want to do was warn the bloody chit that she was about to be dismembered, eviscerated and minced into a fine blood pudding.

Although his staggering steps as he crossed to the bathroom door were hardly silent.

He flung the door open and everything hit him at once.

The smell the eucalyptus and spearmint.

The taste the foggy moisture from his claw-footed tub filled with steaming sudsy hot water.

The sound another splash as her head submerged beneath the surface.

The sight his shaving brush bobbing on top the sudsy foam.

And holy Merlin's bollocks he was too late

The tight curls of hair floating, disconnected, on the surface.

"Miss Granger!"

He grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked her out of the water, sputtering and screaming.

He wasn't too late. He wasn't yet.

"Get your hands off me!" She reached up to rake him with her fingernails, but he knocked her hands away, yanked the stopper out of the tub, flicked on the water and held

her head under the faucet.

"What the hell are ... " she sputtered, and then choked and coughed, and evidently reserved her breath to fight him, for fight him she did. Her arms and legs were silky slick of course and he had to clamp down on her unmercifully to keep her head in the stream of clear cold water. And if she weren't fighting so hard, he could have warmed it, but he couldn't focus his magic with this agony of pain slicing through him, nor could he reach the ruddy handle when both hands were so vitally involved with the effort to stop her from killing him.

Bloody ungrateful little witch.

He tried to brace himself against the side of the tub but his heel hit water, and before he could catch himself, he was flat on his back in agony, staring up at the peeling ceiling.

Granger could bloody well drown for all he cared.

But of course, such a convenience would be beyond the scope of his miserable life.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she shrieked.

"Gaaaaaaah!" he responded eloquently when icy water splattered across his torso his bare torso, he belatedly noticed as her face dangled over the side of the tub and that miserable mop of hair drained its bounty of water all over him.

"Professor," she snapped, "are you quite all right?"

He aimed his most deadly glare at her.

He rose, wincing, to a sitting position.

"If you value your hair..." he groaned, "you will keep rinsing."

She opened her mouth to argue, then suddenly didn't. Her face disappeared, and he heard the sound of her head ducking back under the faucet.

He wasn't sure what surprised him the most, her quick acquiescence or the fact that she actually valued that knotted tangle of frizz.

He curled his fingers over the side of the tub and finally hoisted himself to his feet. Rolled his shoulders experimentally. Well. That was interesting. Whatever had been wrong with his neck seemed to have improved dramatically. His fall must have knocked something back into alignment.

He rose to his full height and stared down at

Oh, Merlin's fucking ghost, the hair sticking to the sides of the tub was pubic hair.

He felt a whimper curl through his throat but managed to keep it under submission as he realized

She had found the final and most brutal way possible to look like a fucking schoolgirl.

Of course she fucking had. Brilliant. Brava for the insufferable witch.

"Miss Granger," he said, fighting for calm.

She froze, her slender back and shoulders and, of course, her not quite so slender arse, tense, waiting for him to continue.

"You can come up for air now."

Slowly, she rose to a kneeling position, her back still to him.

And gave her hair a mighty sling out of her eyes.

And sprayed him with more icy water.

"Shite!" He winced. "Miss Granger, why were you using my shaving soap to bathe?"

"It smells good. And it lathers. And I wanted a bubble bath."

He spoke through gritted teeth. "What do you know about the principles of wizard's shaving soap?"

"Well," she said, her head down and her back still to him. "Are you asking what I did know or, what I think I might know now?"

He let out a quick snort of frustration.

"I *did* assume it makes it easier to get a smooth shave, and is very sudsy, and smells wonderful, and even though I wasn't intending to shave anything now that I think about it, I don't even recall there being a razor with it...." She was shivering in the cold now. "I think what I *now* know is ..."

A tremor of cold rippled down her back, and he couldn't tear his eyes away from her.

"You don't have to use a razor with wizarding shaving soap, do you?" she asked weakly.

"No."

"The soap does it for you?"

"Yes."

"So, this shaving brush, besides just feeling silky and lovely and divine on your skin when you brush the soap on, actually ..."

He swallowed, trying not to think about what she might have been doing with his brush. "Yes."

"I couldn't find the shampoo. I was about to use your shaving soap to wash my hair." In a very small voice she added, "Thank you, Professor."

She stood up, and before he realized her intention, she stepped out of the tub, dripping water everywhere, and despite her best efforts he caught sight of a swell of breast, and bloody hell, schoolgirls had no business looking like that.

"I'm going to go get dressed, and I'm sure you need your privacy," she said primly.

And closed the door behind her.

"Miss..." he croaked and tried again. "Miss Granger. You forgot your towel." He flicked his fingers toward the door, and it opened. He sent a towel sailing out after her.

And watched the door slam shut.

Bloody fucking hell.

#

Hermione scrambled into her jeans, sadly saggy and begrimed by this point despite her use of a Cleansing Charm. The point came when clothes simply had to be laundered. She sighed as she pulled the soft white shirt on. She ran her hands over it and hoped (without hope) that Professor Snape wouldn't be too angry that she'd delved into his wardrobe and charmed one of his shirts smaller.

Well, there wasn't much she could do about it if he was. Other than, of course, charm it back, which she really didn't want to do. She rolled back the sleeves and shrugged her shoulders to feel the soft fabric slide over her skin. It was a surprisingly sensual shirt for a man who slept on sandpaper.

Listening to the sounds in the bathroom, she decided he wasn't going to be long, so she whisked the books back into place and her notes into a neat stack.

After summoning her tea things, she used her wand to light her small, personal burner and put on the tea kettle.

Within minutes, the whistle was shrieking and she lifted it off the flame.

BAM!

The bathroom door exploded open.

The man certainly was hard on doors.

"What the bloody hell is that?"

"Um, are you through in there?"

He emerged, a towel wrapped around his waist, scowling.

She slipped by him with her tea tray following behind her. But once inside the bathroom, she abandoned magic. She tilted the kettle to fat, round Brown Betty teapot and poured out enough steaming water to warm it, then emptied it into the sink. After spooning in the loose tea, with an extra spoon for the pot, she emptied the kettle into the teapot and watched the tea leaves explode and swirl in the currents of boiling water.

There was more than one way to brew a potion.

She lovingly dipped her head over the steam for a brief second just to suck in the tea oils, then quickly popped on the lid to keep all the strong, sharp flavor in. Finally, she snuggled the old teapot into her grandmother's hand-knitted tea cozy.

It wasn't until she'd completed the ritual and turned to leave the bathroom, her tea tray following behind her, that she realized Professor Snape was standing in the open doorway, buttoning a shirt over black trousers, watching her every move.

"You realize you can order tea from the kitchens."

"I prefer brewing my own."

She felt his scowl aimed at her upper body. Damn. "I'm sorry about your shirt. I can turn it back "

He jerked his black gaze away from her. "I don't care about the shirt."

Oh.

She passed him and, with a whisk of her wand, cleared the table for the tea tray. "How do you like your tea?"

"Milk. Two sugars."

She bit back a smile. So, the professor had a bit of a sweet tooth. "I think you should at least sit down, and you probably should be back in bed," she said calmly. "I'll bring it to you."

To be obstinate, she was certain, he simply leaned against the bathroom doorjamb and glared down his beaky nose at her.

Ha. If he thought that was going to intimidate her, he hadn't spent the last four days with her. Four days in which she'd bathed every inch (oh, my) of him (and she'd never confess how long it took her to get past her initial trepidation) and learned far more about his body than she ever would have wanted to know even a week before, right down to the fact that he seemed to prefer to go commando.

Well, in a manner of speaking, he hadn't spent the past four days with her, had he? Or at least he wouldn't remember them, thank Merlin!

She stirred his tea methodically, three circles clockwise and one anticlockwise, then handed it to him.

He looked at the dainty teacup with displeasure. "I should have known you'd be the overblown cabbage rose with gilt-edge type of Muggle-born."

She refused to let him get up her nose. "They were my grandmother's."

She cast a Cushioning Charm and then sank onto the single hard-backed chair at the table, leaving him his choice between the leather club chair and the bed. She took a deep sip of her tea. The heat unfurled through her, and she almost moaned as the tension eased from her shoulders. Eyes closed, she rested her head against the wall.

"You look like hell."

"Thank you. You, however, look much improved." She drank more and otherwise ignored him.

"Merlin." It was almost a whisper, an evocation, a prayer.

She opened her eyes, surprised.

He had the teacup to his lips, his eyes closed, savoring.

She watched the contours of his cheeks move, tense, relax, as he tasted, swirled the tea in his mouth, and finally, swallowed.

When he opened his eyes to find he was watching him, he demanded, "What is it? What have you done to it?"

"It's just tea. Some things," she responded smugly, blissfully sipping her own, "are not improved upon by magic."

He snorted. He lifted the teapot and examined the knitted tea cozy.

"My grandmother's," she answered the question he hadn't asked. "Her tea service, her tray, her cozy."

He examined the stitches suspiciously. "She was a witch?"

"No," she giggled. "Honestly, it's just PG Tips."

"You could have gotten tea from the kitchen," he repeated, surly. "Instead of stringing out your mess all over the room."

She sighed, flicked her wand, and all of the "mess" settled itself tidily onto the tray. "Better?" she asked.

She lowered her eyes to her own tea and finished it, carefully avoiding watching him as he finally sank down onto the bed.

She also carefully avoided any expression that would reveal she approved of such an action.

He glared at the red sheets.

"You needed something soft against your body. They're mine. They're red. Deal with it." She hid a smirk.

"Do you really think I fucking care what color the sheets are?"

*In a word, Professor? Yes.*

"They stink."

"They smell like sachet."

He pinned her with a scowl. "Indeed."

She rolled her eyes.

"How long was I out?"

"Four days."

He put the cup down with a clatter. "Then then tonight is the Sorting?"

She looked down at her lap. "One would presume."

He leapt to his feet. "Why in bloody hell didn't you say something?"

He flicked his fingers toward the wardrobe, and his black robe flew to him.

"You're in no condition "

"Miss Granger, get dressed!"

"No!" She stood up as if to block his way. "You're too weak. They can do it without "

"We will be at the Sorting," he snarled

"We? I'm not going." She backed away from him, not meeting his eyes. "It's not proper, having a professor's wife taking classes. I can find a way to help the Order "

He bent over her, his eyes burning. "You will gather up whatever bit of Gryffindor courage you possess, and you will walk into the Great Hall on my arm, and you will then take your seat "

"Where?" she snapped.

He clearly had no answer. He grimaced and rubbed his neck.

"I'm sure it will be evident when we get there. I doubt if it's up to us to choose." He seemed to shake something off, then glared at her and continued. "You will take classes, and you will be the same model student you have always been, and you will work even harder for your grades than before because nothing has changed. Because anything else is a sign of weakness. And because anything else negates your motivation for this bloody sham of a marriage."

Well. When he put it that way.

"Where are your clothes?"

"In my trunk in the Head Girl's room."

"Ah. Well." His lips thinned. "That is one thing that will have to change. You can't very well be Head Girl and my wife as well. I'll have them brought down. For now " He raked his eyes down her body and sighed.

It was the work of less than a minute for him to magic another of his heavy black robes to fit her.

"Do something with your hair."

She didn't dare argue. She saw the beads of perspiration on his upper lip, his sunken eyes, and wondered how he was going to get through this night. She simply did everything he told her to, and when she was ready, she paused at the door.

"Professor, you need to know. I am taking your name. I will be Madam Snape."

"I thought you intended to be *Mizz* Granger," he said wearily.

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes.

"Why the change?" His voice was measured, revealing nothing.

"Because " She broke off, tossed her head back and glared fiercely up at him. "Because I'm proud to be Mrs. Severus Snape."



His lip curled, and he pinched the bridge of his nose as if in pain. "Miss Granger, please rid yourself of any stupid romantic notions you might have "

"You misunderstand me," she cut in sharply, unable to hear him continue. "Hermione Granger, *Miss Granger*, was a stupid, selfish cow."

She noticed he wasn't disputing that fact.

"And I am not that girl any more. I shall endeavor to be worthy of the name Snape."

He laughed bitterly. "The words 'worthy' and 'Snape' have not been used in the same sentence for almost a century."

"I wouldn't know about that." She gave her most haughty and Snapeish sniff. "You are the only Snape I know."

He studied her through narrowed eyes.

"On second thought..." He reached into her hair and pulled the hairpins loose. She felt it tumble to her shoulders and reached up, aghast.

And he kissed her.

No, this was no mere kiss. This was a ravishing. She fought to stay standing, all too aware that his arms were trembling. She knew better than to think it was passion that made them so. But, oh, there was definitely passion. She felt her lips bruising with it and her blood surging with it, and for one wild moment, she even thought perhaps they wouldn't make it to the Sorting after all.

Abruptly, he broke away. His face was as cold and controlled as she had ever seen it, as if, even while sending electrical charges from her mouth to the deepest most regions of her body, he had felt nothing.

And even knowing that the kiss that had rocketed through her with such alarming strength had no impact on him at all, when he stroked her lip and it pulsed beneath his thumb, she couldn't stop herself from closing her eyes and sucking his thumb between her lips, between her teeth, and tasting his skin, salty and rough against her tongue.

"Very good, Madam Snape," he murmured as he pulled away. "Now, there will be no doubt in anyone's minds why we are late to the Sorting."

All she could do was swallow, nod, and take his arm.

## Gifted

*Chapter 8 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*JKR owns the characters and world. The story is mine. The beta is divine. Thanks, Leigh-Anne!*

### 8. GIFTED

It couldn't happen again.

He didn't even know what *had* happened, what happened even when their lips barely brushed, and he sure as hell didn't know what happened when he found himself wanting to deepen it, when he felt fire and melting and

It couldn't fucking happen again.

He had to stop outside the entrance Great Hall. He needed to catch his breath and brace himself for the entrance.

"Am I happy or miserable?"

He stared down at her upturned face, startled. Startled that these soft brown eyes and this impossibly young girl could truly be the source of such stirrings, and she stared at him. Waiting. What had she asked? Happy? Miserable? "Good god, how would I know?" he snapped.

"I mean, how am I supposed to look?" she snapped back. "Am I supposed to look like I'm..."

"Sated." Like she'd looked after the fucking kiss.

Which was not fuck it all to hell going to happen again.

She seemed to focus her energy, then lowered her lids to half-mast and looked quite deranged.

"For fuck's sake, Miss Granger, I said sated, not ill."

She shot him a most puzzled glance and sighed. "I don't know how to look sated."

*Insufferable witch!* "I'm not the only one who fights dirty," he said silkily, tamping down the memory he dared not let float to the surface, not now, maybe not ever. And, certainly not immediately prior to entering the Great Hall for the first time as man and ... good god.

*Wife.*

Luckily, he had a very good idea of how to inspire her passion without lips. He breathed into her ear, "Imagine..." His breath moved tendrils of her hair. He noted her slight

shudder as she listened, wide-eyed. He leaned closer, his lips almost brushing her earlobe, "Imagine that you've been up for days, for *nights*... not because you couldn't sleep, but because you didn't want to sleep, not if sleeping meant stopping ..."

Her eyes fluttered closed and her moist lips parted.

"... and now you've reached the limit of what your body can stand, but it's been worth it, so very worth every sleepless moment as your body screams for rest, your muscles ache for it, your mind begs for it, and all you have to do now is revel in the sensations, the triumph..." He turned his last words to velvet without even a semblance of pity "... of passing your NEWTs with all," one last shivery breath into that delicate shell of an ear, "Outstandings."

"Oh ... my." She almost purred, and her head tilted lazily to one side....

At which point he whisked her through the doors and into the roar of excitement and laughter.

Which immediately became a hushed silence.

"Chin up," he growled. He escorted her to the two empty seats at the far end of the head table, adjacent to his Slytherins and pulled out her chair.

At least he'd be spared some of the Gryffindor glares.

Hooch stared at him as he took his own seat beside her.

"Severus, you're growing a beard," Hooch announced. "And I don't think it's an improvement."

Fuck.

He aimed a hard look at Miss Granger and saw her staring at him, too.

He sipped from his goblet of wine and blandly scanned the hall. "I've just been informed that I'm growing a beard?"

"I...I didn't notice," she said. "My mind was on other things."

The snickers from the Slytherin table were quite unacceptable.

The stunned silence from his colleagues didn't even bear consideration.

He quelled the Slytherins with a single glare.

He quelled his colleagues by agreeing with her amiably. "Next time," he said, "we'll have to come up for air a bit sooner, don't you think?"

Hooch had a coughing fit beside him.

Hermione practically dove into her goblet and then came up sputtering.

What? She thought professors drank pumpkin juice?

He carefully avoided Minerva's eye as she rose to begin the Sorting. He didn't have to look at her to feel the arctic chill coming from that direction. So, she was bearing a grudge that he dared sully her favorite student.

Instead, he looked at Miss Granger and found her staring across the hall to the far table.

Ah, yes.

The fucking hell-cursed Gryffindors.

As the first eleven-year-old entered, Ronald Weasley was leaving.

Fucking hell.

It didn't take a mind search to know why.

He cut a look back at ... his wife. To see what humiliating and endangering reaction she was revealing.

And found her studying a fork.

"The head table gets sterling," she said, and he was certain nobody else noticed her fingers trembling or heard the slight tremor in her voice.

"If you'd married his brother, it would have killed him."

She turned the fork over and over and over, as if it held the key to the universe. "He'll get over it."

The sharp small pain caught him as unaware as anything since she'd burst into his classroom with her outrageous demand.

"Heaven protect the wizard who puts his heart in the hands of a teenaged witch," he gritted out, his sneering words out before he could stop them, just like the sharp pang of sympathy for Weasley.

She looked up at him, startled.

Oh, fuck. Now the glimmer in her eyes threatened to spill over. Merlin deliver him. He turned to his goblet for solace.

"That one's yours," she said, blinking quickly and applauding.

He turned belatedly to watch a terrified first year named Peregrine Burns slip from under the Sorting Hat and begin the long walk to Slytherin.

Snape forced a sneer, and the boy tripped, then took off running for the first empty chair he saw.

"Nice," she said.

"Indeed," he responded, satisfied to see Parkinson offer the new boy an illicit sweet.

He struggled to follow the Sorting more closely.

#

As the platters of food, heavy and rich with butters and sauces, appeared on the table before them, Hermione's stomach did a queasy turn.

She reached under the tablecloth and touched the professor's thigh, hoping nobody noticed.

He looked at her, astounded.

She leaned a little toward him as she reached for a bowl of sprouts and shot him a look.

Fortunately, he took the hint and leaned closer to her, though she was vitally aware that in no way did he get close enough to touch.

"I'm not sure your stomach can handle this," she said softly, with a glance at the sprouts in cheese sauce. Off his sudden questioning look, she continued, "You haven't had anything but broth and tea on your stomach for four days."

He scowled. "What was Poppy thinking? After the *Cruciatus* ... "

She looked at him, alarmed, and then around to see if anyone was listening.

His mouth clamped shut. He said more quietly, "After certain exertions, the body needs protein for recovery."

"I didn't know." Hermione felt like kicking something. Hard.

"*You* didn't know?"

Hermione studied her plate and pushed a roasted potato through heavy brown gravy in a pretense of eating. "You said not to call her. Not to let anybody in."

"My wards held?" he asked, seeming relieved and disbelieving and snarlingly angry, all at once.

"Do you think I could hold off an entire faculty of wizards if they hadn't?" She finally popped the potato in her mouth. "I'm sorry I didn't know about the protein," she sighed.

"So. *You* cared for me?" He touched his side probingly, frowning.

"I tried." She glanced around. Maybe she should tell him now where his reaction would be, hopefully, more controlled. "But, I mixed up the potions. I first gave you a Drowning Sleep instead of Dreamless Sleep."

He lowered his goblet and turned a withering gaze on her.

"You should label your potions," she said sternly, eating a savory bite of roast capon. The head table really did get better food.

"I know my personal potions chest like the back of my hand. It's deliberately obtuse to discourage thieves."

She shrugged.

"How do you know what you gave me?"

"Because when you hadn't awakened after 38 hours," she snuck a glance at him and quickly retreated from his dangerous glare, "I realized something was wrong. Plus, it tasted a bit too much like mint. That's how I found the Dreamless Sleep Potion. I recognized the taste."

"You tasted unlabeled potions? You, Miss Granger," he hissed softly, "are an idiot."

"And just think, you left your life and welfare in my hands." She popped a bite of baked apple into her mouth and smirked. "What does that make you?"

As he reached for his goblet

"You probably shouldn't be drinking so much, either." Of course, her words *would* escape in a momentary lull of conversation at the head table.

She saw an entire table of heads turn and stare from her to Snape and back at her again, as he froze with his hand halfway to the goblet.

He took the goblet in his hand and drained it, sliding her a dirty look.

Hooch was the first to break the silence. "My congratulations, Severus, on your newfound marital bliss."

Hermione could only blame it on four hard nights of sleeping on the floor when she looked calmly at the one professor who taught the only subject she hadn't mastered and replied sweetly, "Bite my arse."

House points be damned.

#

The interminable feast was finally coming to an end, and not a moment too soon. He could only pray his legs would hold him up. He'd had too much to drink, which under ordinary circumstances would hardly have mattered a whit, but in his weakened state....

Damn the insufferable chit. If she hadn't told him not to drink, he wouldn't have been forced to prove he could.

*Marital bliss, my ruddy arse.*

Albus rose from his spot holding down the center of the head table. "And now as a last announcement ... " Albus turned his twinkle (though it seemed more obviously forced than usual) down the table at them. "As I believe anyone who reads the *Daily Prophet* is aware, amongst all the happy news of weddings in recent days was the news that our own Professor Snape has taken a bride, the former Miss Granger."

Fuck.

Hesitant applause swelled to a veritable smattering as Severus jerked his head at her, *rise*, and tried not to lean too heavily on the table as he stood. She grabbed his elbow and he was too bloody grateful for the support to pull away. He put on a nice scowl for effect, though.

Anticipation stirred from the Ravenclaw table as Terry Boot rose, grinning. "Professor Dumbledore, we of the House of Ravenclaw have a presentation to make."

Oh Merlin, what now?

Dumbledore nodded, surprised, and Boot walked to the front of the hall, holding some sort of small object in a blue velvet bag. He cleared his throat and announced, "Professor Snape, Hermione...?"

Then he gave what could only be described as an impudent grin. "The blissful union of Gryffindor courage and Slytherin cunning makes any Ravenclaw worthy of the name

quake in our boots." The tension in the hall was broken by nervous laughter from the Ravenclaws, and Severus wasn't sure where to throw a hex first.

"Such a combination could easily control the wizarding world, you know," Boot continued, "if the two Houses ever stop feuding long enough, which never seemed a problem before, but now...?"

Again, laughter. Again, Severus fought to control his temper.

"As it's in our own best interests to remain on the good side of such a union, the House of Ravenclaw wishes to assure you that we wish you only the best in life and in your future together by giving you this gift."

He reached into the velvet bag and brought out a small silver cup with handles on either side. "A goblin-forged loving cup."

The Ravenclaws jumped to their feet, applauding, and search as he did, he couldn't find any ill will in it.

With a slight bow and a cheeky grin, Boot handed the cup to Miss Granger, and she looked practically moist-eyed as she looked down at it, and then slanted her eyes up to meet Snape's, surprised.

As the Ravenclaws cheered and Flitwick beamed with obnoxious pride, she offered it to him. He took it in his hand and stared at it. It was a nice thing, actually. He'd definitely check it for hexes later.

Granger took both of Boot's hands in her long, slender ones and smiled. "Thank you, Terry. And all of our friends in Ravenclaw." She ducked her head again, embarrassed.

At that moment, Severus was saved from speaking when Susan Bones rose from the Hufflepuff contingent and scampered to stand beside Boot. She gave a saucy smile and giggled.

"And we from the House of Hufflepuff present you with this specially decanted Elixir of Unity and Lovingkindness, simply because it's in our nature to wish happiness on those we love." Her impertinent sniff in Boot's direction diminished the sentiment of her words only slightly. "It's charmed to refill each year on the date of your marriage, August 28."

Miss Bones momentarily looked nonplussed as he continued to scowl, but evidently his scowl was weakened by wine and exhaustion because she managed to recover and present him with the golden vial.

He would have liked to snarl, but it hardly seemed proper so he forced a smile.

Or what he thought was a smile. From her reaction, he may have misjudged.

"Thank you, Miss Bones," he intoned. "And we most assuredly thank the proud House of Hufflepuff."

Well, that seemed to go over well. This time the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables both exploded in applause.

It was painfully obvious by the studied nonchalance of the Slytherins and the pouts of the bloody Gryffindors always wearing their emotions emblazoned on their foreheads for all to see that their own Houses had not considered the idea of bonding gifts.

No loss, although he did tighten his hold on Granger's hand. She seemed a little shattered to see the Gryffindors so carefully avoiding her eyes.

And finally, the old man rose and twinkled his way through the usual nonsense, and all were released to go hither and yon.

Before they could leave the table, however, the astoundingly delirious Miss Lovegood blocked their path.

Severus stopped and sighed, waiting for her to give Granger a tight hug and smile, and then to his astonishment, she focused her large eyes on him and grabbed his free hand.

She peered into his eyes, searching, and he drew back as far as he could without absolutely jerking free and turning on his heel.

Then she looked back at Granger, who seemed as disconcerted as he felt.

"You're both very lucky," she finally said with that weird smile. "Not everyone will end up so happy when this is all over."

Was she insane? At that, he did jerk away.

"Thank you, Luna." Granger gave her a fierce hug, then pulled quickly away, clearly distracted by the entire conversation. "That's very sweet of you."

Luna just nodded and drifted after her fellow Ravenclaws.

He opened his mouth to say something slicing, but felt her fingers tighten on his arm.

"She means well."

He let out his breath in quick snort.

Granger sniffed, and he thought she might be holding back tears, but then she said with far more haughteur than was polite, "Can you walk, or do I need *usdobilicorpus* to get you to your bed?"

"Bite my arse," he replied.

#

She hadn't expected him to bring her here. Had he given her any warning, she would have refused.

Yet here she was, standing in the shadows as Professor Snape addressed the House of Slytherin in their common room. No amount of extravagant decoration or rich green and silver furnishings could diminish the fact that it was in a dungeon, and she stilled a shiver.

"Tonight we welcome our First Years to the embracing comfort of our House," he said in his dulcet tones. "Those who enter the House of Slytherin find friends and comrades whom they can count on for the rest of their lives," he continued.

"Here, here!" It was a unison response, clearly tradition, and clearly and proudly sincere.

"Our First Years come in, sometimes worried by rumors or reputation. What they quickly discover is that the House of Slytherin takes care of their own," Professor Snape continued smoothly. "Prefects, have the pairings been made?"

The first years were obvious by their fresh faces and expressions of excitement and general trepidation. To Hermione's surprise, they were each joined by an older student who handed them a small gift a coiled Slytherin snake carved of deepest green jade with charmed silver eyes that occasionally blinked.

"Your guides will answer any questions you have and help you to your first day's classes tomorrow. The stairs can be tricky." He cleared his throat to general laughter. "If you have any problems, if you are bothered by anyone at any time, understand that you can call upon any Slytherin to assist you."

Hermione watched, surprised. Professor McGonagall had always left such details up to the Prefects, and there had not been anywhere near so much attention to detail.

Not that she would ever confess such a thing to Snape.

"And as you are all aware, tonight I also present to you my bride, whom most of you already know, Madam Hermione Snape." He made the slightest of bows in her direction and offered his hand, drawing her into the middle of the room beside him. She hadn't realized her hands were so icy until she felt his fingers close over her fingertips.

She forced herself to scan the room, relieved to see hooded glances and polite applause, but no open hostility.

Well, of course not. Not tonight. Not in front of Professor Snape.

As Prefect, Draco Malfoy stepped forward with a direct look straight into her eyes. "Madam Snape."

She realized she wasn't breathing.

She realized he expected her to offer her hand.

He bent over her fingertips but fortunately his lips never met them. "Those who enter the House of Slytherin find friends and comrades whom they can count on for the rest of their lives," he repeated in a drawl. She tried not to reveal the chill that swept through her before he finally stepped away.

One by one the Slytherins greeted her in similar fashion, the males bowing over her hand and the females touching her fingertips with theirs, as Snape watched calmly from beside her.

As they got younger she relaxed, and by the time the smallest First Year bobbed earnestly over her hand, making her smile, she felt oddly warmed. It was young Peregrine Burns, the first to get Sorted on this night.

"M-Madam Snape," he stammered, tongue-tied, and finally thrust his small jade serpent into her hand. "For you," he blurted and blushed.

She looked from the sweet, so sweet and beautiful gift to him and then impulsively kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she said, and whispered into his ear, "It's my favorite gift we've gotten."

He looked at her with huge eyes and then grinned and ducked his head.

She glanced at Professor Snape. His expression gave her no clue. She finally let her smile sweep the room. "I hope to be an asset and a friend to you all."

Another "Here, here!" followed by polite and almost warm applause, and Snape took her arm.

"If there are no questions, I believe I will leave you to your first night celebration. You know how to summon me if you need any assistance."

He took her into the corridor, and she felt his weariness seep into him as if a glamour had lifted. It only took at a glance at his suddenly-drawn features to realize it had.

#

Upon entering his quarters it took all the strength he had left to make it to his chair and lower himself into it without revealing his bone-deep exhaustion.

It wasn't until he felt her slender but strong fingers release his arm that he realized her assistance had kept him from falling into the chair.

He glared up at her, determined to regain his sense of balance. "You chose potions by *taste*?"

"I'm not stupid," she snipped, flouncing across the room to sit down in the hard-backed chair. He noticed a flick of her wand at the seat before she dropped into it and vaguely wondered, but she continued, "I didn't willy-nilly ramble through the potions cabinet, taking a swig of everything that looked interesting, you know." She began unbuttoning her robe. "I'd narrowed it down by the color and shape of the vials, the scent, the color and the viscosity of the liquid. But after I realized you were sleeping too long and did some research, I realized that Drowning Sleep and Dreamless Sleep potions are almost identical, except Drowning Sleep has opium, and is most easily discerned from Dreamless by the presence of water-mint."

"Rattling off words from a book, per usual," he grumbled, too tired to dig for a deeper taunt.

She sent his robe back to the wardrobe with a wave of her wand. "Fortunately for you, words in books work." Her face tightened in anxiety. "I think they worked. Or at least, they seemed to ... help?"

Once again he probed his sides, his torso, rolled his shoulders. Whatever had knifed through him like whiplash when he first awoke was almost completely diminished. The rest, well, he needed to examine himself to be sure, but... "It seems that what you did was ... more than adequate."

She gulped. Hiccuffed. He looked at her, alarmed. She covered her mouth with her hands and bent forward over her lap.

"Are you ill? Miss Granger, the toilet is " he snarled, ready to haul her in there himself if he had to. He was halfway across the room when she shook her head violently, and he saw the tears streaming from her eyes. She held out a hand to stop him from coming too close.

"I'm sorry truly, I am. I I was just so afraid!"

"Afraid?" he repeated numbly.

"I thought I was afraid I thought you might die! I did the best I could, I read everything, I I just was so afraid!"

He ached. His arms ached. His legs ached. It was something that went beyond exhaustion and weariness and pain and something deeper. He forced his voice to be calm, to soothe.

"What you did," he repeated slowly, "was more than adequate."

Her sobs choked to a halt and she rubbed tears from her cheeks and managed to smile. "Thank you, sir."

He realized he was standing. He forced himself backward, forced himself to sit back down.

Forced himself to remember the things that needed to be said between them, so that this hell-spawned night could finally end.

"Miss Granger, did you read the terms of the contract we signed?"

She nodded, staring at her hands in her lap.

"So you know that we are required to have sexual relations once a week, with the exception of those weeks when your menses makes that less appropriate."

She nodded again. He noticed she didn't blush, which surprised him.

"You know that we are not allowed to use contraceptive potions or charms."

She nodded again, but looked up at him with quick desperation. "I hoped you would know something, though. Something that they wouldn't detect."

He nodded. "Yes. It's not the best, but it was used with great success for several centuries, and I doubt if anyone will think to look for it now."

She looked like the pressure of the world was lifted from her shoulders. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. It's for both of us. Now, you also know that you are expected to give birth to a child within a year of leaving Hogwarts, and so there will come a time when such contraceptive measures will have to end."

"Yes, I know." The devastation in her eyes was clear.

"Next week, I'll make legal arrangements to assure that you and any " He broke off, unable to even voice the concept of children. "That you will be cared for in the event of my death."

Her head snapped up at the word death.

"In the meantime, we'll have relations once a week, which happens to be on a Saturday, because these rings are charmed to monitor the frequency and existence of said relations."

She nodded, staring at her hands again.

"It will not be ..." he struggled for words, avoided looking in her direction. "It won't be as difficult again, I can assure you. I will make every effort to cause you as little distress as possible."

"It's all right, truly it is!" she assured him. "I wasn't expecting violins and choirs of angels, you know."

"Which is fortunate and rather realistic of you," he ground out, trying not to remember the stark details of their marital bed.

"Professor," she said softly, and before he could brace himself, her soft brown eyes had captured him.

"Four days was a long time to think, and nobody to talk to."

"Which I'm sure in your case was catastrophic," he said, grateful for the opportunity to regain his equilibrium.

"Indeed," she said with a slight smile. The smile faded. "I'm not in a position to make demands. But I find I must."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Demands? You think to make demands *of me*?"

Her jaws tightened and she gave him a sharp nod. "Yes, I'm sorry, but I must. This horrid marriage law it's so shortsighted and dangerous that I can't believe nobody sees what it's reaping for the future. So many babies, so many children forced upon people who don't want them, or don't want them with their chosen mates." Her eyes were hollow, the shadows beneath them suddenly deep. "Professor, you must promise me you must swear to me our children will never know that they weren't wanted."

He was speechless.

"Swear to it."

He opened his mouth to say, "You want my soul, too? You have my life and way too much of my body and now you want me to give my soul and my honor to a vow that is a curse to all of us?"

He opened his mouth to say, "You stupid girl, you think I'll live to see children?"

He opened his mouth to shout, "Get out! Get out of here and don't come back!"

He opened his mouth to say all of these things, and many more

And the only words that escaped were, "I swear to it."

She only nodded. "And I swear to it, too."

He could only hope for the sake of any unfortunate souls that "blessed" their union that she was better at keeping such a vow than he would be.

## Discovered

*Chapter 9 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

## 9. DISCOVERED

He awoke to darkness with his wand in his hand, a curse on his lips and both aimed at something on the floor beside him.

Hesitation could mean death.

Yet, he hesitated.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness.

*She* was on the floor beside him.

Merlin's soul, what in fucking hell was she doing?

A soft moan.

He lit his wand to a soft glow and checked more closely.

Her hair tangled around her in a storm cloud, she tossed restlessly.

Tears streaked down her face.

*Legil--*

He stopped himself.

He didn't want to know.

He reached to wake her.

Stopped himself.

He'd leave her to her own nightmares.

He had plenty of his own.

He rolled over and off the bed, stood and glared down at her.

She probably would wail and moan to her friends about sleeping on the floor. Well, let her. He didn't tell her to do that. He hadn't even thought about it before. Wondering where she was sleeping was hardly on his list of worries in recent days.

He didn't even remember getting in the bed the night before. He remembered sitting in the chair ... then nothing *She* must have done it.

She wore his shirt, again. In her tossing, she'd kicked off her cover, and her bare legs were covered with goosebumps. He recalled how silky and slick they'd been in the bath water and stifled a snarl.

He forced himself to stop staring at her.

He was awake. He had things to do.

He left her to her dreams and the cold night air.

After a stop at the bathroom he didn't flush, didn't want to wake her because he sure as hell didn't want company he paced back to his private laboratory.

The wards were down.

Fuck.

Wand at the ready, he used a hand wave and opened the door.

Where there had been melted cauldrons nothing.

Where there had been broken beakers and glassware not a splinter.

Where there had been spilled ingredients spotless surfaces.

The lab was pristine, if desolate.

On a worktable rested a parchment with a meticulous inventory of what was still there, another with an inventory of what had been destroyed, and a third with other possible needed items.

So. She hadn't spent the entire four days hovering over him in despair, it would seem.

Impertinent, over-achieving girl.

He sat on a stool to go over the lists and make corrections.

#

Hermione stretched her arms and arched her back, stifling a yawn that threatened to turn into a groan. Her covers were tucked snugly up around her chin, and she snuggled deeper into them, wondering what time it was.

She opened her eyes and blinked blearily

And found Professor Snape studying her from above.

He leaned against the wall by the fireplace, arms folded, as if he'd been there for a long time.

She sat up quickly.

"So," he said in a voice velvety soft. "Is your plan to regale your friends with stories of sleeping on the floor alone while I sleep in the bed?"

The very thought of people knowing what transpired between her and Professor Snape made her ill.

"Surely I've provided you with ample ammunition to earn you the pity of everyone you know," he said bitterly.

"I don't want pity," she said sharply.

He glared at her through hooded eyes.

Clearly, she thought without any clarity at all, she needed to stop looking at his bare shoulders and torso because now that he was no longer unconscious they radiated intimidation.

He flung himself onto his bed and folded his hands behind his head. She felt him, still glaring, even though she refused to meet his eyes.

Tea. She needed tea.

She ignored him and busied her hands with the preparation, but unfortunately that left her mind all too unoccupied.

Why did he keep watching her? Didn't he have anything better to do?

Ungrateful bastard.

Well, what did he have to be grateful for, after all? She was the one with debts piling up higher than she'd ever be able to repay.

She forced herself to focus on tea.

Carefully swirling the leaves in the Brown Betty as she walked, Hermione crossed to the leather chair with the tea tray following her.

Green flames flared in the fireplace and the Headmaster's head appeared.

"Severus, I must request that you and, um, good morning, Miss Gran...I mean, Madam Snape."

Hermione blocked his view of the room and used her heel to kick her pallet under the bed. At the same moment, she felt the white shirt she wore transfigure into a floor-length nightgown. She looked up startled, and found Professor Snape staring through slanted eyes at the fireplace, his hand dangling languidly beside him.

"Could the two of you come to my office as soon as possible?"

Snape rose on one elbow in the bed. "You know I don't have time for a meeting, Albus. I have classes this morning."

The headmaster cleared his throat and appeared uneasy. "I think this supersedes your first class, Severus."

Snape's hooded eyes fixed on the old wizard's head in a glare, and he asked in a deceptively smooth voice, "Do we have time to dress, or would you prefer us to present ourselves as we were so rudely thrust into this world to take our first breaths?"

Hermione jerked a startled look at him. He wanted Dumbledore to think he was naked under the covers? Whatever on earth for?

"I do believe clothing is appropriate for this meeting." Dumbledore coughed. "Miss Gra...I mean, Mrs. Snape's parents are here."

With that, his head disappeared.

Hermione gasped.

"Miss Granger, might I impose upon you to share your tea?"

"But Professor Dumbledore said..."

"Really," he replied blandly. "Are you afraid of them?"

She looked at him, at his narrowed eyes and hawkish nose and arrogant expression, and felt her tension ease. "Of course not," she replied and realized she wasn't.

She quickly poured his cup, added milk and sugar, stirred it precisely three times clockwise and one time anticlockwise, then stopped just short of handing it to him. "I'm sorry, I forgot." She forced a very innocent smile. "You prefer tea from the kitchen."

He snatched the tea from her before she could move it out of his reach. "I'll force myself."

There was no way he could hide his pleasure as he sipped and the heat eased its way into his body. "Thank you," he finally growled.

She hid her grin as she prepared her own cup.

She had something to add to the list, "Ways to Make Professor Snape's Life Easier."

It was too late to change what had been done, but she was determined to make their situation feel less onerous to him.

They sat in what could almost be termed conspiratorial silence and sipped their tea. But finally, Hermione couldn't deny the unease that tightened her shoulders and roiled in her stomach. Her shirt was a shirt once again so she pulled on her jeans and the black robe she'd worn the night before.

She'd get Dobby to bring her trunk later. And Crookshanks.

She nibbled her lower lip.

Maybe she should ask about Crookshanks.

No. She wouldn't ask.

She'd deal with the aftershocks later.

When Snape was ready, they silently made their way through back corridors she'd never seen before and, after Snape barked out the password, ended up outside the Headmaster's office.

She paused and drew in a deep breath.

"Am I happy or miserable?" he asked with a glower.

She couldn't tell whether he was taunting her or wanting an answer so decided the straightforward approach was best. "Just be yourself, with all that entails." She cleared her throat and avoided his gaze. "There are things about me that you don't know."



She knocked on the door and entered before he could demand more answers.

XXX

What the bloody hell did that mean?

He followed Miss Granger into Albus's office.

Her chin raised and stubborn, he watched her move to the strangers across the desk from Albus. She offered each of them a cool cheek to well, to brush against their own cool cheeks.

Icy politeness seemed the order of the day.

One look at her parents, and all sorts of things clicked into place, even as others spun wildly out of orbit.

The mother was tall and angular and horse-faced. She had rather large teeth and stylishly-cropped, greying hair of a similar texture to Miss Granger. She wore tweeds that draped gracefully and expensively on her lean body, and she looked like she spent far too much time on a horse. She had ten years on Severus, at least.

The father was tall and even older. In his youth, he might have been good looking, in a narrow-nosed, weak-chinned, inbred way. He obviously had an excellent tailor, and it was doubtful he had shined his own shoes to such a high gloss.

"Mummy, Daddy, I would like you to meet my husband, Professor Severus Snape. Severus, may I present my parents, Sir Alistair Granger, Baron of Eastleigh, and Lady Granger?"

Clearly, these people were not dentists.

Clearly, they held everything within their line of sight in the greatest disdain.

Clearly, if there was anything Severus Snape could return with interest, it was disdain.

"Charmed," he drawled. He folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe, as if either too lazy or too bored to make the effort for more.

He didn't like the way the mother stared at him through assessing eyes.

He assessed her back.

"Well," she announced to no one in particular. "I'm beginning to understand a few things."

"Pray tell, Lady Granger, please illuminate us all. I myself haven't understood anything for five days."

He noticed that *his* Granger seemed to be fighting laughter. Interesting.

Lady Granger fixed her acid look on her daughter. "So we had to find out from the Dean of the Cathedral that our only child had wed?"

"I didn't think you'd want to be there," Hermione said calmly.

"You may think you have everything wrapped up in a neat little bow, young lady," the baron blustered, "but I intend to appeal this to the highest levels of Westminster and of Canterbury and put an end to this nonsense!"

"Neither the pillars of Parliament nor those of the Church of England tremble at your approach, Daddy, so you can stop your ridiculous posturing," Hermione huffed.

Oh, that seemed to find its mark. Well done. Perhaps he could watch this as a spectator and stay out of the way of hexes.

"And while we're on the subject," her mother added, "you claim all this came up last week, but we find the banns were published and arrangements made for a cathedral wedding, which has to be done months if not years in advance"

Finally, Albus decided to intervene.

"Lady Granger, please don't blame Hermione for this. There was no advance preparation, but it only took a bit of magical intervention to smooth the way backward, so to speak, so that everything is official. And as for the cathedral wedding..." Albus looked at Hermione questioningly. "I believe that must have been your daughter's, um, 'requirement.'"

Hermione looked surprised and aimed Severus a look of dawning comprehension. Perhaps she remembered him shoving her through first, so that it would be her 'requirements' that would be met.

She smoothed her robes primly. "I was baptized and confirmed in Winchester Cathedral, as have been more generations of Grangers than we can number. Of course I would be married there." Her smirk was only the tiniest bit smug, but quite a bit filled with sass. "And of course, impossible for you to challenge, Daddy."

"I'm sure the Board of Governors of this...*institution*," her father announced, "must frown on such a relationship as has obviously been ongoing between the *professor* and my innocent daughter "

Severus snorted.

"...and I intend to pursue this matter to the full extent of whatever law exists in this place!"

"You will do no such thing," Hermione snapped. "You will go back to your life and leave me alone in mine. And when you've learned to behave yourself, perhaps we can meet again on more civil terms. Until then, I have my education to pursue, and my husband has his job."

Her cheeks flamed, and her hair was a riot of tangles as she returned to stand beside him as if she belonged there, which upon consideration, he rather supposed she did.

She looked rather disarming when she was in a snit.

Her mother clearly wasn't satisfied. "Now that you're married to a member of the staff, how can you presume to continue your education with any semblance of integrity?"

And something inside Snape snapped.

"Madam," he said coldly, "you will never again impugn my wife's *integrity* if you wish to see her again in my lifetime, and I warn you, wizards live far longer than mere humans."

"Please, please," Albus protested, ever the fucking peacemaker. "Let's not let our tempers get the best of us, and let's not say things that will haunt us in the future. I believe I understand your question, Lady Granger, and agree it bears addressing. Hermione's grades have always been top of her class. There will be no question that if she continues to get high grades it will be because she earned them. My staff is beyond reproach. I'll appreciate your acceptance of that fact."

Lady Granger turned her gaze to Snape's and tilted her head. "And Potions? No one will question a student taking classes from her own husband?"

Damn but the woman was insufferable.

Snape felt Hermione tense to respond but cut her off. "Of course it would be inappropriate for her to sit in my classroom. In fact, I'll find it much easier to teach when the little *know-it-all*," which he attempted to sound like an endearment, which was an interesting challenge, "isn't there. As it is, I have to prepare for two if not three different classes simultaneously when I attempt to teach your daughter. She routinely assaults me with a barrage of questions, the answers to which only she and I would even comprehend, since she is so far ahead of any others in her year. Valuable time is taken away from those who are not at her level, and the rest of her time is wasted on what can only be termed busy work."

He gave a haughty sniff. "However, I will tutor her privately for her NEWTs, with the goal of having Madam Snape equal or better the highest score in Potions in the history of Hogwarts. I feel it is within her grasp, under my tutelage."

Both Hermione and Albus turned shocked eyes to his face, and he blithely ignored them both. Just because he would encourage her to beat his own scores didn't mean she had a shot in hell to actually do it.

"Now, if you have nothing else I have a class waiting for me, and Hermione has her own schedule to fulfill."

It almost worked. He almost managed to steer Hermione through the door and out of the office, but the harridan caught her breath and managed to blurt one last request.

"I won't leave I can't leave my daughter here until I see where she's living."

Fuck.

"Of course you can't, and I'm sure Professor Snape and Hermione will be delighted to show you their quarters. I do think it would be best if you Flooed in, as this is the first day of this school term and the corridors are apt to be a little disorganized."

Snape shot Albus a glare, but Albus ignored him.

As Albus began explaining the process of Flooing, Snape grabbed a handle of powder from the mantle, flung it into fireplace and dragged Hermione in with him.

When they landed in his quarters, before he could catch his breath, she flung herself into his arms, laughing. "You were brilliant!" she gasped, and before he could stop her, she kissed him.

He had sworn that wasn't going to happen again.

He jerked away, but not in time. Not before the surge of reaction rampaged through him, settling into his groin. He peeled her arms from his neck and turned her to face the fireplace a split-moment prior to her mother, her father and Albus stepping through.

And belatedly realized what they would all see.

Quarters that in no way had been altered to accommodate a second person.

Quarters that were selfishly and stubbornly unchanged from when he lived alone.

A disheveled narrow bed, suitable only for one person. Half-empty teacups, books piled everywhere, one reading chair, one table and chair.

Hermione's father seemed too stunned by the actual process of Flooing to take in anything. But the mother, ah, she was another thing all together.

Her eyes didn't miss a thing as they raked every surface, glanced into the bathroom (still in disarray), and deeper into his quarters.

"My private laboratory," he announced firmly. "Off limits."

She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"I'd like to speak to my daughter. Alone."

"All right," Hermione said. "We can do that."

Albus herded her father back into the fireplace. Snape hesitated, but Hermione shook her head slightly.

"Are you sure?" he asked, pointedly ignoring her mother.

"Yes." She smiled half-heartedly.

He finally turned to the woman, offered his hand and said silkily, "Lady Granger, you are welcome to stay in our home as long as my wife welcomes you."

He made a dignified retreat out of the line of fire.

XXX

"Mummy." Hermione offered her mother the hard chair.

"No, darling, I won't be long. I just wanted you to understand that when you come to your senses, your father and I will be most happy to have you return. No choice you make can't be undone one way or another."

"Am I supposed to thank you for that?" Hermione snapped.

"I feel better having said it, so I hope you will forgive me for needing to."

Her mother walked along the walls, gazing at the books. "Can he afford you?"

"What?" Hermione was stunned.

"He's a teacher, darling. He lives in school housing, which is neither spacious nor luxurious..."

"Mother! I don't care about those things."

"Of course you don't because you've never had to." She arrived at the bed and stared down it, and then gave Hermione a knowing look.

"You're so transparent, darling."

Hermione was certain she was going to regret asking, but she felt compelled to ask anyway, "In what way?"

"The reason you wanted to marry him."

"I didn't *wan--*," she began, but broke off quickly. And then, "Oh, god." She shot a nervous glance around the room, wondering what other than a certain scholarly untidiness her mother "saw" that suddenly made her believe she was an authority on Hermione's relationship with Professor Snape.

"Don't 'oh, god' me, young lady. No wonder you were swept away by him"

Hermione couldn't stop her gasp. "By Professor Snape?"

Her mother looked at her, her expression almost pitying. She closed the distance between them and stroked Hermione's cheek. "Darling, are you trying to delude yourself or me? You'd have to be blind not to see it. Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't attract most silly young girls, but a woman sees these things. The man radiates power. He practically reeks of sensuality. And his eyes " Her mother laughed. "Well, they go beyond undressing you. He seems as if he could peer right into your soul."

Hermione felt a twinge of anger. Had Professor Snape used *Legilimens* on her mother?

She'd kill him.

"The problem with falling in love with your teacher..."

In love?

"...is that the day comes when your world is larger than a school room or even a magical castle, and you realize that the authority and power that overwhelmed you as a schoolgirl are small and dusty and stodgy compared to the real world you're ready to enter."

Hermione didn't even attempt to respond. Her mother had no comprehension of the "power" that existed in the wizarding world, and thus no comprehension of how Professor Snape stood head and shoulders above most wizards, even if he did spend most of his time in a classroom.

"He obviously has little room in his life for anything but books and work," her mother continued, "and thus was safe from undesired feminine distractions until..."

Lady Granger dropped her hand to her side. "Until a similarly-focused young woman was born a witch." She gestured toward the rest of the room and Hermione braced herself for more scathing commentary, but her mother surprised her. "All books, no furniture. You've found a man who shares your priorities," she sighed. "And, yet..."

"Please, Mummy. It's done. It can't be changed. I don't want it changed. Can't you just let it go?"

Her mother gave her a hard look, then sighed again. "You need your own reading chair. I'll send it along." She gave Hermione a cool peck on the cheek. "I'm going to go back and retrieve your father and glare one more time at your new husband, and then leave you to it. But don't think I'm happy. Let's just hope you are."

Hermione nodded, feeling like she'd gotten off rather easily. "Erm, I need you to double up when you send my PG Tips. It seems Prof... um, Severus, likes Muggle tea."

"I'll send it by owl." Her mother grabbed a fistful of Floo powder, tossed it into the flames and announced, "Headmaster's office," as if she'd been Flooing all her life.

Hermione had often been told she took after her mother.

She sank to the bed and sat, overwhelmed. There was so much to think about, she didn't even know where to begin.

She needed to make another list.

Several lists.

She was crossing to find some parchment on the desk when Professor Snape entered from the corridor.

"Well, they're gone," he announced. "She waltzed into Albus's office as if she owned it, wished me a happy life, collected your father and left."

"My mother finds you attractive," Hermione blurted.

He paled as if she'd squirted him with bubutuber pus. "Surely you don't think you don't mean your mother "

She burst into laughter. "I just thought it was information you might tuck away for future reference. A weapon, as it were, if you ever need to deal with her again."

At the even more horrified expression on his face, she laughed harder. "I didn't mean you'd seduce her, you big git! I meant, you know you'd just " She couldn't find the words. Unable to stand, she dropped onto the bed and held her side.

"Miss Granger, I don't have time for this nonsense. I think perhaps I should leave you to your hysteria and hope that you've come to your senses by lunch, when I can assure you that you will have any number of questions to answer, not the least of which is why you told everyone your parents were dentists!"

With a swirl of his robes, he billowed through the opening in the wall. As it closed after him, she fell to the bed and laughed until she cried and cried until she slept.

Which was not a bad thing.

## Rejected

*Chapter 10 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*JKR owns the characters and world. The story is mine. The beta is divine. Thanks, Leigh-Anne!*

## 10. REJECTED

He entered the classroom with his usual flare of cloak and banging of door and general sneer, but he wasn't feeling anything "usual."

She laughed at him.

She called him a git.

She linked him with her fucking *mother!*

The harridan had to be ten years, maybe fifteen, his senior.

He didn't look that old. He knew he didn't. Did he?

He glared at the empty place where she should be sitting, and wished she were there just so he could deduct fifty house points from bloody fucking Gryffindor.

Except Albus fucking Dumbledore had revoked his ability to deduct house points from her, as it wouldn't be "seemly."

He realized everyone was staring at him.

He waved at the board and the day's potion assignment appeared.

He glared at Slytherins and Gryffindors alike and dared anyone to say a word.

So, of course, Longbottom's hand rose.

"Already lost, Mr. Longbottom?" he sneered. "The words on the board are your assignment. If you can manage to read them silently with a minimum of lip-movement, it would be appreciated by all, I'm certain."

"Sir, is ... is Hermione ill?" Longbottom pressed, his cheeks pink.

The Slytherins' expressions were avid, perhaps even lascivious.

The Gryffindors' expressions were wary, perhaps even threatening.

What the bloody hell did they all think, that he had her chained to his bed?

"Madam Snape will be revising for her Potions NEWT in a course of independent study," he snapped. "Miss Patil, will you please take the seat beside Mr. Longbottom?"

At least he wouldn't have to stare at her empty chair.

X

Hermione awoke with a start and leapt from the oh-so-soft bed. She'd slept through Potions, which was fine since she didn't have to attend. But it wouldn't do to sleep through Transfiguration, too.

She barely managed to enter the classroom before Professor McGonagall swept in behind her.

"Late, Madam Snape? Five points from Gryffindor," she announced crisply.

Hermione took the first empty seat and dove into her bag, trying to assemble her materials.

"Madam Snape, I do believe you have an assigned seat. Five more points from Gryffindor."

Hermione did a quick and furious *Wingardium Leviosa* and had her materials follow her to her regular desk. Was the old witch still angry with her? Evidently so.

She forced herself to focus on the assignment and despite her late start, finished first and best, she was pleased to note. Ordinarily she could have expected at least ten points for such a successful transfiguration from an owl feather to an adult barn owl.

McGonagall barely glanced at her preening owl before passing along to the next table and bestowing house points on the bedraggled bird Ron had produced. Even Pigwidgeon looked better than the thing on his desk, which molted feathers everywhere.

Hermione decided to let it pass, however, and turned to whisper, "Ron, Harry we haven't had a chance to catch up since..."

"Five more points from Gryffindor." McGonagall glared from across the room.

Hermione realized all the Gryffindors were shooting her dirty looks, as if they thought she actually deserved the punishments.

Ron and Harry studiously avoided looking at her at all.

Burning with a mix of fury and shame, Hermione gathered her things and left as soon as class ended.

X

She was halfway into the Great Hall when one isolated moment from the morning popped into her head.

She hadn't. She couldn't have.

Had she?

She gulped.

She had called Professor Snape a git.

She wasn't hungry any more.

X

He stood pressed against his bathroom door and stared at the four-poster bed that dominated his quarters.

"This is exactly why I never wanted the damn thing to begin with," he said to the empty room.

When he'd decided to cover every bare wall with bookshelves, he'd condemned himself to a room with a small bed and little furniture. This had never been a problem. In fact, he preferred it. It was like living in a library.

But now, with no walls to put it against, the only way to fit Salazar Slytherin's immense bed into his quarters was to put it in the middle of the room. He'd be damned if he was going to let it block access to his books.

To add glove-slap to body-blow, someone had dumped a prissy little upholstered chair (chintz!) in here, and it didn't take a Ravenclaw to deduce that the offensive piece of furniture had to be Granger's.

And of course, she'd put it right beside his sensible leather chair, as if the two of them were destined to share cozy evenings in each other's company.

Bollocks.

Fuck.

Hell.

No matter where her chair was, they were destined to spend way too much time together, cozy or not.

With a bit of concentration and wand waving, he angled the bed in a different direction.

It still dominated the room, but the only other option was unspeakable and he absolutely refused to even consider it.

He had to draw a fucking line somewhere.

X

*Oh. My.*

Hermione approached the bed warily. She didn't mind that it was big. Big was good. Big meant plenty of room to spread out in. And it did have lots of pillows.

She didn't mind the green velvet covers. They were to be expected, and besides, she'd always liked forest green.

What she minded were the slithering serpents.

Each post actually *moved*.

Though carved of a dark and aged wood, the serpents coiled and slid and slithered up and down, twining together and apart, knotting and unknotting.

She took a step closer to examine them and one of them actually hissed at her.

Humph! She wasn't going to let a bed get the better of her.

She walked firmly toward it and every snake on the nearest post bared long, sharp fangs at her.

She ran to her chair and put it between her and the bed.

The bed went back to coiling and slithering and knotting.

Uneasily, she settled in to study, using the small table as a desk.

Two hours later she heard the soft sound of the wall dissolving and looked up from her parchment, distracted.

Snape entered in full billow.

"What part of 'I have questions for you at lunch' did you not understand?"

She swallowed heavily. "My Transfiguration class was rather stressful. I didn't feel like eating."

"Since when are your classes stressful for anyone other than your teachers?"

She tossed her head in frustration. "Everything has changed." Then, woefully, "Everything."

He flung himself into his leather chair, propped his feet on the footstool and glared at her from beneath his stringy hair. "The only thing surprising about that statement is that you are surprised."

She felt his narrowed eyes burning into her as she allowed her quill to doodle runes in the margin of the chart she was working on. "What happened to the other bed?"

He frowned. "I have no idea. I had it taken away."

"I think ... I think I'd like to sleep in it."

The silence stretched out until she simply had to look up and see how expressionless his face was as he watched her. Finally he said, "Indeed."

"That bed..." She pointed at it with a trembling hand. "That bed scares me. Are you happy? I've admitted it. I am afraid of a stupid bed."

He still watched her without expression. "I can't imagine that you are intimidated by a charmed bed. Am I to deduce that it is the size of the bed and what you fear will happen in it that have you concerned?"

"You mean of course not!"

He looked unconvinced, and he also looked ... tense.

She summoned her courage and got to her feet. She walked slowly to the bed.

First, the hisses.

Then, as she drew closer, bared fangs, only this time they were from all four posts.

But as he'd said, it was only a charmed bed.

She suddenly felt foolish and took two more steps...

She felt him grab her from behind and yank her away a mere moment before a serpent's mouth snapped shut near her bare hand.

His arms clamped around her waist like a vice, and she felt his chest rising and falling behind her, as if he'd run a great distance or had a great scare.

"I know it's only a charmed bed..." she began, barely able to speak.

"I see." He eased her further from the bed, and then put himself between her and the four-poster.

Between soft incantations, a waving of his wand and a fierce intensity focused on the writhing bed, he reduced it in size and then made it disappear.

"It never occurred to me...." He was clearly disturbed.

She felt cold creep through her veins. "It's because I'm Muggle-born."

"I believe that would be the reason, though I'd have to research to know for certain." He turned stiffly to her and gave a very deep, disgusted sigh. "I'll have a different bed here by tonight. I've been remiss in not doing so sooner."

"If it had bitten me...?"

"I'm not certain, but I can assure you that there will be no other Slytherin artifacts in these quarters." His manner was formal, but she felt an undercurrent of embarrassment.

So she wasn't at all surprised when he went on the offensive. In fact, it was rather a relief to get back to "normal," or what passed for normal between them.

"Question one," he demanded from his spot towering over her. "Why have you perpetuated the myth that your parents are dentists?"

"Because if they sounded boring, nobody would ask difficult questions about my life." She raised her eyes to his defiantly. "And because I didn't want to be mistaken for the kind of pureblood toffs that populate the House of Slytherin."

His voice was low and silky and even more threatening because of that fact as he replied, "Do not insult my House."

She glanced at the empty spot where that dreadful bed had been just moments before. "All right, then. I didn't want to be mistaken for arrogant pureblood ponces like the Malfoys."

*"Or my friends."*

She sniffed.

"What kind of questions about your life?" he demanded crisply.

At first she wasn't going to answer. People were so bloody curious about what it was like to be on the long list (definitely not the short list) for Court functions. They asked questions then got put off by her answers, because no answer satisfied the listener. Pretending it was an exciting life made her sound like a snob. To proclaim the truth, that she hated it, made her sound even worse, dismissive of opportunities that most others assumed were a great honor.

*Idiots.*

No, she had many reasons for not opening doors to these conversations.

But her traitorous brain kept *thinking*, and her traitorous mouth opened, and she found herself blurting even more revealing truths. Was it his eyes? His damnably black eyes? Did they pull information from her against her will? "How come you're always available summers and hols, Hermione? How come you're never with your parents?" Her voice was light in mimicry, but she rather assumed he'd pick up on the pained subtext.

"I can honestly say I have had higher priorities to consider than how you spend your holidays, Granger," he announced with clear disdain.

"I wasn't talking about you," she disdained right back at him. She dropped back into her chair. Already, its familiarity had made it her comfort and refuge. She tucked her feet beneath her.

"So, how come you were always available summers and hols, Miss Granger?" He matched her movement, taking his seat beside her and relaxing with a smirk. "How come you're never with your parents?"

How did he do that? Mimic her, mimicking them, as light and false and polite as conversation at any icy court function? He did have the most amazing voice.

She shot him an acid look. "Because their social schedule is always so full, they don't care much if I'm not around. I'm not athletic, so my mother wasn't sure what to do with me. I'm not a pretty little girl who liked to be dandled on a knee, so my father didn't know what to do with me. I was pretty much left to my own devices even before I got the letter from Hogwarts."

"Poor little rich girl," he sneered.

"Sod off," she sneered back, then added with a heavy load of snark, *'Sir.'*

He snorted softly.

She realized she'd doodled a hole in her parchment and had splayed her quill. She tossed both aside with disgust. "They thought Hogwarts was an eccentric school but that it would eventually spit me out ready for Cambridge after my year off. They never understood that I wouldn't be back in their world when I finished my seventh year."

"Meaning, you never told them."

She shrugged again. "I never told them anything that would stop me from coming back to Hogwarts every year."

"I'll tuck away your tendencies toward passive aggression, selective honesty and ambiguous morality for future consideration."

She was getting good at ignoring him when it suited her.

"When and how did I get in bed last night?"

"When you fell asleep in your chair and I couldn't waken you. I used *Mobilicorpus*."

"And you slept on the floor." He spoke idly, as if the subject held little interest. But she assumed the fact that he mentioned it at all meant he was disturbed. Severus Snape was not the kind of man to indulge in idle chitchat.

"I transfigured a pallet which was remarkably comfortable when I added a Cushioning Charm," she said and then added with a modest twitch of her lips, "I am ... more than adequate ... at transfiguring."

"Indeed." He glared at her, then closed his eyes with a sniff. He had obviously lost interest in all things Granger. "If you don't mind, I am going to rest for seven minutes, then return to my duties."

She nibbled her lower lip. "Professor... "

"Fucking hell, what is it now?"

"I'm sorry I called you a git."

"Did you?" he asked nonchalantly. "I didn't notice."

"Well, I was overstressed, and lately I seem to be doing and saying and thinking all sorts of things that I ordinarily wouldn't do or say or think, and I'm very sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I do respect you, and I'm grateful for everything..."

"Please, Miss Granger, stop apologizing. It's growing tedious."

She wanted to curl into ball and hide. Which made it even more difficult to keep going. "I need your assistance, sir."

He opened his eyes and glowered and waited for her to continue.

"If you would please owl Harry, Ron and Ginny and summon them to your classroom at 2:30 tomorrow afternoon..."

"Surely you aren't planning my weekend activities?"

Weekend. Tomorrow was Saturday. She stopped herself from following that thought *Saturday!* and rushed on, "You wouldn't be there, of course."

"You're going to have to explain," he sighed wearily.

Hermione did not want to explain, didn't want to admit the idiocy of her friends, but had no choice. She twisted a strand of hair around her finger until it pulled at her scalp painfully. "This is the only way I can force them to talk to me. If you summon them they have to come, but then I can take it from there."

"Consider it done."

That was it? He'd agreed that easily? "Thank you."

She was glad his eyes were closed, again. She was finding it more difficult to blink back tears, and was afraid she might not make it into the bathroom to turn on the faucet before they started flowing. Again.

She was about to close the door behind her when his voice followed her, bored but demanding.

"*What* is your problem now, Miss Granger?"

And despite her best intentions, her dislike of all things whingeing, she found herself speaking straight from the heart. "It's just that nobody likes me. My teachers, my friends nobody likes me any more."

"You wanted to be a Snape," he drawled. "It seems you have succeeded. Now close the door and give me some silence."

She did, and turned on the hot water and stared at herself in the mirror until it steamed over.

Oddly enough, the tears didn't come.

And when she left the bathroom, he was gone.

X

"What a delightful surprise!"

"Really, Albus? And here I thought I was responding to your summons." Snape sank into the chair opposite the Headmaster's desk with a shortage of goodwill. He waved away the sherbet lemons before they were even offered.

Albus leaned back in his own chair and dispensed with the twinkles. "I'm assuming you've had time to consider the unusual behaviour of the Room of Requirement at your ... wedding."

Albus had barely managed to keep his displeasure at the marriage from seeping into his tone of voice. Interesting. Snape ignored it. "I have."

"And have you drawn any conclusions?"

"None." Which was true. He had no fucking idea how a transfiguration could actually have transported them to Winchester Cathedral. It was impossible.

"Well. That's hardly helpful."

"And your point is?" Snape idly watched a miniature spinning wheel behind Albus's head spin a thread of crystal. "New toy?"

Albus cleared his throat. "Have you noticed anything else odd or unexpected regarding Miss Granger..."

"Madam Snape."

"...or your relationship?"

Snape glared at him. *Kisses. Those bloody fucking kisses.*

"Ah, so you have."

"Nothing that I'd care to discuss."

Albus gave up all efforts at diplomacy. "You didn't have to marry her. If you'd given me time, I'd have come up with another way to protect her."

"Of course you would, Albus. She's one of your fucking precious Gryffindors."

The old man still had enough blood in his veins to show a bit of pink in his cheeks at the insult. "I protect all of our students, as you well know."

Snape folded his hands across his belly, resigned to being on the receiving end of a long one-sided discussion, because he'd be bloody damned if he was going to join it.

"Well." Evidently Albus recognized as much. He spread his hands in defeat. "Give my regards to the lovely Madam Snape."

Snape had almost passed into the corridor when Albus added, "Do be gentle with her, Severus. She's *so young*, you know."

He made his getaway before his anger spilled over into words he dare not speak.

X

The new bed was almost as big as the previous one, but nowhere near as intimidating. It was a simple four-poster with similar green velvet covers and drapes pulled back at the corners with silver tassels. Hermione inspected it carefully from a safe distance and could detect nothing untoward.

Her experience with the charmed bed still made her heart stop just thinking about it.

She held the small jade serpent in the palm of her hand and felt the odd sensation of its eyes blinking against her skin. For the first time, she was nervous about bedtime. But of course, this was the first time Professor Snape was fully awake and aware at bedtime, and the first time they would actually share a bed.

And this was the first time Crookshanks was present.

She sat in her *(his)* white shirt with her half-Kneazle in her lap, his deep, vibrating purrs a comfort she'd missed.

She wouldn't let Crookshanks near the bed, either.

When Professor Snape entered, he stopped and stared at her bare legs. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen them before, but she suddenly felt very exposed.

"You never said a word about a cat."

Oh. Not her legs. She supposed she felt better. "Half-Kneazle," she corrected.

"That's hardly an improvement."

She clutched Crookshanks to her breasts. "You have a nasty temper but I haven't asked you to change it. I think you can put up with Crookshanks."

"Insulting me is not the way to gain my approval of your fucking cat, Miss Granger," he snapped.

She arched her eyebrows at him.

"And I never said you couldn't have it. I merely commented that you didn't mention you possessed a cat." He shrugged out of his robe and she saw the weary slope of his shoulders, the strain in his eyes. "Impertinent chit."

"Yes, I am," she agreed with him. "But I won't apologize because that would be tedious." She snuggled her face into Crookshanks' fur to hide her relief. She didn't think she could bear to lose Crookshanks in addition to everything else. He was just about the only one who didn't hold her marriage against her. Yet.

She cautiously let him go.

Crookshanks idly licked the inside of his rear haunch and ignored Professor Snape completely.

Things could be worse.

"I won't allow him on my bed."

"That's all right. He sleeps by the fire." She nibbled her lower lip. Usually. Unless he chose to sleep on her bed.

"Good."

"Will you please check the bed? I didn't want to..."

He paced around the bed, wand held high. "This appears to be a very normal Hogwarts-issue bed. Which means normal by Hogwarts standards," he added wryly. "If it has any idiosyncrasies, they should be mildly annoying rather than dangerous."

Hermione sighed with relief and crossed to it. "I've never shared a bed before. Which side do you prefer?"

He looked surprised. "I've never shared a bed, either. I'm not sure."

"We could flip a Galleon?"

He indicated the side nearest the door. "Don't be absurd. I'll take that one."

She plopped Crookshanks onto a cushion by the fireplace and climbed into the bed, which she noted had her blood red sheets (transfigured to a larger size, of course) under the green velvet. She supposed this was meant to be a compromise, as she snuggled deeper into them.

She expected it to be awkward, waiting for him to climb into bed beside her, wondering if he would decide not to wait until the next day (the next day!) to claim his conjugal rights.

But long before the water stopped running in the bathroom, she was asleep.

X

A familiar voice called sharply. "Miss Granger!"

But sleep was so delicious ... this bed was so delicious ... she clung to her floaty, dreamy somnambulant state despite the annoying voice.

Hard fingers grabbed her shoulder and gave her a rough shake.

"Miss Granger!"

She yawned and opened her eyes to darkness. To black eyes glittering over her in the darkness.

To his demanding voice.

"Miss Granger, you're snoring!"

She felt her entire body suffuse with a blush. "I am not!"



"Roll over," he demanded.

She rolled over and sank back into blissfully soft sleep.

He was drifting ... in a punt, on a cloud of pillows, soft breezes drifting over his face. Merlin, he didn't recall sleep this sweet in his entire life. He stretched his long legs and arms had room to stretch to their full length and he should have gotten a larger bed and soft sheets years before.

He flopped over on his stomach and sank deeper into bliss.

"Professor!"

Good god, what did the harpy want now? He tried to growl but found his mouth full of pillow. Adjusted his head and sank deeper into it, deeper into sleep...

"Professor!"

"What the fuck is it, now," he tried to growl, but only managed a garble of nonsense.

"You're on my side of the bed! You just rolled over on top of me!"

He felt himself get shoved aside with a rough elbow and a hard kick.

He waved the cloud of frizzy hair away from his face, realized he had indeed been quite improperly on top of Miss Granger, and was about to apologize profusely when his eyes adjusted to the dark.

"You," he snapped, "are on *my* side of the bed." He flicked his hand at her, watched her glide to her own pillow, and sank back into the warm spot where she had been.

What ... a ... magnificent ... bed.

Something tickled her neck.

Oh, sweet Merlin's breath, it sent curls of pleasure skittering through her body. She arched her neck to give better access and felt something rough nuzzle her.

Oh god, so wonderful...

No ... He didn't want to wake up yet.

But that cloud of hair in his face ... so soft, he didn't remember it being so soft ... he moved his cheek against it and allowed himself a sigh of contentment ...

Professor Snape. Breathing on her. Nuzzling her.

Every fibre in her arched in languor as she gave him more of her neck and sighed, and reached back to cup his face with her hand, and felt the rough swipe of his tongue on her fingers and brushed another set of fingers

And rolled over, wide awake, to stare into Professor Snape's shocked black eyes

And at the quite satisfied Crookshanks, idly licking both of their fingers where they met and joined over the cat's soft belly.

Hermione burst into giggles and pulled Crooks into her arms. She yawned and spoke without thinking. "I thought that was you licking my neck!"

Professor Snape looked quite startled and then growled, "Well, I should have known your hair was never that soft."

"Oh!" She inhaled deeply and strained closer to him. "How do you do that? Your breath smells so sweet..." She arched and yawned and covered her own mouth in embarrassment. And couldn't help herself. She angled her face up to his and closed her eyes and inhaled again.

Damn.

She wanted to kiss that mouth.

"It's it's a potion I developed." His voice was rough with sleep. What an odd concept. Rough velvet...

She rubbed her palm over Crookshanks' fur and sighed drowsily. "Very sweet... "

She felt him roll away from her and knew a moment's distress, but only a moment's. She should apologize for snoring. And for Crookshanks. And oh yes, for not staying on her own side of the bed.

But that would be tedious....

When she awoke an hour later, she was alone in the bed and in their quarters.

Crookshanks was curled up asleep in the professor's club chair.

And it was Saturday.

She felt herself clench in anticipation, and the soreness was still there, but it was hardly noticeable any more, and it was Saturday....

Anticipation curled through her.

She was ready for Saturday.

Very. Ready.

Indeed.

# Lists

Chapter 11 of 92

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*Everything recognizable and wonderful is the creation of Jo Rowling. The other stuff is mine.*

## LISTS

Severus had considered waking her up.

He wasn't going to go tiptoeing around his own quarters while she slept until all hours of the day.

But he found her sleeping form fascinating, slipping her looks as he dressed.

When she wasn't nattering at him or whinging about things or making a general nuisance of herself in other words, when she was asleep she was oddly compelling to look at.

Her eyelashes were very thick and curly for one thing. Nothing more than should be expected, considering that hair, but he would have never noticed such a thing if she hadn't been sleeping.

She had a soft spattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Very pale, easy to miss when her face was animated, which it almost always was. Except, obviously, when she slept.

Her hands were long and slender, and her fingertips were stained with multi-coloured inks. Odd, that. Odd that he hadn't noticed before.

He also found it annoying that a strand of hair clung to her parted lips. How did she sleep with all that wretched mop of hair, with strands drifting on each breath and clinging to her cheeks, her lashes, her lips? He finally stopped with his shirt half-buttoned to lean over the bed to free the strand and felt her moist breath wash over his knuckles in the process.

He stood, feeling that warmth on his knuckles, for longer than he cared to consider.

In conclusion, he found a sleeping Hermione Granger much more tolerable than an awake one, so he decided to let her sleep.

*Sometimes discretion is the better part of valour, after all* he thought as he whooshed through the door and into the corridor, then meticulously checked the wards to make sure she wouldn't be disturbed.

X

First things first.

Although lurking outside the House of Slytherin was one of the least comfortable ways she could spend a Saturday morning, it was the most straightforward way she could think of to find Pansy Parkinson.

Unfortunately, Draco Malfoy emerged first. To her surprise, he was alone. All right. This could work as well.

He frowned at her. "Granger."

"Snape," she corrected.

He arched a skeptical eyebrow and smirked. "As you say."

"After the Sorting, Peregrine Burns made me a gift of his jade serpent," she began.

"Yes."

"Good. You know. Well, then, I hope you gave him another? It was the sweetest thing, of course, but I hate to think he--"

"Of course we did."

"Oh." Well, that was easy. One thing marked off her list.

"Did you really think we wouldn't?" he asked, narrow-eyed.

"I thought you might not realize he'd given his away." She didn't like the way he looked at her, now. The way his eyes flickered up and down her body. Not exactly menacing, but assessing. It was almost enough to make her cross her arms across her breasts, except that would reveal she noticed and was bothered by his appraisal.

She also didn't like the way he smelled of cigarette smoke. They were allowed to smoke in Slytherin?

He gave his head a small shake and turned his attention back to the corridor ahead of them, then smirked again. "I still haven't gotten used to the idea."

"What idea?" she asked.

"I'm just trying to imagine you with Severus. You're not at all his type," he said with a snide laugh.

*Imagine?* This time she crossed her arms without hesitation. "I should hope not. He's not the kind of leech who drools over the girls in his classes," she said with sharp snip.

Draco shot her a surprised look.

She realized belatedly that her words might be misconstrued. "Of course, that's no longer an issue between us," she amended, "as I'm no longer his student."

Draco glanced down her body again, and this time there was no doubt what he was imagining--

She took a step toward the stairs. "I'm sorry if it seemed I was judging you and finding you lacking when it came to your duties in the House of Slytherin," she said politely. "I have some other errands to run, now."

"What? No apologies for judging me and finding me lacking as a husband?" This time the sneer definitely held malice.

"No," she said. "No apologies for that."

She left him watching her. She could feel him watching her.

But that was the least unsettling part of the conversation.

Professor Snape had a type. She wasn't it.

Draco Malfoy knew him well enough to know this.

And to call him Severus.

None of this surprised her.

It certainly shouldn't hurt her.

But surprisingly, it did.

She'd taken two left turns and a right before she realized she was headed up to Gryffindor Tower.

Old habits died hard.

She retraced her steps and headed back to the dungeons, trying to form the word "Severus" in her mind and finding it impossible.

X

She returned to her lists with a renewed fervor. Sitting on the bed against a pile of pillows with books and parchments stacked around her, and a small lap desk with quill and ink levitating beside her, she hacked away at them until she'd more or less bent them to her will.

But she'd left herself far too much today, on a Saturday when her mind was truly only on ... well, yes *That*.

Which brought her to the "Ways to Make Professor Snape's Life Easier" list.

It was a short list.

That bothered her a lot.

In the week since she'd come up with her *oh so clever* plan to marry Professor Snape, not only had he married her, but he'd almost gotten killed, most likely on her behalf, though he'd never admitted it beyond the ominous, "*The Dark Lord isn't happy.*"

She'd turned his life upside down, and no matter how good her intentions, she seemed to get up his nose every time they even attempted to have a normal conversation. Of course, *he* was usually an arse, but still, she'd known that going in. She was the one with the great debt to him, not the reverse.

He must hate himself for ever agreeing to save her.

He must hate *her*.

She certainly hated herself on a regular basis.

She rubbed her temples with her thumbs. Guilt was a horrid thing to carry around on her shoulders, especially when she so richly deserved it.

She turned back to the list.

She'd gone over everything he'd said to her and listed it for reference.

*"... with as little fuss as is humanly possible..."*

This was number one on the "must avoid doing" sub-list. And she'd *tried*. But it seemed just existing in his quarters created fuss.

*"I don't care about the shirt."*

In the language of Snape, especially as she'd literally pinched his own nice shirt out of his own armoire, this had to count as a positive. And the way he'd looked at her legs unless, of course, he really had been looking at Crookshanks.

Well, the shirt still went onto the "how to please" sub-list.

Along with tea. At least there was no second-guessing that.

Did he like firewhisky, or was his indulgence the night of their wedding an aberration? If he actually liked it, he was certain to like single malt better. She could have her father send some, just in case.

She chewed the feather end of her quill.

Or wine. He did seem to like wine. Her parents had a very fine wine cellar, or so it was reputed. Her own experience with wine was limited to holidays and special occasions, and she hadn't spent so many of them at home in recent years.

At least her "research further" sub-list was growing.

He hadn't complained about the sheets, either the color or the softness.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't toss them in the fire when he decided they needed cleaning, either.

She added to the list, "Magical housekeeping How to clean sheets?" Was there a wizarding equivalent of a washer and dryer? She wouldn't mind doing her own laundry if it meant she could keep her soft sheets. She'd rather they be a very pale silver, of course. The red and green was reminding her all too much of something she might find on Professor Dumbledore's bed, and that was a thought too disturbing for words.

In the meantime she cast a freshening charm over them and felt them soften and fluff over, under and around her. She didn't dare use herbs; he'd complained about the sachet. She quickly added sachets to the "must avoid doing" sub-list.

She really should find a way to keep Crookshanks out of their bed, she thought, stroking his purring body as she considered it. In fact, this being Saturday, she ~~really~~ should find a way. What if Crooks misunderstood their physical activities? He could be fiercely protective of her, as Ron had the scars on his hand to prove.

She added that to the "prepare for Sat. night" list with a shudder.

Crooks was definitely due a night out hunting.

X

Snape entered the Slytherin common room unannounced, as usual. It was, after all, the only way to catch the little buggers up to mischief.

The common room was empty. They must all be at lunch....

Miss Granger must be at lunch. In fact, immediately upon thinking that thought, he supposed he should consider going to the Great Hall, as well.

He turned to leave, but Draco stepped out of the seventh-year salon.

"Severus."

He arched his brows. Draco knew better than to be familiar with him here. "Mr Malfoy?"

"Could I have a word with you, *sir*?"

Well. Better. Snape nodded and followed him into the salon. With a slight wave of his hand, he warded the room and silenced it.

Draco slouched onto a green velvet chaise longue and offered Snape a cigarette.

Snape accepted it and sank into the wing chair across from him. But as he started to light up, he stopped. He didn't want to taste of stale cigarette when they...

But that was hours away.

And there would be *no kissing*.

He never kissed if he could avoid it and had developed more than a modicum of skill at effective kissing without tongues for those times when he felt it necessary. Early in his study of potions he'd considered the risk of the introduction of foreign elements to one's body through the exchange of bodily fluids, and frankly, *snogging* simply wasn't worth the risk. Fortunately, there were protection spells for more intimate acts, but the human mouth was a nasty place by definition, and it would be difficult to find a better incubator for some of the more malicious elements he'd encountered in his years of spying.

But here he was, struggling with a deep and dangerous desire to kiss *her*....

He looked up to find Draco *studying* him, the little whelp. "Is there something amiss in my appearance?" he snapped.

Draco shrugged, smirked, and exhaled a soft stream of smoke. "I'm just beginning to wonder if you did me any favors by marrying Granger. Since the Sorting, everyone has discussed how eagerly she seems to have adapted to your bed."

Snape willed his body to stillness and simply cocked his head.

"Having a Mudblood around to fuck wouldn't be the worst fate in the world," continued Draco with a whinge.

The cigarette exploded in his hand, spraying tobacco. He wanted to reach across the short distance between them and snap the boy's neck. "You are talking about my wife."

Draco laughed. "Really, Severus."

"Yes. *Really*."

"My father told me that you've been known to share." Draco's eyes darted nervously to his cigarette, which he seemed more interested in staring at than actually smoking.

Wandless magic being what it was and his Dark urges being what they were, he wouldn't even have to reach. Just a flick of his hands... He could almost see Draco with his head dangling sideways....

He tasted bile in the back of his throat.

Images flashed into his head, images he usually repressed.

Images of a seventh-year Lucius and Narcissa, drunk on their newfound sexual prowess, deciding to initiate a fourth-year Severus Snape into the delicacies of love.

Of Narcissa welcoming him into her naked embrace.

Of Lucius smoking hashish and watching, smiling, giving advice. *Touch her there, that's right, you like that don't you, pet?* Once even moving his hand over Severus's to demonstrate the correct technique, the soft yet firm pressure....

And then pulling Severus off of her and flinging him out of the way to finish the deed, leaving him to wank and watch and seethe and experience an orgasm like none he'd experienced before.

Images that taunted and haunted him for years.

Lucius had told Draco about *that*?

Draco cleared his throat, nervous.

*Lucius is playing games. No way would he expose Narcissa to such knowledge from her son.*

"Draco," he said, his voice soft and cunning. "Are you telling me that your father suggested a man should share his own wife?" The words *your mother*, hung between them unspoken.

The boy's face suffused with an ugly red. "You know that's not what he meant, not if she's pureblood and *a*true wife."

"Just because my wife is Muggle-born does not make her any less the wife of a pureblood Slytherin. It would be a grave mistake for *anyone* to forget that."

Draco jerked a nod. "It's just it's just that I see pureblood Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws with their Mudblood wives and know that they're all fucking like rabbits and here I could have been..."

*You could have been eligible for the Dark Mark the moment you were married* Snape finished silently, his rage palpable in the pulse of the blood pounding through his veins. *None of my House will sport a Dark Mark in these halls, as long as there is a chance in hell of ending this madness before they leave Hogwarts.*

"Yes, you could dilute your line with Muggle blood, couldn't you? And after you, how many other Slytherins would follow you, Draco? And they would follow you. You would lead them right into the Ministry's hands."

Draco squeezed his eyes closed.

"I thought we all agreed, no Slytherins will take part in this travesty until they are forced to by graduating. No pureblood Slytherins will allow their lines to be tainted."

"I don't know what kind of game your father is playing with me, Draco. I don't expect you to take my side. But I do expect you to use your fucking brain and control yourself. Use your hand. Use a Knockturn Alley whore. But don't play into the fucking Ministry's schemes, and don't turn yourself into a murderer when you have to rid yourself of a Muggle wife once the Dark Lord returns to power.

"Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Draco nodded, to all appearances chastened.

Snape removed the wards and silencing charm and made his exit before his fury could erupt.

If Draco Malfoy threw away the sacrifice he'd made to stop him from taking the Dark Mark, to give him time to come to his senses or the war time to end or the bloody fucking world to stop spinning on its axis

If Draco took a wife

Or touched *his* wife

He'd rip him limb from limb.

## Observed

*Chapter 12 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

### 12. OBSERVED

Hermione sat at the end of the High Table feeling very exposed. Less than half the professors were eating lunch in the Great Hall and none near her.

She sipped her soup and tried not to think about all the eyes that might be staring at her.

When the doors to the Great Hall opened and she saw Professor Snape enter, she couldn't stop the smile from spreading over her face. He seemed in a thunderous mood, but since when was that a surprise?

As he took his seat beside her, she said, "I'm glad you're here."

"Really?" He unfolded his napkin with precision. "Why?"

She blinked up at him. She realized she didn't have an answer. She simply was. She just smiled and went back to her soup. "This cock-a-leekie is Wonderful. You really should try some."

"I can choose my food without your assistance." His voice was cold and he didn't look at her.

He was in one of *those* moods. And now that he was seated beside her, she could guess why.

"You've been with Draco," she said, wrinkling her nose with a sigh. Malfoy was enough to put anyone in a foul humor, even his own Head of House.

He froze. "Why do you say that?"

"I smell the cigarette smoke," she responded, biting into a slice of ripe pear.

His voice was low and he still didn't move. She looked up at him, suddenly alert to danger as he said, "And where have you seen Draco smoking?"

"I haven't." She put the pear down carefully. "I smelled the smoke on him this morning."

His voice took on even more of a chill. "You were with Draco this morning?"

"Yes, in the corridor outside Slytherin. I wanted to make sure that Peregrine Burns..."

"Who else was with you?"

"Nobody. I was looking for..."

"Miss Granger. Did I, or did I not," his voice was barely audible but each word slapped her as if it were a shout, "inform you that you are never to be alone with a male, any male, once you are my wife?"

"I thought you meant Harry and Ron," she whispered.

Venom dripped from his lips. "I suppose it's an easy mistake to make, seeing as it has been an entire week since I married you *at your own request* because you wanted to avoid Mr Malfoy. Perhaps now you seek to *tease* him, now that you have me to hide behind?"

She glanced desperately around, fearful of those who might overhear. "It wasn't like that at all."

"Indeed." He picked up a knife to butter his bread, his movements fluid, but his knuckles white. "And what, pray tell, did you discuss?"

She lowered her eyes to her trembling hands in her lap. "Peregrine Burns."

"What else?" he ground out, tearing the bread into two pieces and dropping them both on his plate uneaten.

She couldn't tell him the rest. She wouldn't. She fought for calm and finally looked up into his burning black gaze. "It won't happen again."

He broke the stare, rose, and left the Great Hall.

Her soup holding no more interest for her, she waited the bare minimum amount of time before following him.

This time, she wasn't worried about the many pairs of eyes that might follow her progress across the Hall.

This time, the only pair of eyes that worried her was his.

X

He told himself he was doing it for his own protection, his safety.

She'd proven herself too stupid to trust and trust her he didn't, not when one wrong word could have them both before the Dark Lord and possibly taking in their last lungful of breath before the night was over.

Of course, he also realized that there was little she could say to her Gryffindor friends that would have that result. But still, he found himself sitting in the rear of his own classroom under a Disillusionment Charm with his feet propped on a table and his hands folded across his stomach, waiting for her little meeting to begin. He was fifteen minutes early; he'd timed it well he thought as the door from his office opened and she walked in and approached his desk.

He frowned as she riffled through the parchments there. Those were third year essays. She had no business

*Nosy little witch.*

She certainly had no business picking up a quill, opening his jar of red ink, and marking them!

He stifled a low growl. He wasn't going to reveal his presence, but he would definitely have a lot to say to her on the subject later.

He watched her scowl grow fiercer, the further she read. She carefully put some sort of small marks no comments, he noticed throughout each parchment, deep lines between her brows as she (he was sure) got as frustrated with the inadequacies of the lack of content as he did. There wasn't a single sheet of parchment there that would have met her own standard as a first year, much less a third.

He hoped they gave her a headache. She deserved one for meddling.

He resettled himself in his seat as he heard the approach of footsteps in the corridor.

Impatient, she waved her wand and the door flew open, revealing the sullen faces of Weasley, Potter and Weasley. Faces that quickly changed to suspicion and then irritation when they saw who sat at the desk.

"Come in," she snapped. "I'm in a hurry."

They walked in slowly, scanning the room. Finding it apparently empty, Ronald Weasley was the first to speak. "So, where is the greasy git?"

"Professor Snape," she snapped, "isn't going to be here. And if the three of you weren't such gits, we wouldn't be, either."

"I don't have to put up with this," Ginny began, heading back to the door. "I don't even know why I'm here!"

The door slammed shut in front of her face, and she whirled, furious, to find Miss Granger with her arms folded across her chest and her wand dangling loosely from the fingers of her right hand, looking every inch the insolent chit she was.

"You're here," she drawled, "because those two need somebody to keep them focused, and it can't be me any more."

The Weasley prat burst out with an oh, so elegant, "Oi!"

Severus allowed his lip to curl.

"Okay, let's get this out in the open," Granger announced. "You've rebuffed my every attempt to talk to you and you've ignored my owls. I didn't marry George, and now I'm no longer even your friend?"

"You used George!" Ginevra Weasley with her hands on her hips and her narrowed eyes clearly had her mother's temper. "Half my brothers volunteered to marry you, but evidently Weasleys aren't good enough for you!"

"Ginny, that's not fair!" Granger seemed quite caught off guard by this angle of attack.

"When Charlie found out what was going on, he even sent an owl saying you could join him..."

"Yes, that's just grand, I could ditch my education, ditch my work for the Order, and run off to Tasmania!"

"It would be better than marrying that..." Ron fell silent, though his mouth kept moving and his face grew flushed.

Hermione held her wand erect. "I'll unsilence you when you show some respect." She picked up a book and held it out toward Potter who had remained oddly silent through it all. "Harry, this book has three chapters on horcruxes."

*Horcruxes? What the hell?* He strained to see if the book had come from his own shelf, because if it had

"I've read them but haven't had time to compile my notes. Read them yourself this weekend and we can go over them together next week."

Potter hung back, somehow managing to glare at her and look petulant at the same time, but shooting curious looks at the book, as well.

She pulled a long parchment with various colored charts on it out of her book bag. "This is going to be a compiled schedule of classes and commitments once it gets filled in. I'm in black ink, on the bottom. Harry, you're green. Ron, you're red. Ginny, you're blue. I want each of you to fill in your schedule, including classes, Quidditch games and practice, and any other regular commitments. I have it charmed so it then calculate times when we are all free and can meet to compare our research and plan." She added a small folded parchment for each of them. "The schedules will automatically show up on your own sheet, here."

She pulled out two smaller parchments. "Harry, Ron, here are your revision schedules. I'm not going to be in Gryffindor Tower to nag you into studying so you're going to have to keep up with the details yourselves. But if you have problems just let me know."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I hope you didn't make me one of those."

"Of course not. You can manage without one." She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the three of them. "Did I forget anything?"

Ginny drew herself up. "What makes you think Harry needs your help?" she spat.

"Yeah," Ron said. "You're forgetting to tell us why we're supposed to want you involved now that you've gone over to that grea..." Face red, mouth moving furiously, no sound. One would think he would have learned.

"It's simple, really. Over the past six years, how have we spent the majority of our time? Wandering the halls after curfew, sneaking into places we're not supposed to go, risking expulsion at every turn and that's just to seek information before we can even do anything we need to do. We spend more time sneaking and looking than we spend doing!"

"And your point is," Potter asked, sullen as usual.

"My point is," she said crisply, "I now have access to all the information we need, information beyond our wildest dreams. We'll be more prepared than we've ever been before Harry, *you* will be more prepared. Because instead of sneaking around, I'll just get whatever we need from Professor Snape."

*Oh, you will, will you?* He had to stop himself from sitting up straighter and revealing his presence with a scrape of chair legs.

"You're going to steal from Snape?" Ron caught himself at the last moment.

*Yes, Miss Granger, elaborate, please.*

"I don't have to, you pillock. He's on our side. He'd rather help us stay out of trouble than rescue us once we get into it up to our necks."

*Humph.*

The Weasley girl gave her an odd look. "Hermione, you still call him Professor Snape?"

*Interfering little baggage.* Although why her comment made him grind his teeth, he didn't care to examine.

Without missing a beat, Granger smoothed her hair out of her face primly and replied, "If I call him *Severus*..." And the name seemed to curl from her lips with a sensuous grace...

"Gah!" the Weasley prat whinged, while his sister flinched and Potter blanched white.

"...to the three of you all the time?" She whipped back to Granger-like efficiency and know-it-all lecture mode. "The first two hundred times I'd have to put up with that," she jerked her head at Ron. "Or course you'd eventually get used to it and next thing you know, you'd be missing Quidditch practice to scrub cauldrons with your toothbrushes for calling him Severus in class."

That seemed to take the wind out of all their sails.

It was a very quiet Potter who finally broke the silence. "Hermione, why did you have to marry him?"

"Because he can protect me."

"So, you're saying that even though I'm supposed to go up against Voldemort and be the Boy Who Lived Twice, not to mention the Saviour of the Wizarding World when it came to your own safety, you didn't trust me. You don't think I can protect you. If my own friends don't believe in me..." His face was flushed with humiliation. Well, about damned time the arrogant little sod faced his own shortcomings.

"I believe in you against Voldemort." Her voice was solid with conviction. "I don't think you can handle Voldemort if you're having to protect me at the same time. You can't be everything to everybody, Harry. We all have sacrifices to make. We all have things to endure. I've found my place. Let me use it to help you."

The blood slowed in his veins as he studied her face, the way she *worried* about what Potter thought, about the fact that she might have hurt the little shite-eating Gryffindor.

Who, despite it all, could only spare her a sullen glare as he took the book off the corner of the desk. "I'll look at this if I have time."

"Damn it, Harry Potter! Find the time. I can't force-feed you this year. I can help you, but I can't..."

He waved her off with one hand and left, the Weasley girl following quickly after him with a flounce of her skirt.

Leaving Ron Weasley behind.

Alone.

With his wife.

His eyes were full of longing, and he reached for her hand. "Mione..."

Severus stiffened.

"Go on. Catch up with them," she said. "Keep Harry strong, Ron. He needs you."

And with that, she gathered the parchments into her arms and left through the office door.

Weasley stood frozen, staring at the closed door, then whirled away and out into the corridor, following after his sister and his friend.

Leaving Severus alone to allow his Disillusionment Charm to dissipate.

Alone.

With a lot to think about.

But especially words like "sacrifices" and "endure."

She intended to *use* him to further whatever ridiculous schemes and plots she devised for her friends this most vital year.

And she stood there whinging to them about sacrifices, as if she had *any* idea.

*Saturday.*

If he were half the Death Eater they all thought him to be, he'd fuck her to hell and back and before the night was over, she'd know full well what making a bloody sacrifice meant.

How easy, how deliciously easy to give the Dark urges reign...

He felt the shudder roll through him and yanked himself back from it.

He would damn her to hell, if she hadn't already accomplished that feat by insisting that he "rescue" her.

He pushed down the rage, the inferno that he had once nursed to higher and higher head, but now knew was at its most deadly when held under icy control.

He would be efficient. He would be as quick as she'd assumed a man of his *advanced years* would be.

He would make sure she had little *to endure*.

## Claimed

*Chapter 13 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*If only these characters and this world were mine, but alas, they are not.*

*As always, kudos to my fabulous beta, Leigh-Anne, who dubbed my Sev & Hermione "the dysfunctional duo" for good reason!*

### 13. CLAIMED

She didn't need Draco Malfoy to tell her she wasn't the professor's type.

The expression on his face when she'd undressed for him when he'd even gone so far as to transfigure her bra and knickers ~~twice~~ before giving it up as a lost cause still stabbed her like a pike.

Logically, she knew he didn't like her white knickers because he had changed them, after all.

Neither black lace nor pastel silk had been improvements, from the expression on his face.

She snorted in disgust at herself.

She knew it wasn't the knickers and bra; it was what was in them. (Or wasn't.) It took more than sexy knickers to make a body sexy.

And his last effort her nude body had clearly been a futile last resort or a giving up on the cause.

Not that she had been in any way surprised. But none of it helped her plan for tonight.

She couldn't imagine herself in any sort of lacy peignoir or sleeping robe.

The white shirt would have to continue to do the job.



She climbed out of bed and padded into the bathroom to the mirror. She *Accioed* the shirt, which she'd already freshened. (She really did need to get a magical housekeeping book.)

She slipped it on and tugged off her jeans and examined herself critically.

Her legs were... okay, she supposed. But didn't the shirttail hit her just at the spot that made her knees look knobby? She shortened it. Lengthened it a bit. Went shorter again. She turned around and looked from all sides, even bending over to check out the rearview. Somehow she thought perhaps it was best when it still covered her bum barely when she bent over.

Finally she was as satisfied as she was going to get with the length.

The neck was an entirely different matter. There was very little in the way of cleavage to expose, so a deep plunge looked rather sad. On the other hand, if she didn't wear a bra and if it was unbuttoned just so.... It hinted a little. A slight swell peeked out when she moved, without actually revealing anything. Maybe tonight she should just leave that one extra button unbuttoned.

Again, from all angles.

This time, she called it a loss. She buttoned the button. He knew what was there, and no "slight swell" was going to fool him. Best not to emphasize her deficiencies.

Which brought her to her hair.

It was more of a mare's nest than ever. She seemed to be too distracted and busy to even bother lately.

It's not as if *he* had room to talk.

Of course, he must like it a little. He had saved her from losing it all, hadn't he?

She couldn't do anything about the frizz, but the color... She loved Ron's hair. It was so glossy and shiny and rich. She angled her head and wondered how she'd look ginger.

And while she was contemplating glamours, she had the most ordinary eyes. Why couldn't she at least have blue? Or green like Harry's. Harry had the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen.

Ron's hair and Harry's eyes.

If she could only come up with a satisfactory body...

Oh, and learn to do glamours while she was at it!

This sex thing would be a piece of cake.

Well, she didn't have time to learn any glamours today so Professor Snape Severus? She shook her head quickly. She couldn't imagine saying that name, and until he insisted, she wouldn't even try. After all, he'd never once even suggested it, which had to mean something.

She started the water running in the deep tub. She'd at least wash and condition her hair. Plus, she needed another good hot soak in the tub.

X

Thunder cracked in the distance, and the dark grey haze of rain approached.

He'd hoped a brisk hike into the Forbidden Forest would take the edge off his anger, but such was not to be.

*He* was the one who made one sacrifice after another to save the lives, perhaps even the souls, of ungrateful children. Spoiled brats, all of them.

Draco and Potter at the top of the list.

He'd spent his adult life sacrificing, certainly never having the time or opportunity to fret over sex and friendships and petty betrayals, but the four brats could whinge about nothing but.

Another crack of thunder.

Rain pelted down from overhead.

He took the front steps of Hogwarts two at a time.

He was weary. So fucking weary.

X

Hermione rubbed herself dry and pulled on the shirt and a pair of knickers. She had clean denims in her trunk.

She finally gave up on her hair. It was clean. It was dry. That was the best she could do on a night that crackled with electricity and heavy moist air.

She hung the damp towel over the edge of the tub and emerged from the bathroom.

Professor Snape sprawled in his leather chair, one foot propped on the footstool and the other leg stretched straight.

He seemed to be asleep.

Her pulse pounded at her throat and she felt sick rising in her throat. This morning, she'd been so happy, so sure. Now...

Could she? Could she really?

She closed her eyes, remembered the list, the careful notes she'd made, and the research she'd read.

If she startled him, he'd hex her into next week before he even knew whom he was hexing.

Once he realized it was she, of course, he'd keep hexing.

That made her smile.

She crossed the floor softly and rested on her knees before him.

She considered using her wand, but decided against it.

She studied the face under the strands of heavy black hair. The sharp contours of his cheekbones, the elegant black eyebrows, his strong (she'd decided she liked that word better than the others she'd heard used to describe it) nose and surprisingly supple lips. What was it about his lips that made her tingle and burn and *long* for things?

He'd never given her a truly proper kiss, but the merest brush of his lips set off a tantalizing and dark reaction in her that nobody else had ever managed in the few long snogging sessions she'd shared before giving up on the activity as not worth the effort.

She forgot to be afraid.

Of hexing.

Or anything else.

She cocked her head and nibbled her lower lip and reached for the top button of his frock coat.

*There.*

She'd unbuttoned it, and nothing had happened.

She reached for the next.

And the next.

And somehow, she managed to open one after another, until his coat was hanging loose, and yet his breathing was unchanged.

Her own breath quickened.

She licked her lips.

She began to love his buttons. Each time she released one, she released a bit of her own apprehension. Each time the fabric loosened, she felt her own tension loosen. Her mouth flooded with moisture as she began exposing his chest beneath the softly wrinkled white linen.

She hadn't seen it like this since he'd been recovering from the Cruciatus. She'd cared for him, rubbed unguents and massaged potions and even bathed him when she realized the very idea of pointing a wand at his most sensitive parts terrified her.

She longed to stroke his skin again, to touch the sleek, soft black hair that dusted from his sternum down to disappear beneath his waistband and beyond, but dared not... did she?

She glanced up at his face again and saw nothing change again.

She started on the buttons of his trousers and felt her breath catch in her throat. Where before they'd been snug across the crotch, now they... strained.

And still, his breath came in measured, even rhythm.

His lashes rested long and lush on his cheekbones.

She no longer believed he was asleep.

She watched his eyes as she released another button, and another.

He wasn't asleep.

He wasn't hexing her.

And finally there were no more buttons to unfasten, only soft, gaping fabric that hinted without exposing, and a sleek Slytherin snake hypnotizing her with his pretense of sleeping.

And she felt a charge of tantalizing power.

She had yet to touch, to tease, to pleasure.

Yet already, he bulged.

She remained frozen, her fingers still trailing on the last released button, as she watched his eyes. And waited.

The tension mounted.

And then, glittering slits as he let them open to spy, and then they opened slowly until they were fixed upon her when he realized she was staring at him, wanting him to watch. And when she knew he was watching...

She moistened her lips.

He swallowed.

She slid her fingers beneath the edge of the black wool, over hard, hot flesh. She dragged her fingertips down the length of him.

He gripped the arms of the chair.

Her heart thudded in her chest, and her pulse raced as she released him from the bonds of his clothing and, still staring at his face, felt the length and girth and heat of him spring free and throb against the palms of her hands.

She no longer relied on the careful list, the *project*, but instead simply leaned forward and brushed the mushroom head with her lips, surprised at how soft it was. She couldn't resist tasting its salty surface and found she loved the salt, the softness against her tongue. She stroked, first around the circumference, then found herself tracing runes across him

And found herself dumped hard on the stone floor. Sitting, gasping, and gapping up at him as he towered over her, his penis glistening near her face.

"Miss Miss Granger," he ground out, enraged. "What in fucking hell are you doing?"

"It's the seventh day," she said hoarsely. "We have to..."

"You don't have to do this."

"But I want to."

He leaned over, grabbed her arms, and jerked her to her feet. He drew her face close to his, and she thought for one wild and wonderful moment that he was going to kiss her. She strained forward, her eyes drifting closed, but instead

He sniffed her breath.

"What have you been drinking? Did you get into my potions cabinet?" he snarled.

"Why? Don't you believe I can be a wife without a potion?" She closed her hand around his penis and stroked it and thrilled at his response. Her smile was triumphant.

And before he could push her away, she dropped to her knees and took him into her mouth as far as she was able and reveled in the power as his angry words stopped in a choking groan and his hands dug deep into her tangled hair.

"Please," she said, releasing him, and then blowing down the length of his wet flesh. "Let me please you."

She let the tip of her tongue dance the ridged circumference of his head, then washed him from nested base to the moisture gathered at its tip with the flat of her tongue.

She daintily, oh so daintily ... nibbled.

And gloried when that rapier-sharp intellect, that dark chocolate voice could only express itself in a harsh groan.

His fingertips rubbed trembling circles on her scalp. Had he pulled her tighter she might have broken loose, would have had to, because already she had taken him as far into her mouth as she could without choking, but he must know that, mustn't he? His fingers trembled and massaged, and his gasping groans filled her senses, and then she remembered something she'd read

She opened her mouth, and he released her head, thinking she would pull away.

Instead, her mouth still full of him, she forced her throat to stretch into a yawn and when it opened, took him in to the hilt.

His gasp drove him even deeper.

She didn't, couldn't, move ... at first.

Neither did he.

But her tongue could move, she was astonished to realize, and she wasn't gagging or choking, and she wanted to laugh, to exult, as she gifted this man with the deepest pleasure in her power and knew that it was good.

And suddenly, he was groaning and thrusting, and she hollowed her cheeks and sucked, clutching his arse like it was an anchor, and it was, it was, she would fall, would collapse if she didn't have him to cling to, with hands, with mouth

And he yanked away

She cried out in protest

He flung her across the bed

She strained up to capture him again

He pressed her head back into the mattress with one hand fisted in her hair as he groped at her knickers with the other between her legs forcing her legs open, moving the elastic edge aside

And plunged into her.

It hurt.

He thrust.

It hurt.

He stiffened.

It hurt.

And filled her with hot semen.

And she didn't care that it hurt because she could only watch the sensations play across his face, his beautiful face as he hovered over her, braced on his arms. She tentatively moved, *squeezed* him with all her might watched his mouth open and his neck tense in a gasp beneath the fall of black hair.

And again, her power surged.

She could bring him pleasure.

She clenched herself around him, angled up to meet his thrust, unable to tear her eyes away from his face, his mouth, his chest, his arms tightly wrapped with lean muscle cataloguing each reaction that tremored through his body.

And when she could stand it no longer, she reached and took his raspy jaws in her hands and cupped them, and pulled his face down to hers, and strained up to kiss him.

Their lips touched like lightning touches and his eyes flew open, and he pulled away, leaving her cold and draining on the bed as he dragged his fingers through his hair and stared at her, his eyes drugged and confused.

"You...you've got to let me..." he gasped. "I had to finish inside of you, but you didn't you didn't give me a chance to to prepare you."

She reached again for his face. All she wanted was to feel his lips on hers, to feel his skin against hers. That was all; it was enough, but she ~~needed~~ needed it, like she needed air to breathe....

But he pulled away. He fell onto the bed beside her, his chest heaving, his penis still swollen though no longer stiff. He stared at her, his black eyes furrowed with confusion. "Where on earth did you..."

She fought a tremor of unease and rolled over to smile down at him. She felt so damned needy having to actually say the words, but say them she did, because she did need. She needed to hear him say that she had pleased him, that she wasn't a ruddy failure at everything but had found at least some way to make him happy. So despite a cold fluttering in her stomach she forced a smile. "It ... it was good?"

He frowned in disbelief. "Miss Granger, your modesty seems a bit disingenuous," he drawled as he winced and tucked himself back into his trousers, began the long process of buttoning. "I had no idea you had such hidden talents."

He rolled his head sideways and stared at her through hooded eyes. "Although ... although now that I think of it, it explains so much."

Her smile made her cheeks ache. He was paying her a compliment, in his own way. But still...

"I presume I'm not the first to have told you so."

What...what had he said?

Her blood froze in her veins.

*Not the first to...?*

She rubbed her hand across her mouth, and when he'd rolled away from her

She grabbed her cloak and ran for the door.

She would not let him see her cry.

She slipped through the wards and ran blindly for safety.

She would not let him see her cry.

And when she heard him try to follow her into the corridor she flung a breathless "*Stupefy!*" over her shoulder, saw the bolt of red hit him in the chest, and kept running.

She would not let him see her cry again.

# Hurt

*Chapter 14 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*In deepest gratitude to JKR for not only creating all that you recognize here, but for allowing her world to be open to others to explore.*

*And as always, thanks to my beta, Leigh-Anne. I posted questions about writing fanfic (this is my first) and amongst the responses was her offer to beta. How much luckier could I get?*

## 14. HURT

He saw the weak bolt of red but was so startled he didn't dodge it. He landed hard, flat on his back.

Damn the girl!

But he could still breathe, still move, still stagger to his feet.

He stood, gasping, clutching his sides.

He didn't delude himself. The only reason he wasn't laid out for the count was because she only wanted to slow him down. She was too strong a witch to have tossed such a halfhearted curse unintentionally.

She'd done what she intended. She'd bought herself time.

By now she was Merlin knew where.

He forced himself to think like a Gryffindor.

She would go somewhere nobody in their right mind would go, assuming nobody would think to go there to find her.

Her refuge would be dramatic and foolhardy.

He allowed himself a tight smile.

The weather that would keep even the most hormonal teenaged wizards and witches indoors was on his side.

Not even when he flung wide the door at the top of the Astronomy Tower and was hit with the full force of the wind and rain did he doubt his conclusion.

Not even when a stroke of lightning followed by a crash of thunder lit the parapets like daylight and revealed no bushy haired girl huddled against the wall.

He walked into the forces of nature and let the door blow closed behind him.

And found her standing behind it, her face twisted with rage. Somehow even the torrential rain hadn't sleeked her hair to her face. His own hair already clung to his face, his eyes, his mouth; hers blew around her as if it had its own life force.

"Can't you even allow me this? A place to lick my wounds in peace?" She yanked away from him as if he'd reached for her.

He hadn't.

Something kept him at bay, something undefined but primal in her defensive stance. Her wand hand was hidden in the folds of her cloak. If he didn't know better, he would think she was one twitch away from truly and thoroughly hexing him.

In fact, he didn't know better.

"It was meant to be a compliment."

"That my husband, who knows I came to his bed a virgin, thinks I routinely service boys by sucking their cocks?"

"That your husband, who is so staggered that someone else hadn't already deflowered you before you came to his bed, concluded tonight that you had developed some pretty impressive skills to satisfy teenaged boys...whom you yourself announced only live to rut...in order to protect yourself from their more unwelcome advances."

Her laughter was bitter, on the edge of hysteria. She slid down the wall until she was sitting.

He dropped to a crouch in front of her and felt not a whit of guilt (hadn't she chosen him because he fought dirty?) as he leaned close and pressed her shoulders against the stone wall so that their eyes were close, and waited for another stroke of lightning...

And when it lit her face in stark black and white, a delicate face dominated by fierce, wild eyes, it took not a split second for him to stare into those eyes...

*"Legilimens."*

And enter.

It took her too long to realize what was happening, because he was rapid and ruthless, and she had no chance to stop him, nor experience to repel him. And it didn't take long to find the memories, which he flashed through with razor-like precision.

Weasley and Potter, teasing her homework out of her, and her feelings of fondness...fondness!...as she let them get away with it.

Longbottom, so insipidly grateful that she corrected his potion.

Potter, asking her to take his books to the Gryffindor common room so he could chase off after Chang, the Ravenclaw.

Weasley, punching her in the arm and laughing then stopping mid-sentence to gawk at a seventh-year Hufflepuff witch whose endowments had caused more than one Slytherin boy to eye her lustfully, as well.

But none of this was what he sought...he dug deeper, feeling her tremble under his hands, knowing he had pushed far beyond the bounds of anything ethical.

And found Krum.

Krum, kissing her. Krum, grinding against her, kneading her, bringing her nothing but discomfort and confusion, as he whispered harsh words in her ear and pleaded for completion.

And finally...he could almost hate himself for it...he found a dark night memory of a narrow four-poster bed, of her own urgent attempts to feel something~~anything~~, as she fondled her own breasts, and touched herself tentatively...

And then, when he was ready to pull out, a memory that he realized she'd tried to block off sliced into him.

The expression of dismay on his own features as he saw her nude body for the first time.

Fuck.

He closed his eyes and she slumped to the ground, trembling, her teeth chattering, staring blindly ahead, and not even blinking away the rain.

He was a fucking bastard.

He'd never claimed to be anything else, though.

She certainly couldn't have expected him to be anything else.

He bit back a torrent of obscenities and lifted her from the puddle of icy water and didn't realize until he was halfway to the dungeons that his body trembled as wildly as hers.

#

By some miracle, he managed to get them both back to his quarters without being seen. The wards released and then closed after him, and finally they were in the warmth of fire and warming spells.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

She nodded, and he stood her up and started to remove her sodden cloak, but she brushed his hands away and did it herself. He started to cast a drying charm, but she did it herself.

Somehow, he ended up being the one who was drenched and shivering, as she went matter-of-factly about preparing tea.

"Miss Granger..."

"It's all right," she said. "It's easier this way. At least you understand."

Oh, he understood, all right. He simply wasn't at all certain that they understood the same things.

He gave up on working buttons with his icy fingers and whipped the robe off over his head. "Don't make assumptions. Tell me what you think I understand."

She glared at him. "You're not stupid. You're not Ron!" And then realized what she'd said and covered her mouth.

He was rather proud of himself for letting that pass.

And again, he could almost hate himself for making her say it, but he had to know, he had to know what he was dealing with, and even having seen everything he'd seen, he didn't trust himself to draw the correct conclusions, no matter how obvious they might seem.

"Please," he said. "Tell me what you want me to understand."

And his "please" seemed to catch her by surprise, almost as much as it did him. But then her body tensed and the pinched lines appeared between her eyebrows as she avoided his gaze. "You are humiliating me."

"That is not my intention. I'd prefer not to leap to another wrong conclusion."

She looked him straight in the eye, defiant if foolhardy, and announced, "You are the only one I ever wanted to please."

Which was definitely not what he expected to hear.

He stared straight back at her, waiting for something to make sense. That made no sense at all.

She would have wanted to please Krum, certainly. Well, maybe not Weasley, that wasn't hard to accept. But Krum?

He realized she was still staring into his eyes, searching, frustrated. "Don't you understand? Remember me? The insufferable little know-it-all who has to learn everything from books? Those things I did...I learned from books!"

Her cheeks flamed with what could only be shame, and he felt a right bastard indeed, but before he could say a word or make a move to cross the room, she shattered him.

"I would do anything...anything at all. I would take Polyjuice Potion. I would take Heart's Desire. I would ~~do~~ anything, *be* anything to please you."

She stared at him with those huge, soft brown eyes. "No one would ever need to know."

He sunk heavily into his club chair and stared at her from beneath his hair. How did she do that, he thought resentfully. How the fuck did she do that?

He tugged his boots off, and before he could do it, she'd flicked her wand and dried the carpets and moved his boots near the fire.

He cast his own drying charm and sank back and just watched her, watched her move across the room as she prepared the tea tray, watched her nibble her lower lip, watched her fling her hair out of her face and tuck it behind her ears and keep fighting with it, and he bloody well expected to find a hank of hair in his teacup when she brought it to him.

Without pausing to think, he stood up and walked up behind her. "Hold on," he said and pulled her hair back and up and gave it a twist, then snatched her wand out of her wand pocket and plunged it through the ruddy mess at a diagonal.

It stayed.

She turned to him, her lips parted in surprise.

"I knew someone once who..."

She nodded, and went back to the tea, touching a loose tendril of hair on her neck tentatively, but leaving it up.

"I need to check on my House," he said, suddenly awkward.

Again, she nodded. "Tea will be ready in about seven minutes. But if you aren't back, I'll make you fresh."

He couldn't get out of there fast enough.

He burst into the Slytherin common room with more force than necessary, hoping to find a disaster of momentous proportions, something dangerous enough to demand his attention for hours, to justify not returning to his quarters...his own goddamned quarters...until dawn.

But there wasn't the slightest whiff of alcohol or any other illegal substance, for that matter. The only cigarette smoke wafted from the seventh-year salon, where it was allowed. The lower years were not in evidence, having already gone to bed. The never-ending poker game continued beneath Salazar Slytherin's crest, and a few sixth years lounged and chatted in desultory conversation.

He made his rounds but didn't find a single excuse to linger.

He reentered his quarters, seething. All he needed was an excuse, any excuse, to blow up, to let his guilt get subsumed by anger, and he could feel himself again.

He scowled at the tea that awaited him, pure heaven in a cup, and forced himself to drink it.

Her determination to please him, to excuse his inexcusable insult and even cater to him was so damned despicable he found himself looking for Slytherin-like ulterior motives.

But she had none.

He wanted to rail at her for teasing him, for taunting him with her femininity...but she didn't do those things. The shirt she'd charmed to fit herself didn't cling, nor did the throat dip low to reveal cleavage. But every time he closed his eyes, he saw her wearing it, felt it sliding over her skin as if he were the one sliding over her, and the effect it had on him was as heated as if she'd been wearing something obscene.

Why would she want something of *his* against her skin? She had an entire trunk to choose from now, but she kept wearing his shirt....

And then, her body.

Her body was tight and long and lean and her breasts small and firm, and he liked his women soft and full and voluptuous, yet he'd never seen or touched a body that had as much power to render him almost incoherent with need.

He could catalog her faults and her characteristics and come up with a list of everything he'd ever disdained, but now they combined to drive him mad with longing.

He had to believe it was simply her proximity.

The knowledge that this body that was his for the taking.

That was all it could be.

It was driving him insane.

He did not like this life.

He did not like this weakness.

He did not like the guilt that gnawed at him, guilt for not being what she needed and what she deserved...

Guilt for being the only thing she had.

This was a responsibility he had not asked for, and he refused to feel beholden to it.

Teaching was his profession, but these were the kinds of lessons his *enemies* would expect him to indulge in. He wasn't a dirty old git who preyed on innocence. He harbored no fantasies of introducing students to the pleasures of the flesh.

He had never in his fucking life fantasized about a student.

He did not want this.

It was not his place to teach her that she wasn't what those bloody blind Gryffindors had convinced her she was, simply by ~~not~~ *seeing* her!

If only Krum hadn't been a bloody hormonal teenager, too. If he had a Time-Turner, he'd go back in time and hand the fucking boy a sex manual.

He jerked to his feet and paced before the fireplace, ignoring her startled intake of breath, not allowing himself to even look in her direction at her fucking huge eyes.

He was doing everything he'd promised to do, blast it.

He was keeping her safe.

He was securing her opportunity for education.

He was protecting her.

That was enough.

It had to be, because he couldn't be other than who he was.

Especially when he was a man with a raging desire to please the stupid little know-it-all in turn, the way she had pleased him!

However....

If his self-recrimination took a sharp turn and transformed an act of pleasing an insufferable know-it-all into an act of ~~of~~ *self*-pleasure... if this weren't about pleasing her at all...but about assuaging his own desires...

Well then, wasn't that a very Slytherin train of thought, after all?

"Miss Granger," he said silkily, and oh he did know how to turn his voice to silk.

"Come. Please me."

X

She couldn't breathe.

He was slouched in his chair, peering at her from beneath a heavy fall of hair, holding out one elegant hand, beckoning her.

She calmed herself.

Whatever he wanted, she could do this. She'd enjoyed what they'd done before up to the point where he'd...

No, she couldn't let herself think about that. She'd enjoyed giving him pleasure, and she had so much more to learn.

She dropped between his open legs, leaned against one knee and half-smiled up at him.

His fingers traced her cheek and she jerked away. "That tickles," she said, embarrassed.

He arched an eyebrow at her and suddenly took her upper arm and pulled her to her feet. "I think we'd be more comfortable over here, don't you?"

And he had her at the bed.

Her pulse pounded. She reached up to kiss him, but he turned his head away. She nibbled his throat instead...she liked that, nibbling...and he tensed and groaned.

Oh, yes, she could do this. She wanted to do this.

And then, his hand was inside her shirt, closing over her bare breast. Her breasts were quite inadequate, and having his hand there only made her more humiliatingly aware of that fact. Her hand flew up to cover his, to try and pull it away, but it only caused him to... to caress her.

She drew back, anguished. What was he...*why* was he doing this?

He released her, pushed her gently down on the bed.

"Relax," he said in that voice that curled through her body and took up residence somewhere in her core. "Don't think. Just let me touch you."

She froze.

He stroked the bare skin beneath her breast, and she jerked upright.

"Shhh..." he soothed. "It's all right."

But it wasn't. She thought he'd understood what he'd seen! "Professor, please. Let me..." She reached for the bulge between his legs.

He gasped, let her touch, rub... then seemed to come to his senses and wrenched himself away.

"Give me a little credit, Miss Granger. It will be better if we both get pleasure from the act."

She turned her head away from him. Her eyes burned as she stared blindly at a wall of books and tensed, determined to endure his efforts to arouse her until he realized the futility. Or maybe, maybe she could fake it? Women did that. She wondered if she could fake something she'd never felt....

He closed his hands around her hips and pulled her to the edge of the bed, where he knelt between her knees.

She tried to roll away, but he held her firmly.

With his free hand, he stroked her inner thigh.

She jumped, tried to clamp her legs together, but he held them open, stayed between them.

"I'm...I'm ticklish," she protested.

This time, he allowed his palm to slide up her thigh instead of his fingers. This time, it didn't tickle.... Perhaps she could have handled that if it had been just that, but he didn't stop there.

She flinched when he touched her.

Gasped when one finger gently stroked her.

Cried out when he applied a firmer pressure.

Endured the silence that followed, and then...

"Fucking bloody hell!"

"What?" she gasped. She rose up on her elbows, frantic, and saw his face. "What's wrong?"

He looked stunned, and filled with what ridiculously appeared to be self-loathing, as he winced and hung his head. "Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you...pull on your robe. We're going to Madam Pomfrey."

"We most certainly are not!" She scrambled to get away from him, but he closed his hands over her ankles and held her.

"You need medical attention," he ground out.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped back. "I was a virgin. I'm a little tender. That's what happens."

"A little tender? Is that what you call this...this..." he fumbled for words, "...injury?"

"I'm not injured!" But, she began to feel uneasy. "Am I?"

"Miss Granger..." His words seemed choked from deep within him, and his eyes were as black and hollow as she'd ever seen them. "I...I brutalized you."

"Professor," she said soothingly, "you simply did what had to be done. And it's fine, I promise, it's much better and I don't even have to use cushioning spells to sit any more, and I'm hardly even aware of it, now..."

"It was a week ago! You shouldn't be tender, and you...you..." his eyes went back to the junction of her thighs. "I gave you a healing potion. Why the hell didn't you use it?"

"I used it all on you!"

"You should have told me! Why haven't you...it's been a week, Merlin's bollocks, girl, why haven't you said something, gone to Madam Pomfrey~~done~~ something?"

"Well, let me think back," she snapped. "Oh yes, a week. First four days, taking care of you." She looked ceilingward. "Then there was the Sorting, my parents, classes...and besides, this is normal for a virgin! I read it in a..."

"Fucking bloody book."

She clamped her mouth shut. But. He was scaring her.

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice low. "Please. Let me take you to Madam Pomfrey."

"No!" And without thinking, she yanked her wand from her hair and aimed it between her knees at his face. "You take care of it! I took care of you, damn you, and you are going to take care of me! I'm not spreading my legs open for all and sundry to stare at my genitalia!"

"It's not all and sundry! She's a medical professional!"

"You're the only one who has ever seen me down there, and the only one who ever~~will~~ see me down there, and you are going to do the best you bloody well can...which I am sure is probably better than anything Madam Pomfrey can do, anyway."

"You're deluded," he snapped.

"I don't care. Do your best. I won't complain."

He hung his head and shook it, burying his face in his hands. "I'm the one who did this. How can you trust me at all? How can you want me, of all people, to..."

"Look at me."

He did.

"Nobody else is going to see this. I refuse to be the subject of false stories, to have people think you are cruel, that you..."

"You mean you are refusing medical treatment to protect me?" Dismay, disbelief and frustration clearly warred on his usually unreadable face.

"And why wouldn't I? You're protecting me."

"Miss Granger, I *am* cruel. Nothing you do can change a reputation I justly deserve."

"You aren't cruel to me," she said softly. "I won't have people thinking otherwise."

He pulled away from her as if to get up, to leave, his expression incredulous.



She lunged forward and dug her fingers into his hair and held him there, until their faces were close. "Do you think the Malfoys would have been more gentle?"

He jerked his face up to meet her glare. Then turned his head away.

"Do you think when I give birth it will be gentle?" she demanded even more fiercely.

He glanced down at the juncture of her thighs and paled, which she would not have thought possible, all things considered.

She allowed her voice to gentle. "Do you think I blame you because it was difficult? It was difficult for both of us. Do you think I don't know that?"

"You are far too forgiving," he snarled.

"Oh, piffle!" She threw herself back on the pillow.

She heard a strange noise.

She raised her head again and looked. He was grinding his teeth.

"I'm sure you know a potion that will take care of everything. Just do it."

He let out a frustrated snort and grabbed her hand to pull her to a sitting position. "I have to fetch some things; we will be brewing tonight, I fear. In the meantime, you're going into a hot bath to soak until I get back."

"You won't be long, will you?" She felt a sudden emptiness at the thought of him leaving.

"No."

"All right, then."

She followed him docilely into the bathroom.

## Trusted

*Chapter 15 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*As always, the world and characters are Rowling's. The story is mine.*

*And, as always, kudos to my sainted beta, Leigh-Anne.*

*And a bit of a squick advisory, if medical procedures leave you diving for the smelling salts.... By the way, do not attempt this at home. Medical procedures and ingredients are totally the product of my imagination.*

### 15. TRUSTED

A half hour later, he returned with his arms full of potions and ingredients.

If he hadn't destroyed half of his laboratory in a fit of temper, he wouldn't have had to raid the classroom lab and hospital wing for potions and ingredients, of course.

He put them on the lab table, and then retraced his steps to the bathroom where he found her, half-asleep in the tub of steaming water.

He went to the sink and turned on hot water to scrub his hands with strong soap.

"Mmmm," she said drowsily from the tub. "This smells wonderful."

"I added a little spearmint and eucalyptus." Although why she wanted to smell like his shaving soap he had no fucking idea.

Her lips curled into a soft smile as her head lolled against the back of the deep claw-footed tub. "Thank you."

"Cleanse thoroughly with this," he said, handing her the bar soap. "And then dry off and put on a robe."

"Yes, sir."

She was entirely too trusting, damn it.

He ought to call Poppy and be done with it.

But he wouldn't. Couldn't.

He *Accioed* a couple of towels from the shelf and closed the door behind him with a sigh.

By the time he smelled her behind him, he had the necessary freezing potion ready.

He gave her a look that he knew was unadulterated resentment. "Are you determined to go through with this?"

She hopped on the bed as blithely as if he'd promised her a lolly and announced, "Without hesitation."

She scooted herself to the foot of the bed and made herself comfortable on the spread towels without his assistance, opened her thighs and leaned back on her elbows to watch.

To watch!

How the fucking hell was he supposed to

Fuck. If she watched, he could watch her. Watch her for discomfort, for pain.

Fucking hell.

"Before I get started, I need your assistance." Giving her something to do had to be a good thing. "Where's your wand?"

She pulled it from behind her ear. Her hair tumbled hither and yon in wild abandon which fully annoyed him.

He raised his hands. "Do you know the *Protego Frigeo* Charm?"

She gave him a haughty glare and performed it with precision and more than a bit of the insufferable show-off in her wandwork.

"Thank you." With his hands protected, he opened the freezing potion. Wispy vapors wafted from the neck of the bottle.

"Relax," he said. "This won't hurt."

As she reclined on her elbows again, he used his forearm to brace her knees apart and then poured the potion over her bruised labial folds.

"Shite!" she shrieked, trying to jerk free of his grip.

"Language, Miss Granger." He kept pouring the pearly liquid until he detected...even through the vapors...that the entire area was well coated. "Now, how does that feel?"

Her chest was heaving and her face bright red as she gasped for air. "Like bloody ice! Why don't we pour some on you, while we're at it?"

"Still like ice?"

She glared at him.

"Now?"

"I don't feel anything at all. It's worse than numb it's nothing."

"And that is quite the point."

He slid one finger down the fold of her skin, through the liquid. His finger wasn't even chilled. "Have you performed *Protego Frigeo* before?"

"No." Her brow furrowed. "Didn't it work?"

"It will suffice." He spread the potion smooth, making certain no portion of her bruised skin went untreated. Then he poured more liquid over his fingers and slid them into her canal.

"SHITE!"

He probed as deeply as he could reach, until he was satisfied that he'd deadened everything within his ability.

"Now?" he asked.

She glowered. "Nothing."

"Good." He lifted his wand. If only she weren't watching so avidly, as if this were a fucking lecture. He raked through his mind for anything to distract her, and the first subject that popped up was the one that had been on his bloody mind for the past hour or so.

"Would I be safe in assuming that the Sorting Hat considered putting you in Ravenclaw?" He wiped the excess potion away and sighed. So much bruising. It would seem he'd used a battering ram instead of enough of that. He couldn't think about it; he simply had to examine, treat and heal.

Ha bloody ha, as if it were that simple.

"... couldn't make up its mind," she was saying. "Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor but I wanted Gryffindor and I got it."

"Of course you did," he said, restraining his snarl to half-volume. The bruising was already at the yellow and green stage. He swallowed hard. But the labial tear how the hell had he done *that*? "And of course the hat listened to you. It usually does, more's the tragedy."

"Why?" she asked. "Did the same thing happen to you?"

"More or less." He took his wand and cast a wordless "*Segmentum*." "Slytherin, Gryffindor or Ravenclaw."

"Not even a tiny bit of Hufflepuff in you?"

He shot her a withering glance, then used his wand to quickly and carefully slice away the worst of the swollen tear so that it would have clean edges, the better to heal.

He watched her face. She didn't seem to feel a thing. He swallowed thickly, forced himself to breathe slowly as fresh blood oozed. "You realize of course that had you allowed yourself to be sorted into Ravenclaw, your life would be entirely different and I must say, better suited to you and your needs."

"I think I am an excellent Gryffindor!" she huffed indignantly. "I can't imagine being half so satisfied in Ravenclaw, much less 'better suited.'" She adjusted her weight on her arms and scowled at him.

"Hold still," he commanded, and then, lest she grow too fascinated by what he might be doing between her legs he continued. "As brilliant as you are, and as stellar as your educational achievements have been," he said, dabbing at the bleeding flesh, "can you imagine what heights you would have reached had you been surrounded by those your intellectual equal rather than the idiots in Gryffindor?"

"They aren't idiots..."

"Idiots, every one." He whispered a soft "*Integro*" and watched intently as the two straight edges of flesh joined. He let out his breath as a silvery scar appeared and most of

the bleeding stopped.

And noticed she was glaring, waiting for him to respond to whatever defense she'd made of her idiot friends.

He curled his lip. "Indeed."

That seemed to work if her frustrated exhalation was any indication.

He poured more freezing potion, sliding a quick glance at her eyes. She didn't flinch. Good, it was still doing its job.

He finished with a light bit of cauterization to staunch the last of the bleeding and released a shuddering breath.

"Why did you choose Slytherin," she asked suddenly. "You did, didn't you?"

He considered his possible answers and found himself speaking the truth as easily as if they were discussing the Periodic Tables of Magical Elements. "I was eleven years old and I'd just fallen in love at first sight with the most stunning blonde creature I'd ever seen."

He saw wheels turning behind her eyes. Saw her carefully guard her expression and ask without judgment, "Mister Malfoy?"

He couldn't stop the smirk, nor could he stop the snort of laughter. "No, Miss Granger. Narcissa Black."

Her mouth formed a silent oh. And she seemed a little distressed. More distressed than if it had been Lucius, which was decidedly unsettling.

"I was eleven years old. Surely you didn't expect me to exhibit a wisdom beyond my years?"

"She's still very beautiful."

Ah.

"Believe me, that momentary infatuation didn't last. And yes, she is still very beautiful, if appearances count."

"Don't they always," she sighed sadly.

"I believe they often do." And shouldn't he, of all people, know that? "However, in her case, no."

"What's that smell?"

"Burning flesh."

"Really? Where...oh!"

"Deep breaths, Miss Granger. It's been over for five minutes. You missed your opportunity to faint."

Her eyes threatened to swallow him whole as she stared at him, and he saw her throat working as she swallowed.

"Breathe with me," he ordered her.

He allowed his chest to swell with air until she followed suit.

Slowly exhaled.

Repeated.

And repeated.

Until pink came back into her cheeks and the green pallor receded.

One last deep cleansing breath. (One last glimpse of taut, peach-coloured nipple peeking from the gape of her robe.)

One last slow exhale. (Temptation removed.)

"Now." He cleared his throat thickly. "We shall brew."

He took her hands in his and pulled her up to her feet. She walked beside him to his private laboratory without hesitation or any indication that she felt discomfort.

He wished he could say the same. His own bits were cringing in sympathetic distress, with the occasional twinge of outright pain.

He handed her a mortar and pestle and a quantity of dried *Corydalis yanhusuo* rhizome. "Grind this to dust, if you please."

He watched her precise wrist movements and noted her strength. She ground with much more power than he would have anticipated, using her entire arm up to and including the shoulder. He set about gathering various other ingredients along with three cauldrons.

"So this is your bedroom."

"This is my laboratory."

"Yes, obviously, but it's the bedroom of your quarters, isn't it?"

"Don't get any ideas," he growled. Damn the impertinence he could see it now; she was already mentally moving in the bedroom furniture.

"It's brilliant, isn't it?" she asked, looking around without ceasing to grind the rhizomes. "That alcove," she indicated it with a toss of her head, "is where the bed would be, but it's perfect for your desk and work table."

He didn't see any reason to respond other than to glower.

"Much more useful than a bedroom. Plus, it annoys Madam Hooch. You realize, of course, that she grilled me about your quarters and asked was it true you have a private lab, and I'm quite certain she is jealous that you have more space than she does."

He smirked at that. Hooch had grilled him similarly, and it didn't bother him a little bit that she seethed at the perceived injustice.

"I, of course, didn't answer. It's none of her business," she sniffed. And then, "Why did you ask me about Ravenclaw?" She changed subjects without warning.

"Just an idle thought."

"Professor Snape, you are not a good liar."

"I'm an excellent liar."

"Then why do I know you're lying?"

He just glared at her and continued chopping asper root.

She came at it from another direction. "How would my life have been better?"

Well. He *had* been the one to bring it up, after all. "You wouldn't have come close to death on more occasions than I can probably name, as I doubt I know the half of them."

She shrugged.

That shrug was fucking annoying.

He scraped the asper root into a simmering cauldron and crossed to check over her shoulder. "More wrist action." He saw her wince, knew her wrist was probably aching by this point. He closed his hand over hers, guided her for a few rotations.

"Oh," she said. "That helps."

"Proper technique generally does." As did his silent charm to relieve tension and pressure. He withdrew his hand from hers.

"So, very well. I wouldn't have been fighting Voldemort. What else would have been better for me in Ravenclaw-*in your opinion?*" She added the last as if his opinion was dubious, at best.

"You wouldn't have been unappreciated." Let her try that one on for size.

She stopped grinding, her eyes wide. "But I'm not."

He fixed her with a stare. "You wouldn't have been teased for reading, for studying. You wouldn't have found yourself doing homework for all your friends and saving at least half of them from self-annihilation in my class."

She had the temerity to roll her eyes.

"And with closer proximity and less house rivalry to cloud the issue, the gentlemen of Ravenclaw would have appreciated what they had in their midst, unlike the bloody Gryffindors. You wouldn't find yourself eighteen, a seventh year in Voldemort's crosshairs, forced to marry someone you..." He broke off.

"Someone I...?" she asked, troubled.

This time it was his turn to shrug.

She returned to her grinding, avoiding his eyes. "It still seems an odd thing for you to bring up."

"My mind has been much on the inadequacy of the Sorting Hat of late." He moved around the table and leaned over her shoulder again to check her progress. "That's enough."

He hadn't realized he was so close until she sighed and sank back against his chest.

She jerked forward, startled.

He stepped sideways, took the rhizome dust and carefully sifted it into the second cauldron, then started a stirring rod and left it to continue stirring as he sniffed the contents of the third brew.

She simply rubbed her arms, watching him.

He returned to her side with a vial. "The freezing potion will begin wearing off soon and you'll experience discomfort. It's time to drink this and go to bed."

"What about you?"

"I'll be following soon, once I've got everything here under control."

"I'll wait for you," she said quickly.

He turned his back to her. "There's no need. The longer you put off drinking the Dreamless Sleep Potion, the more likely the pain will interfere with your rest. I'd rather not give you anything more for pain right now. You've had contraindicating potions, and if I bring you to harm, Poppy will kill us both."

When he didn't hear a response, he turned and saw her toying with the vial.

Finally, she quirked a smile, her eyes soft. "Thank you. For everything."

He gave her a curt nod and was returning to the first cauldron when she hopped down from the stool and gasped in pain.

Blast. He'd waited too long. He crossed to her, tilting the vial to her lips. "Drink, damn it."

She fixed him with those eyes and never looked away, even after the vial was empty.

She took a step, and flinched.

Disgusted with himself, with her and with the entire situation, he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

Her weight was more substantial than he'd expected. Not heavy. She was anything but heavy.

But she filled his arms.

He settled her onto the bed as gently as he could.

"Just relax and let sleep come. You probably won't feel anything once you're asleep, but if you do, awaken me and I'll try something else."

She nodded and yawned, totally trusting.

Damn her.

He was halfway back to the laboratory when he heard her call for him.

Poised in the doorway he looked back at her. "What now?"

"Can I use your breath potion? The one that makes you smell so good in the morning?"

As if he cared what her breath smelled like in the morning.

Blast.

He went to the bathroom to retrieve it for her.

It was easier than saying no.

## Marked

*Chapter 16 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

### 16. MARKED

Bruises. Blood.

Rage. Fury.

He had *hurt* her.

He who had never lifted a finger to hurt a woman.

Any woman.

Even a woman who hurled hexes and curses and left him quivering and convulsing in a graveyard at midnight, a woman whose "tender" ministrations left him screaming with his face in the dirt until he had great clods of it in his mouth.

And despite the fact that he'd clutched his wand in his hand and could have destroyed her with one well-placed word, he hadn't even hurt that woman.

Because she was a woman.

He had never hurt a woman.

Because *he was not his fucking father*.

He hung his head.

He had hurt *her*.

As he waited for the potion to cool, to cure... the potion that would take away her pain safely...

He stared at the Dark Mark on the tender flesh of his inner arm and wanted to blame it, wanted to blame ~~him~~ *Him*, the bastard, the Dark Bastard, for sending evil coursing through his body and taking away his awareness, his control...

But he also remembered the rage, the fury that had rocketed through his body even before the Mark burned in him. The rage that she dared throw herself on his mercy, as if he had any reason to want to protect her. The rage that Lucius had attempted to claim her for Draco, knowing full well that claim would mark Draco a man, and bring him to the Dark Lord to accept his own Mark. The rage that he, Severus Snape, who had spent his adult life protecting ungrateful children, would even make this sacrifice to protect Draco from his own father's political aspirations.

Rage. Fury. Anger.

Hours before the Dark Mark called him.

He had only to look at his near barren laboratory to remember that.

Could he really blame the Mark for her injury?

Could he ever allow himself to touch her again now that he knew what he was capable of?

X

He was awakened by a warm body curled against him.

Correction.

The body had evidently been there for a measure of time without his noticing. It was the soft moan that broke his sleep and jerked him to a state of awareness.

He dug through her hair until he found her face and touched her forehead. No discernible fever.

She'd had bad dreams before. It might be another.

She broke off in mid-whimper and gasped, then silenced; she was awake. He felt her begin a torturously slow process of inching away from him with an occasional audible little sound of discomfort.

"Miss Granger?"

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

""*Lumos*". He raised his wand, the better to see her.

She was clutching her lower abdomen.

That shouldn't be. He sat up quickly. "How much pain are you in?"

"It's not bad."

"Miss Granger, you're a terrible liar."

"I don't want to be a bother."

"You're always a bother," he said with absolutely no malice. "I'm growing accustomed to it."

She gave him a pained look.

"Describe it."

One hand drifted to the juncture of her legs. "It's throbbing."

*Throbbing*. Fuck. Just that word spoken in her sleep-rasped voice made him throb in an entirely different manner.

Her hand joined the other on her abdomen. "And cramping."

"I'll apply the freezing potion again," he said, forcing himself out of the warm bed to prepare.

But still, cramping?

She didn't voice a protest.

He performed his own *Protego Frigeo*. She spread her legs open, and he was relieved to see the bruising had diminished already. It must be the new wound that was causing pain, even though luckily it, too, seemed to be healing well.

However, her folds were swollen and the silvery scar was pulled taut; it was no wonder she ~~throbbed~~ *throbbed* with pain.

He bit back a curse when he realized his error. She had no business sitting on the incision and helping prepare potions immediately after the procedure. She should have stayed reclining, and he was a dunderhead because any housewitch would have known as much.

This time there was no cry when the liquid ice hit her skin. Her jaw clenched and her hands gripped the towels he'd placed under her, but otherwise, she was silent.

He waited for her fingers to relax and realized he'd been holding his breath.

"Better?"

She nodded, but the tight lines between her eyes didn't completely disappear.

"I'm disturbed by the cramping," he said, and braced himself for her next reaction. "If it continues, I insist that you see Poppy."

She turned her head away from him, but this time she didn't argue. Her brow wrinkled, her expression perplexed. "What's the date?"

"The fifth of September. I suppose it's the sixth, now."

"Oh." She wrinkled her nose. "There's no need to bother Madam Pomfrey."

He must have looked particularly obtuse because she added, "At least I'm not pregnant."

Oh.

*Oh*.

She rolled over with a wince, and stood up, and caught herself on the edge of the bed when she staggered.

"For god's sake, get back in bed before you make things worse," he snapped. And then, belatedly, "What can I do?"

"My trunk. It's under the bed."

He summoned it. It resisted before sliding out; it weighed much more than he would have imagined.

She reached over the side of the bed and waved her wand. Her trunk opened to reveal an array of small boxes.

"It should be near the top," she said, leaning further to look, her mouth drawn and white. "There, the red box."

He handed her the small red box and watched as she used her wand to bring it to its normal size. Opened, it revealed several potions and a cloth bag that held, he presumed, whatever feminine items she needed.

And thus it would begin. Her "feminine items" would take over his bathroom.

He gave her the bag with a show of good grace that he didn't feel. "You need to stay off your feet until at least tomorrow, except for necessary trips to the loo and such," he said calmly as he helped her to her feet and walked her to the bathroom. Her grip on his hand was strong, but her steps were slow. He gratefully watched the door close between them. "If you need anything, I'll be right here."

He crossed back to her red box and its potions to check for himself. He snorted his disapproval at the first few, vetoed the next for immediate use, and sighed. After everything introduced into her system in the past few hours, he really didn't see much help for it.

Other than tea or a tisane and a hot water bottle, she was doomed to endure without adequate pain relief.

He went to bathroom door and cleared his throat. "If you'd like, I could attempt to brew some of that tea you're so fond of."

The bathroom door opened and she stood there scowling up at him. "I'd *prefer* you get it from the kitchens."

"You think I can't brew it to your standards?" Insolent chit.

"I'm quite sure you'd surpass my standards and establish new ones of your own. I'd rather have ~~some~~*something* I can do better than you, though, if your ego can stand it." An impertinence which would have been much more effective if she hadn't been attempting to cross the floor gingerly, with one hand on her abdomen.

He grabbed her arm and assisted her the rest of the way. "Back in bed," he ordered, then went about sending for tea and assorted biscuits.

"Would you please check and see if Crooks is in the corridor?"

He lowered the wards and the wall opened. The half-kneazle entered, bottlebrush tail straight up in the air. By the time the wards were back up, the beast had leapt onto the bed and was sniffing and kneading Miss Granger's belly, and she was *allowing* it.

Before he could voice his disgust, however, the cat had circled and plopped down and begun a loud, vibrating purr. Miss Granger's eyes were closed and her hand stroking the orange fur, her face as relaxed as he'd seen it in recent hours.

Well. He supposed he could skip the hot water bottle. At least the creature knew how to make itself useful.

"Has it occurred to you," he asked with visions of obtuse Gryffindor prats dancing in his head, "that the one male in your life who is even halfway attentive to your needs is a half-wild beast?"

She opened her eyes and gave him a considering look, and then closed her eyes again. "You make an interesting point."

X

Hermione was beyond thinking anything odd, strange or bizarre. Thus, an impromptu tea party on a pile of pillows in Professor Snape's bed felt as natural as sitting in his Potions class.

Moreso, actually.

Potions class seemed like another lifetime.

And of course, he'd dosed the tea with firewhisky, which definitely ruined a good cuppa, but at least it wasn't her PG Tips being ruined. And the firewhisky did make her feel a tad ... floaty. A little removed from the pain, even if the pain was still there.

He was pressed back against his pillows, his face twisted in a light scowl as he dangled a chocolate biscuit from his fingertips.

"Thank you." She took it, bit into it, and savored the bitter chocolate crème center with a happy sigh. "You don't like chocolate?"

"I like chocolate." He sipped his tea and avoided her eyes, continuing to scowl at midair. Evidently he was finding their tea party more distressing than she was.

"Why are you giving them all to me?" Chocolate crumbs scattered on the front of her shirt. His shirt. Their shirt.

His gaze flickered to her abdomen and away. "I believe you have more need."

"You'll make me fat," she announced. "You can have the others. Although ... that coconut biscuit..."

He handed her the biscuit without looking at her, and after a long moment, took one of the remaining chocolate ones and devoured it in two bites.

"Professor..." She waited for him to meet her eyes. "Now that you've confessed your Ravenclaw strengths, I really think..."

Did she dare say it? She couldn't stop the grin from spreading across her face.

Chocolate had that effect on her.

Or maybe it was the firewhisky?

No, it must be the chocolate.

"I do believe you should consult your inner Ravenclaw the next time you decide to pay me a compliment. Because your Slytherin compliments suck arse."

He slid her a malevolent glance.

She laughed. Or maybe giggled. "Or," she shrugged lightly, "not. I mean, next time I might be able to read between the lines ~~before~~ I hex you."

He snorted his disdain. "Next time I'll know you lack the subtlety to understand my appreciation for the devious."

"Git." She grabbed her stomach and gasped. It felt as if her uterus was wringing itself out in an effort to empty. She lay back on the pillows and squeezed her eyes shut, pushing Crookshanks away. His weight was suddenly an agony.

A new warmth replaced him, lighter and gentler, and the inner pressure relaxed a bit as she drifted, taking slow, deep breaths, easing through until the cramp had itself eased.

When she finally opened her eyes, she found Professor Snape on his side, watching her, with one of his long, supple hands splayed across her stomach.

"And I don't suppose you've gone to Poppy for this, either."

She gave him a patronizing smile. "Honestly, it's just part of being female."

"Miss Granger, there are ways for dealing with routine menstrual cramps, and there are also menstrual cramps that aren't routine. I hardly trust you to judge for yourself now that I know how much pain you're willing to endure and consider it normal."

"I usually take potions."

"I've seen the potions you take. They're inadequate."

She started to argue with him, but it hardly seemed worth the effort.

His hand felt so nice on her stomach. Without thinking, she put her own hand over his to hold it there. "Thank you," she said softly. "I promise not to tell."

"Tell what?"

"That you're patient and kind." She knew her smile irked him, but was beyond caring.

"Don't be ridiculous."

He tried to pull his hand away, but she clutched it to her. "I knew it, though. If nobody else did, it's because they're dense."

"You could not have known, because I am neither patient nor kind."

"I knew," she repeated languidly.

"You could *not* have known any such thing!" In his frustration, he seemed more like her dreaded Potions master than the man she'd been sharing a bed with.

She leaned close enough to whisper, and he seemed to lean closer despite himself. "I ... knew."

Oh... lovely chocolate...

"Explain your delusion, please." His words were crisp and cold.

"It's obvious... You are patient and gentle and attentive and caring... " She glanced up at him through her lashes and found him staring at her almost in fear, which was very very very odd. "...with your *potions*."

His mouth fell open and he stared at her in total disbelief.

"Are you quite finished?" he demanded.

It took a moment for her to realize he was talking about their tea. She nodded, and he cleared the bed of the mess with a finger-flick, and after his quiet, "*Nox*," they were in darkness.

X

Her labored breathing beside him, the soft, broken moan, confirmed that he'd fallen asleep and allowed his comforting charm to end and had allowed his hand to drop away from her.

Well, he did have to sleep sometimes, he thought irritably.

He pulled her back into his body, letting their curves fit together like spoons in a drawer, and placed his hand firmly over her lower abdomen again. With his free hand, he fought with her hair until he'd managed to secure it out of his face.

He waited for her to protest. She didn't. He waited for her to start talking. She didn't. Her body wasn't even stiff against him. She simply sank back into him and relaxed, and soon he could feel the easing beneath his hand, the slight change that told him she was finding some relief from pain.

But now he was awake, or rather his mind was. There was so much to consider and it made no sense, no sense at all.

A girl who accepted pain as normal, who accepted a horrid first sexual experience as normal, who didn't protest against sleeping on the floor or being mistreated (and even though it hadn't been intentional, he certainly looked back over the past week with a calculated acceptance that she'd been mistreated).

If it had been any other girl, he'd assume she was some horrid weak creature with low self-worth.

But this wasn't any other girl.

This was Hermione Granger, and of all her faults, he couldn't list weakness or low self-worth amongst them.

"Professor?"

He sighed. Of course she'd want to talk. She was Hermione Granger.

"Why have you been thinking about the Sorting Hat?" she asked drowsily.

"It doesn't concern you. Go back to sleep."

"So you weren't just wishing I'd been sorted into Ravenclaw so you wouldn't be stuck with me?"

"Fucking hell, girl, did I say that?"

"I'm not whinging," she announced. "But it certainly seemed to be the subtext."

"Everything is not about you."

"Well. I'm glad we've got *that* settled."

"Will I have to put up with this kind of cheek every month?"

"In my experience, I always remain utterly reasonable, while Ron and Harry turn into total imbeciles who can't breathe without getting on my last nerve, every single month."

Oh, the priss.

"Is that what I have to look forward to from you?" she added warningly.

"Undoubtedly." He supposed having her talk was better than having her moaning in pain. "The problem with the sorting procedure is that it goes for the obvious. Every time I allow myself to consider what I could have done with the Weasley twins..."

"You despise Fred and George!"

"I despise that they were allowed to waste two of the most profoundly gifted natural talents this school has seen. Anybody could see that they had Gryffindor strengths, but



had they been forced to develop some Slytherin subtlety..."

She snorted at that.

"...there's no limit as to what they might have accomplished, and could still be accomplishing. Their genius and I admit it with all the bitterness in my heart, it is sheer genius is wasted on jokes and games, while it could be used..."

"For Voldemort."

"Don't be stupid. A Weasley working for Voldemort?"

"So... you've been fretting over not getting Fred and George into Slytherin." She sounded skeptical.

"They were simply an example."

Her "Hmm" was noncommittal, followed by, "Who else was mis-sorted, in your opinion?"

"Potter, of course. If the little prat had been in Slytherin, I would have been able to steer him instead of have my every attempt to help him..."

"By bullying and treating him like the filth beneath your shoe."

"Out of absolute necessity," he said, daring her to challenge him.

"Bollocks." But she pushed on. "Who else?"

"I find this discussion fruitless."

"Nevertheless."

"Draco." He felt the hollowness in his stomach at the thought that had been eating him alive....

"You think Draco Malfoy should have been in Gryffindor?" she almost shrieked. Fortunately her mouth was aimed away from his ear.

"Ravenclaw." He was careful to keep the pain out of his voice. "If the Sorting Hat had encouraged his intellect instead of making the most superficial of judgments and sending him to Slytherin when his cunning had obviously already been finely honed..."

"Oh, grand. You'd have Draco and me both in Ravenclaw. I suppose you'd have us married, after all," she sighed, and she sounded quite miserable.

The clutch at his gut was involuntary. "I must mark my calendar so I'll be forewarned of your monthly forays into insanity."

"You're a wretch."

"I wouldn't want you to think I was kind."

"You're also dreadfully easy to tease." She yawned and snuggled back against him more firmly, and he concentrated on not "reacting."

It was enough to make him withdraw his hand, his charm and any other comfort he could give, and leave her to whinge and cramp the rest of the night.

She rolled over to face him and even in the dark, it was evident her face was all too close to his. Before he could draw back, she leaned even closer and he could smell the firewhisky and something else, something so sweet, on her every breath.

The potion.

That's all it was. The potion he'd created because he didn't like the taste of morning mouth, and of course it meant that her breath smelt of mint and rosemary and even a hint of eucalyptus.

That's all it was. The ruddy potion.

"Professor...?" she breathed softly, and her soft, sweet breath shuddered through him.

He closed his lips over hers, feeling a small clutch in his throat, a tightening that was part sadness and part joy.

This was insanity.

This was danger.

But he couldn't stop himself, nor could he stop his body from responding very rebelliously when she melted into him with a small sob and flung herself into his kiss, totally and completely.

She was injured, she was in pain, she was a student...

She was his wife, she was in his arms, she was *kissing* him...

And oh those frightening, dangerous kisses were addictive.

He'd be quite willing to simply lie here with her in his arms and kiss, to snog like a teenager the rest of the night.

So soft, so sweet, so unexpectedly perfect in his arms, her body longer against his than he would have thought. She simply *fit*.

Which made his agony even more intense when the burning hit him, the call of the Dark Lord piercing and insistent, and his left forearm seared with pain.

He almost flung her away in his haste to get his arm away from her, as if having her anywhere near it, much less embracing it, put her at risk.

He jerked upright in the bed and clutched it and flung his head back.

And knew a moment's fierce gratitude for the Call.

For the reminder of who and what he was.

"I have to go," he said, forcing his voice to be cold. "Don't let the wards down for anyone."

"*Lumos!*" she said, and her wand illuminated her on the bed as she searched his face, her eyes wide. "Please," she said softly, "be careful."

"I wouldn't be alive otherwise," he snapped and summoned his robe and mask. "Go to sleep."

He left without looking back at her, without allowing himself even a last glimpse.

He bit his lower lip until he tasted blood, and bit harder to erase the memory of those lips, that kiss.

And as he made his way across the grounds to the Apparation Point outside the gates, he tasted fear as he realized the danger they were in if he didn't mask his thoughts and memories from the onslaught of the Dark Lord's probes.

He dug deep and drew upon his rage and frustration, and pulled forth the images to support them, and flung away any sense of shame he should feel for sharing them.

The Dark Lord wanted to see her suffer, and Severus knew with a sickening sense of satisfaction that he had enough images to delight his master and enough experience with Darkness to consume whatever weakness he'd allowed to surface.

He wouldn't be alive otherwise.

## Lorded

*Chapter 17 of 92*

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Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*The characters and world are JKR's.*

*Thanks, as always, to the lovely and intelligent Leigh-Anne for beta-ing and to Juno-Magic for being willing to give up sleep when I needed quick feedback and reassurance!*

### 17. LORDED

At this late hour the evening was winding down, and only a handful of Death Eaters remained, none in mask and black robe.

Severus sighed and handed his own to the house-elf. Although he'd be welcome at any of the upper echelon's formal entertainments, one of the Dark Lord's surprising strengths was the simple fact that he rarely forced anyone to do anything they didn't want to. And one thing Snape didn't want to do was attend social events with the Malfoys.

Despite the wine he was handed, the cigarette he was offered (and accepted) and the comfortable wing chair near the library fire, this was not a social event. Or rather, not any more.

The Dark Lord sat across from him, a glass of wine that he wouldn't touch on the table beside him. He couldn't drink much of anything other than water and ate very little; he stayed alive on potions that Severus brewed for him. But he always was one who cared about appearances, and the wine at his elbow and silk robes made him look almost civilized if one could get past the unfortunate serpentine horror of his new incarnation.

Lucius sat on the Dark Lord's other side with Narcissa sitting on the arm of his chair, draped over him like an elegant piece of artwork.

Which she was, of course.

God only knew where Bella was; Severus was hoping it was not in the same country.

"We miss you at our gatherings, Severuss." The Dark Lord's thin smile was as genuine as they ever got, which meant he probably meant his words.

Severus merely gave an elegant shrug. It was an old conversation.

"Yes, Severus," Lucius drawled in near-sincerity. "In fact, perhaps next week you should bring Madam Snape along, introduce her to her new friends?"

Narcissa smiled, watching Severus's face as she toyed with her husband's hair. "Don't be churlish, darling. We wouldn't want to make Severus's young bride uncomfortable."

"Yet," Lucius added with a smirk, kissing his wife's knuckles.

The Dark Lord turned his red eyes to Severus. "Would she be uncomfortable?"

A loaded question? Surely not as stupid a question as it would seem on the surface. What was he asking? And why? "Well, yes and no. Would she be uncomfortable at a gathering of Death Eaters? I'll allow you to draw your own conclusions. Would she be uncomfortable at a Malfoy soiree, politics notwithstanding?" He tapped the ash from his cigarette and shook his head. "Not bloody likely. The girl was raised in Muggle society."

Lucius waved his hand dismissively. "Mudbloods."

"Her father is a Muggle baron, and her mother ... " Severus took a delicate drag and pretended to savor the smoke before continuing, "... is a Lady who is evidently frequently at Court. You know, the Muggle Court. Buckingham Palace, one would presume."

Narcissa stared suspiciously. Lucius couldn't decide whether he should be impressed or disdainful.

The Dark Lord alone seemed to get the implication. "Their Queen?"

"The very same."

"Does that ... complicate things?"

"It might. I'm probing to find out more. But yes, it might."

"Why should we care?" Lucius decided disdain was the order of the night.

The Dark Lord didn't take his eyes away from Severus, and Severus didn't shrink away from it. He wasn't entering, but he was watching, analyzing, pondering. "It might be imprudent if anything unfortunate happened to Severus's bride, I believe, is the point he is making so delicately."

"Muggle investigations into wizarding murders can be problematical," Severus agreed.

"And is this connection helping you in other ways?"

"I know she's still attempting to do Potter's thinking for him, which has been to his benefit for over six years. Unfortunately, Potter has such a pronounced dislike of me..." Severus smirked. "He seems ready to toss anything she suggests aside in a fit of pique."

"Excellent."

"Indeed." Severus sank back in his chair and closed his eyes, soaking in the luxury of excellent wine, burnished leather that molded to his back in exquisite support, and the satisfaction that Lucius was annoyed. He almost forgot his prop, but snatched the cigarette away from the arm of the chair just before it burned it.

"And what did you bring to entertain me, Severuss?"

He rolled his head sideways on the back of the chair, relaxed, and simply opened his eyes in invitation.

The images flashed by like lightning in no particular order. Miss Granger asleep on the floor, weeping in her sleep. Miss Granger's face twisted in pain as their sham of a wedding was consummated. His own hand twisted into her hair, pinning her against the dungeon wall. On and on they went.

It was an embarrassment of riches.

Miss Granger's bruised genitalia.

That was the image that caused the Dark Lord to return and to linger, and from the thoughtful mood in his brain, Severus deduced it was not because the Dark Lord was interested in the view.

Finally, the Dark Lord's presence withdrew, and Severus allowed himself a couple of slow blinks to recover from the invasion.

"You never cease to surprise me." The Dark Lord studied him closely.

"Indeed?" Another drag on the cigarette.

"I didn't picture you as brutal, Severusss."

He sighed. "My bride is a delicate flower, it seems."

"And will she go crying to Potter about her cruel husband?"

Severus allowed his smirk to spread. "Without a doubt."

The Dark Lord smiled. "Excellent work, Severuss. Excellent."

He basked in the approval.

He basked in the ill-suppressed and petty jealousies emanating from the Malfoys.

"And now, a game of wizard chess?"

Severus accepted another glass of wine, another cigarette, the offer of the white chess pieces and Lucius's resentment with good grace.

Losing a game or two to the Dark Lord was a pleasant enough distraction from what awaited him when he returned to his bed.

Lucius and Narcissa had long since retreated to their bedchambers when Severus laid his white King down (kicking and screaming) for the third time.

"I'll never defeat you," he sighed wearily.

The Dark Lord smiled. "But you always put up such a good fight."

"There's that."

"Before you go, Severusss... one word of advice."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Do not allow yourself to form an attachment for your young bride."

Severus reacted with a startled glare. "My first instinct is to inform you how impossible that would be. But then I realize, you wouldn't find it necessary to warn me, if you didn't see a danger...?"

"I only remember the last time when I almost lost you, Severuss." Red eyes glowed softly in the early dawn.

"Are you threatening to kill another of my toys?" Severus asked, head cocked in wonder. "I'm flattered. I didn't know you cared."

"I hate to see you get hurt."

"Then you also remember the hard lesson I learned about teenaged witches." He bent to kiss the Dark Lord's hem. "There's no need for reminders. There will be no attachment, my Lord."

The claw-like hand reached out and ruffled his hair with affection. "There's my boy."

Severus rose and smirked. "Always."

The Dark Lord's laughter followed him.

XX

The instant the wall began to shimmer with the mere thought of opening, Hermione was out of bed. By the time it opened, she was halfway across the floor.

By the time he entered and tossed his mask and robe into his leather chair, she was a heartbeat away from throwing herself into his arms

But stopped short. The words came out choked; her voice cracked with emotion. "Did he...did he hurt you?"

He gave her a resentful look. "Do I appear to be injured?"

"No ... " And then, the relief flooded through her. "No. Oh, thank Merlin. I was afraid...afraid it would be like last time." And this time, she did sink against him and cling to him until she realized he was stiff and cold in her arms. She pulled away and stared up into his face, confused.

"The Dark Lord has never hurt me, Miss Granger." His voice dripped with acid.

"But last time..."

"That was Lucius Malfoy. He felt I had breached an unspoken agreement that if he wants something, he should get it." He jerked at his buttons with agitation, as if he couldn't get out of his shirt quickly enough. "He wanted you for Draco. He would have destroyed any wizard who attempted to block him from you." He stopped, his shirt hanging open, and shrugged. "The Dark Lord would not allow him to destroy me, but he allowed him to vent his frustration. It was a wise decision, all things considered." His eyes slid to her, his expression cloaked.

She stared at him, her confusion growing. He was cold, deliberate, and the way he *looked* at her ...

"Now then," he said silkily as he began the slow process of unbuttoning his trousers. "Since you're so eager to see me and so joyful at finding me unharmed..."

She walked slowly to the bed, her mind spinning.

"Yes, ever the smart girl." His voice came from behind her ear, his breath hot on her neck. She shivered.

He eased around her until his thighs hit the mattress and then he pulled off his boots, slid his trousers down his long legs, and stretched out diagonally across the bed. His erection jutted from between his thighs, and as she watched, dry-mouthed, he began stroking it. His eyes never left hers.

"Do you want me to..."

"Yesss." The word hissed.

Like a snake.

"Be my *good little wife*," he crooned, but his eyes and his voice were flat as coal.

She bit her lower lip to stop it from trembling. Something was wrong. She'd never been afraid of him before. But now, this minute, she was one fast movement away from stark terror, and she didn't know why.

She climbed onto the bed beside him, her heart thudding in her chest.

She leaned over and whispered softly into his ear, "Do you want me to suck your cock?"

He froze. "What did you say?"

"Isn't that what you want?" she pushed, her voice rough with suppressed fear, and something more than fear. "Tell me."

"What I want," he snarled, "is for you to stop using tricks you've learned from bloody fucking books, and stop saying the things you *think* I want to hear, and to just..."

Genuine confusion and the frustration of getting it wrong *again* overcame her uncertainty. "But men like to hear women talk dirty in bed."

His hand fisted in her hair and it bloody hurt; she forced herself to breathe slowly as he growled, "Just say what Hermione Granger would say. Be Hermione Granger. Forget the fucking books!"

"Hermione Granger *is* the fucking books!" She grabbed his hand and peeled his fingers out of her hair so she could jerk away. "But I'm Hermione Snape, and believe me, you do not want to hear what Hermione Snape has to say, so either tell me what you want me to do, or"

He sat up and sneered, "And just what exactly does Hermione Snape have to say?"

"Hermione Snape wants to know who is in this bed, whether it's a man who has spent a long, difficult night and needs comfort from his wife...or whether it's a Death Eater looking for a quick blow job from a whore!"

Her hand met his cheek with a loud *CRACK*, and the stinging pain shot up her arm, but she wound back, ready to repeat the blow when he caught her wrist and clamped down on it.

They sat there frozen, glaring into each other's eyes, and she realized with a start that his were no longer flat as coal but burned with rage, and relief shot through her because at least this was a Severus Snape she recognized.

"You could have just said *no*," he snarled. "*No* is a perfectly acceptable answer. Hitting me is not."

"But the answer wasn't no," she said. "If you needed me, the answer was *never* going to be no." She wrenched her hand out of his grip; her wrist would probably bear a mark as dark as that on his face. "But when you come to me smelling of wine and cigarettes and *him* and I look into your eyes and you aren't *there*..."

"And what if the simple answer is, I am both? I am a man who needs comfort from his wife, *and* a Death Eater who"

She stopped him with her fingers on his lips, unable to hear the rest of that thought.

"Then on those occasions when a Death Eater climbs into my bed, allow me to hide behind words like fuck and cock and whore, or I don't think my heart will survive the experience."

He shoved her away. "I told you. *No* is an acceptable answer."

"Not if you need me," she whispered, her fingers trailing down the angry red mark they'd inflicted only moments before. She saw that his erection had faded and reached

down to take his penis in her free hand, to stroke it back to attention.

He stopped her hand with his. "My answer is no, then."

He fell back onto the bed and pulled the sheet over his body. He watched her from beneath hooded eyes.

Weariness claimed her. She walked around the bed to the other side and slid between the sheets. She released a long, shuddering sigh.

He pulled her into his arms and curled around her.

She wasn't sure what it meant. That he forgave her? Or was it she who should be forgiving him?

She was too tired to think it through. She just knew that he was back. He was safe.

And belatedly, just as sleep overtook her, something strange flickered through her consciousness. He ... *needed* her. He as much as told her so.

She wasn't sure she liked the way he needed her. It frightened her. She wasn't even sure she should be willing.

She wanted to shove that Dark part of him away and force him to come back to her as the man she trusted.

She wanted to wrap herself around him and absorb everything that was Dark until he could be the man she trusted again. And more, until he could be free of it all for good.

But mainly, she just wanted to sink back into his arms and let sleep overtake her. And perhaps, there was her answer after all.

She laid her head on his shoulder and was assaulted by the smell of his time with the Dark Lord...

And still would rather be there in his arms than any other place on earth.

With his breath on her neck, on her shoulders, in her hair, she gave herself up to sleep.

And they slept through breakfast and lunch without moving other than to adjust more deeply into their sleeping embrace.

XX

Hot ... wet ... desire.

He thrust forward, in, seeking release--Merlin...so wet and hot and slick and

"Eeek."

Such a soft sound, soft wordless sound, but in a voice able to rip into the most *relieving* of dreams.

Fuck.

A dream.

Thighs. Those firm, soft folds were ... her thighs.

Slender, strong hands pulling at his arms as he clung, frozen in mid-thrust, not wanting to blink into wakefulness but unable to dismiss those hands, that small disturbing, "Eeek."

But he didn't want to let go of her.

He groaned into her neck, unable to stop himself from writhing against her and soaking up the sensations of her body, of her hot, wet...

Wet?

"Oh, god..."

The mortification in those words, not passion, mortification.

He was suddenly and vividly awake.

With a lap full a bed full of blood.

"Eeek," and "Oh, god," in-fucking-deed.

He let go she rolled away from him, and he was now *cold* and wet, but no less aroused, fuck it all to bloody hell.

"Don't say a word!" she snapped. "Don't you *dare* say a word!" As if he were somehow to blame? She clearly didn't like the expression on his face because she glared threateningly up at him and spat, "Don't even *think* it!"

Words? There were words for a time like this?

Not to mention, thoughts?

"We...we can behave like adults," that annoying, crystal-clear voice announced with a thread of tremor vibrating through it, "or I can *Avada Kedavra* myself and put us both out of our misery!"

At which point she leapt from the bed and ran to the loo, her shirttail *his* shirttail a blaze of Gryffindor red.

The door slammed shut.

Then slammed open again.

"And don't you *dare* burn my sheets!"

Then slammed shut.

And. Open.

"And it's all your fault for distracting me so for staying gone until I was convinced you were dead and then coming in and making me angry so that I forgot to change"

Her cheeks blazed almost as red as her...*his*...shirttail. "Don't. You. Dare."

Leaving him totally aghast and agog, unable to form any thoughts beyond, "I've brought the fucking Dark Lord into my bed...no, that witch can out-Dark Lord the Dark Lord at his darkest."

Followed by, "Now there's an idea, why don't we just turn her loose on him and sit back and watch and may the best maniac win?"

Followed by the awareness that his most formidable wife had managed to talk away not one, but two erections in one day.

Now *there* was a talent that didn't surprise him in the least.

All that over a bit of menstrual blood.

He waited until he heard the bathwater running and was certain she wasn't going to storm back in and have another go at him before he finally let go...

And laughed himself to back to sleep.

# Simply

*Chapter 18 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*Thank you to JK Rowling who created the characters and the world.*

*Thank you to Leigh-Anne, who is always there to slap me around encourage me when I need it!*

## 18. SIMPLY

She emerged a half hour later, warm and quiet and uneasy. She pulled herself more snugly into the bathrobe and stopped cold.

The bed had awful white sheets on it; her skin chafed in anticipation of having to slide between them. But her soft, lovely red sheets were piled by the door, so she used her wand to move them into the loo.

He'd brought the leather chair to the bed, along with a side table to hold a pile of sandwiches and biscuits. All she saw were his long legs stretched, one graceful white hand relaxed, as he'd angled the chair to face the bed rather than the bathroom. He faced the pile of pillows that was her destination.

In less than a moment, she took it all in, and more.

There was something languid, relaxed, about him. The usual tension radiating from his body was lessened almost to the point of nonexistence.

She'd never sensed this...this absence of stress in him before.

She closed her eyes and drew in a shuddering breath.

"Professor, did you need the bath?"

"My cleansing spells were quite adequate, but thank you for enquiring." The words were cool but his voice was almost warm.

A quick bit of wand-waving and the tub was filled with cold water, red sheets and a shirt that might never be white again.

As she passed him to climb into the bed, she gathered her courage. She wanted to get rid of the horrible feeling clenching at her stomach. She had wanted to erase the expression in his eyes that still haunted her. But it wasn't there now. If she said what she needed to say, would it come back?

But she had to speak.

"Professor... I'm very sorry."

He quirked the smallest of smiles, yet it seemed more a smile than any she'd ever seen grace those lips. "Again?"

"I should have never..." She swallowed. "I'm so ashamed. I should never have hit you."

His head jerked, and yes, the expression on his face shifted to discomfort.

"Miss Granger, you were frightened..."

"I wasn't frightened. I was *angry*." For good cause, she might have added, but didn't.

His eyebrows met in tense lines, and he seemed to pale, if such a thing were possible on a man whose skin already rivaled the angels in its pallor.

*No is an acceptable answer.*

And then, the strained, *Hitting me is not.*

"I won't...I will *never* do that again."

"You can't hurt me," he said. "There's no need to worry yourself." But she detected a tender ache in his voice. "I must ask you..." He avoided her eyes. "I must ask you for a promise, though. Not so very different from the one you drew from me."

She felt the air lock in her lungs as she waited, confused.

"If we have children, and I admit the idea is as foreign to me as adopting a blast-ended skrewt..." He didn't smile, but continued to stare at a fixed bit of nothing in the air before him. "I must ask you to please, no matter how justified...and I'm not so foolish as to think it might not be justified..."

He closed his eyes. His voice was soft and held no threat, only entreaty. "Promise me that you will not strike our child."

Which is why the knife-like pain caught her unprepared, and she had closed the distance between them and flung herself on him before he had a chance to prepare for it, either.

She touched his cheek with her fingers, and the air hurt her lungs when she attempted to breathe.

She touched the soft impression of her hand and knew that as much as he truly meant it, as much as he wanted her assurance, that she ~~had~~ hurt him, and badly.

His arms settled loosely around her; did they tremble? Or was that her own body?

"I swear it," she whispered through her shame. And with her thumb, she tenderly stroked the corner of his eye until it opened, and she could pour her heart and her apology directly from her eyes into his, because she hadn't the words, didn't trust herself to say the right words.

And again, that ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Aren't you going to ask the same of me?"

"No." That was the *true* shame of it, knowing deep in her core without explanation or understanding that she need not to ask him for such a vow. This big bully of a man didn't need to make that promise. She trusted him with her own body and life and soul, and she certainly trusted him with her...with their...

She couldn't even think it. "All this talk of babies and children is terrifying," she whispered.

His hand brushed her hair away but he didn't smile.

They seemed united in that particular terror.

A flash of green flared in the fireplace.

She realized that she was sitting in Professor Snape's lap, curled up like she herself was a child. She tried to pull free, but his arms tightened around her and held her pinned and unmoving.

He rolled his head sideways and glared into the fireplace. She heard rather than saw the WHOOSH, and then, Professor Dumbledore's voice.

"Severus, there you are, we haven't seen you at..." His voice sputtered away to silence.

"You were saying, Albus?"

"Ahem. Well, yes. I was saying." More throat clearing.

Hermione's cheeks flamed, so she just pressed her face more firmly against Professor Snape and kept her back to the fireplace.

"I was saying, we haven't seen you at meals today, but... well, it's nothing that can't wait, and I'm certain you have much to keep you busy, I mean, erm," followed by a choked cough.

"Indeed," Professor Snape said, and she felt his lips brush her temple, and she didn't know why he did it, whether he was playing games with Professor Dumbledore, and if he was, why he was, and her mind was whirling with it all, but she knew that brush of lips against her skin was enough to take her breath away.

"Madam Snape received two messages by owl this morning. Would you like to retrieve them or..."

"Send them by house-elf; that will be adequate. Is there anything else, Albus?"

"No, no, not at all. Enjoy your Sunday." The twinkle in his voice sounded forced.

"I'm grateful we have your permission," Professor Snape responded with no small bit of irony, and then the WHOOSH indicated the floo was closed.

"Now," his voice rumbled a velvety growl in her ear. "Get off me so we can eat."

She scrambled back onto the bed, embarrassed, but reached for a bacon butty before settling into the pillows.

He reached forward and adjusted one of the pillows. "Is the pressure off your incision?"

She shifted a little and nodded, her mouth full of sandwich. "Thank you."

And after she swallowed, she took the bull by the horns and asked, "Why did you want Professor Dumbledore to see us..." Well, she almost got it out.

"Snuggling?" he prompted, then smirked. "Because it disturbs him so."

Almost as an afterthought, he slid a look at her. "However, I should have considered that you might have been embarrassed to be seen in what was certain to be interpreted as an intimate embrace."

"I just wish Harry and Ron and Ginny had been here for it, too." She scowled. "The prats." She tossed her hair out of her face and then added brightly, "Maybe we should snog at the High Table."

He seemed to choke on that thought. "I hope you'll give me fair warning before embarking on such a performance," he remarked dryly. "Which reminds me," he continued, not looking at her. "How did your meeting with the bumbling duo go?" He reached for a sandwich of his own.

"Do we have to talk about them right now? We're having such a pleasant lunch."

He gave a slight cock of his head. "Well. They're *your* friends."

*CRACK!*

Dobby appeared, his eyes squeezed closed. "Dobby isn't looking! Dobby isn't looking!"

Professor Snape snatched the delicately coloured green rolled parchment and the heavy ivory linen envelope from Dobby's clenched fists. "Thank you. That will be..."

"Dobby!" Hermione interrupted.

One of Dobby's eyes popped fearfully open.

"Will you bring us tea?"

"Yes, Harry Potter's friend!"

Snape cuffed him, not hard, but it was a cuff all the same. "Try again."

"Professor!" Hermione protested.

Dobby looked from one to the other, alarmed. "Erm, yes, Professor Snape's wife!"

*CRACK!*

"I can't believe you..."

He leaned back in his chair and folded his lean, pale hands over his flat stomach. "Now, now you promised not to hit me."

She glared at him.

"Miss Granger," he asked, his voice rippling silk. "Has anyone ever told you how lovely you are when you are in a snit?"

She was quite sure she wasn't lovely with her mouth opening and closing like a trout as she struggled for a retort.

And a lovely shiver ran down her spine.

Who was this man sitting across from her, gentling her with lips at her temple, teasing her and even *almost*, smiling? What was happening? And why was her belly doing all sorts of delicious curling and stretching and rolling, like a kitten awakening from a milk-induced slumber?

He reached across the gap between them with his forefinger, freed her lower lip from her teeth. He seemed to study her mouth, tracing it with a delicate stroke of his finger, his eyes half-closed as if he were concentrating very hard, committing it to memory.

Oh, how she loved it when he did that. She pulled his finger into her mouth, caught it gently between her teeth, tasted it with the tip of her tongue....

Her heart thudded in her chest when she opened her eyes and saw him watching her so closely, so very closely.

She released his finger and turned her face into the palm of his hand.

"What is happening?" she asked.

"I believe... we might be having a honeymoon," he whispered.

"Really?" What a thought. What a very odd thought.

"The Dark Lord is unlikely to summon me again so soon, and I believe we've sent Albus scurrying back into his hole, and I do think that perhaps we have a few hours left in the day to simply..."

"Simply?"

"Yes. Simply."

She felt her small smile responding to his, and somehow it made sense that they would have a honeymoon that consisted of a few hours where they just *..simplified*.

"Are you intoxicated?" she asked suspiciously. Not that she actually cared when he was so soft, so tender. She stiffened. Soft? Tender? "Are you sure you're Professor Snape? How do I know you aren't polyjuiced?"

"Honestly, Miss Granger, if you keep this up my mood will deteriorate all too quickly. Here, lean forward."

She obediently did as he demanded, and he gathered her hair into his fists, twisted it in that way he had that she couldn't duplicate, and secured it with a couple of long pencils from the nightstand.

Then he summoned a quill, inkpot and parchment. "Are you ready? We have much to discuss."

She lay back against the pillows with her quill ready, a tendril of joy unfurling in her heart at the very thought of it.

She and Professor Snape must be about to actually plan something together.

XX

He had to be insane.

But for this day, this hour, this moment...

He didn't give a flying fuck.

Her torrent of self-mortification and accusation had left him breathless with laughter.

*Laughter.*

He didn't know he was capable of such a thing.

And certainly, his body wasn't prepared for it.

After laughing until there were tears in his eyes, he collapsed into a brief, intense sleep...if the thought weren't so ludicrous he'd even consider *la petite mort*...and he then awakened to an equally intense sense of sweet lethargy.



And after his first panic-stricken thoughts of pulling himself together, of being ready for a mind-probe or a call to Albus's office, he came to the conclusion that they could all go to fucking hell.

Knowing that if the mark burned or if Albus needed him, he'd be up and gone in an instant.

But still, it was a pleasant conceit to think he could push the world away for a day. An hour. A moment.

"Professor?"

"Mmmm?"

"What are we going to plan?"

Ah, yes. The fly in the ointment.

Even this day, this hour, this moment, still had to be used for the greater good.

"First, the rules of your private Potions tutorials. I'm assigning you three advanced potions this week. You'll be..."

"Three!"

"Is that a complaint?"

"No!" Her eyes shone with excitement. "You just surprised me, that's all."

"As I was saying, you can't do this without my supervision, yet we must work this around your schedule and mine. Thus, I will expect you to complete these assignments in the Potions storeroom adjoining my classroom while I'm teaching. Nobody is to be aware you're there, but it will make it simple for me to keep my eye on your brewing. If you have an emergency situation, we'll have a way for you to summon me, otherwise I'll just pop in and take a look from time to time. Do you have a problem with any of this?"

He looked over her shoulder to see her precise, feminine script flowing across the parchment.

"Do you want me to make two copies?" she asked.

"No, I'll keep it in my head, as always. You are the one with the disorganized mind, thus you are the one who needs the written notes."

She glared up at him, offended.

"Miss Granger, no matter how organized you seem to the typical observer, the fact remains that only someone who is desperately disorganized must keep the kinds of notes, charts and plans you do."

She blushed so deeply he thought she couldn't have been any more embarrassed had he walked in on her masturbating.

A thought that was so unexpected, inappropriate and distracting, he realized his blush equaled hers.

He cleared his throat and continued. "Yes. As I was saying."

"Nobody has ever noticed that before," she said. "The reason why I work so hard on my charts and lists."

He allowed himself to shrug. "Well, it's neither here nor there, except for the fact that it's going to create real problems for you when we embark upon our Occlumency work."

"We're going to do Occlumency work?"

"Did I not just say so?"

She peered up at him from beneath and escaping frizz of hair. "Professor, are you feeling all right?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You keep *smiling*, and that's not at all like you." She glowered. "You're making me nervous."

*Oh, am I?* He allowed his smile to spread. "Never fear. This mood won't last long. Now about your Occlumency lessons, before we begin I need you to take a small test with Albus."

"What?" Her voice was sharp. "No!"

"I need another opinion. I drew some conclusions about your inadequacies, but..."

"I will *not* allow him to prod around in my brain. Absolutely not!"

"Miss Granger, your reaction astounds me. Surely you're aware that Albus Dumbledore is a doddering old fool with nothing more than a grandfatherly interest..."

"Ha!"

He allowed himself a full-throated laugh.

Her mouth fell open.

Good god, was it all that astounding to see him smile or laugh? "Please, close your mouth. You'll catch flies."

He watched with interest as she closed her mouth and swallowed, her eyes fixed distractedly on the quill in her ink-stained fingers.

"Miss Granger?"

"It's not just that you're making me nervous with all this smiling," she muttered. "It's just that I wasn't prepared."

"Prepared?" Any desire to smile was replaced with a desire to climb down her throat, find the words she was repressing and pull them out one by one. "Please complete your thought," he added with a customary snarl.

She fluttered another glance up at him, then back to her quill.

"My good mood is quickly dissipating."

"I'm getting accustomed to the fact that sometimes, with certain expressions on your face, you're quite handsome," she began.

She was insane; there was no other explanation.

"But when you smile..."

The teeth. The teeth disavowed her of such romantic schoolgirl notions. Thank Merlin for the teeth.

"It makes me hurt." She placed her closed fist against her breastbone, just above the swell of her breasts. "Here."

He felt himself frowning in confusion. What on earth was she saying?

"You don't smile enough. And when you do, it makes me sad..." Her fist opened and her fingers trailed to the hollow at the base of her throat. Her voice softened to a near-whisper. "Because you don't smile *enough*."

"Well." He fought against the ache in his own chest. The ache that he hadn't even noticed until her hand had touched her own ache, and he felt the connecting pang shoot from his body to hers. "Miss Granger, you are an emotional weapon of mass destruction," he announced, allowing himself one more smile. "So far you've talked me out of two very eager erections and one very good mood, and the afternoon is still young. What say you we get back to your Occlumency session with the Headmaster? Perhaps you should consult your schedule and get with him about that. I want you to see him as soon as possible because only then can you and I begin..."

"I told you, I'm not doing it!"

"You will do it, and this is why. When I entered your mind, you put up absolutely no defense. The only difficulty I encountered was the disorganized chaos that evidently is the natural state of the prodigious Granger brain. But even that provided little problem because I knew enough of what I was looking for to find it quickly." He cocked his head in enquiry. "The question is, are you this open to everyone? Or is it this, forgive me, somewhat insane notion of trust you have regarding me that makes your mind an open book as far as I'm concerned?"

"I... I don't know."

"Which is why you need a session with Albus. We must know. We must find out. And if you're resistant to the idea of Albus digging about in your brain, that's all the better. I want you to fight him because I need to know if you *can*. Do you understand me?"

She nodded reluctantly, and he found himself reaching out to lift her chin with his forefinger. "Spies. Remember?"

That brought a rueful smile.

"I had thought to tell him that certain areas of thought were off limits, but I regret to tell you that I've had to change my mind. The Dark Lord is interested in you. At this point you haven't become important to him, but he's certainly curious. You have to be prepared for that curiosity, however it manifests itself."

"You think he's going to want to meet me? To read my memories?"

He stroked her cheek and attempted to soothe her. "I don't know for sure. But we'll be prepared, won't we?"

She nodded slowly, closing her eyes and inhaling, and he realized she was inhaling the scent of his hand. He held his hand still, watching the subtle changes on her face as she angled it a little closer, inhaled a little deeper.

"And perhaps the first step to finding out what he wants is for you," he finally forced himself to say, "is to open Narcissa Malfoy's missive."

She jerked her eyes open at that.

"The green scroll. Her parchment and her scent."

Miss Granger picked it up from beside her on the bed and lifted it to her nose to sniff. "Oh ... that's rather lovely."

"Exactly. Now watch this." He took it and performed a simple charm.

"You vanished the scent."

"As you would be advised to do any time you get scented communications, especially from Narcissa Malfoy." He prodded her. "Now, open it. Let's see what maliciousness she's up to."

"She's invited me to tea."

"When?"

"At my convenience. How about when bloody hell freezes over?"

"How about ... Thursday? Would that fit your schedule? I'll be available then to go with you."

"She didn't invite you."

"But when you write and accept, you will tell her how eager I am to introduce you, how grateful I am that oh, hell, just accept for Thursday, and I'll write as well to inform her that I'll be with you. And yes, we will go together. Of course she'll still find a way to separate us and get you alone, but..."

"I think I'd rather talk about *my* friends now," she muttered.

"I'm sure. But let me finish. Assuming that Thursday will be acceptable, that leaves you between now and then to put together a Muggle ensemble appropriate for tea with your Queen. I want you in something tasteful and absolutely not revealing. It's imperative that it be Muggle because I want to emphasize those aspects of your background that will be deemed unacceptable by the Dark Lord's minions. Yet I want you to be impeccably dressed and to exhibit behaviour as equally decorous, no matter what is said to you or about you, or Muggle-borns in general or Mudbloods in particular."

She nodded. "I can do that."

"Indeed? Allow me a moment to bring my skepticism under control."

"Bite my arse."

"Ah, there's my girl."

"Hmmpf."

"Now ... I debate with myself over whether you should know this or not..."

Her eyes met his with sudden alertness.

"I think it's most likely that the Dark Lord will be present at tea."

She dropped her quill and the ink splattered. Neither of them moved to clean the mess.

"You won't see him. They, of course, assume you have no idea that I might still be a Death Eater or in touch with the Dark Lord, so he won't be in the open. But he will want to see you. In fact, if not for that, I doubt you'd have this invitation. Most likely he'll be watching through charmed mirrors."

Her fear was palpable. He could taste it in the air. He left his chair to kneel beside her and kissed her gently on the lips. "He won't hurt you. For now, he's only curious. That's why it's so important that we play this well, so he won't have reason to want to know more."

She nodded, her eyes on his lips.

Good.

Let her ponder the kisses, the unexpected yet kind words they'd exchanged. Let her have something to distract her from what was ahead.

"Now," he said with one last stroke of her cheek. "What is in the other letter?"

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Hermione opened the letter with a calmness that she didn't feel. The words, however, caught her by surprise.

*My little poppet...*

*How could I deny you anything? My cellar is yours; by all means come and raid it. I'll tell Daniels to prepare a case for you. I miss you, my sweet. I'm sorry if I didn't greet your news with the proper amount of happiness. Please accept that I'm a foolish man who lost his baby girl without grace, but doesn't want to lose her for good.*

*Consider yourself hugged...*

The word, "Father," blurred before her as her eyes blinked away tears. She sniffed and fought down the emotion and instead turned a brilliant smile on Professor Snape.

"How would you like to participate in a raid on one of the finest wine cellars in the South of England?" She tossed him the note.

He read it with one brow arched. "Other than the fact that I don't see my name included on this 'invitation,' I could grow quite accustomed to such a connection. Miss Granger, you have hidden resources beyond my wildest dreams."

This time, she was the one to smirk.

~~~~~

A/N: I used "simply" as a verb when Hermione referred to their honeymoon as being a few hours where they just "simplified." I hope that doesn't annoy you. It felt right to me and I went with it.

No grammarians were injured in the writing of this chapter, though some may have suffered self-inflicted injuries when they read it!

Don't Look

Chapter 19 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Lest I forget I continue to worship at the altar of Jo Rowling, whose generous spirit allows us to play in her playground, as long as we don't attempt to make money off the process. Thank you, St. Jo!

And my heart-felt thanks to my brilliant beta, Leigh-Anne, who always has the right words (and often the right title) for me. This is one of her titles, and it's perfect.

19. DON'T LOOK

CRACK!

Dobby appeared so suddenly that Hermione feared Professor Snape might hex him.

Not that the house-elf would have seen it coming since he had his eyes squeezed shut, even though he balanced a tray with a huge Brown Betty and two fat mugs, along with milk, sugar and assorted biscuits.

"Dobby! Thank you!" She cleared the small table between her and Professor Snape with a wave of her wand.

The house-elf broke into a broad grin. "You is welcome!"

"Open your eyes, Dobby, or you'll spill it."

The house-elf carefully put the tray on the table and beamed, then clamped his eyes shut again. "I is not seeing anything," he announced solemnly.

Professor Snape's nose twitched and Hermione kept her features placid.

"That smells like your tea," he said suspiciously.

"It is. Shall I be mother?" She poured his cup.

"You mean you refused to allow me to brew it, but you allow a..."

"Dobby, thank you so much!" she dismissed the house-elf and watched with satisfaction as he disappeared with the usual *CRACK!* "You were saying?" she asked politely.

"Explain yourself."

His good mood was definitely gone.

"I gave Dobby a supply of PG Tips for your use only. You will be served your own special tea at the High Table, or here or in your office or classroom...anywhere you ask for tea. However, nobody else will get it."

"That still doesn't explain..."

"I hope you realize it won't be the same as what I prepare because it will be prepared with magic, of course. But it's still light-years ahead of what they usually serve in the kitchens."

"Miss Granger..." His voice was close to a growl.

"And, no, I'm not going to tell you how to prepare it Muggle-style. As I said before, I insist on having something I can do better than you, even if it is only prepare tea." She handed him his properly prepared and stirred cuppa and then set to preparing her own. "I hope it's not too disappointing."

He drank it suspiciously. "Sub-standard," he announced.

She tasted it and found it quite good.

"But better than the kitchen's usual brew," he admitted grudgingly.

"Thank you." She smirked without shame.

He glowered at her. "Thank *you*."

And for a brief time, they simply shared the intimate joy of a good cup of tea.

She finally spoke up, a little too forcefully, but it was by being forceful that she managed to not shrink in embarrassment. "Excuse me, I need to take care of some things in the loo."

"By all means," he muttered, ignoring her to pour yet a third cup of tea.

She entered to be faced with the horrible tub of red.

Had he been in there? She couldn't recall. She felt herself blushing.

She *Evanescoded* the water, cast a *Stasis* on the damp fabric to keep it from draining everywhere, and floated it to the corner until she could come up with a better way to handle it.

She set the tub to cleaning itself and went to stick her head out the door...

He was about to enter.

"Oh!" Her heart leapt, startled.

He seemed just as caught off guard, though surely he knew she was still in there.

He placed a firm thumb on her upper lip and pulled up. "Loosen up, let me look."

"What are you doing?" She jerked away from his touch. "I'm not a horse and you're not purchasing me."

"I think a little Blood Replenishing Potion might be in order."

"I've never had to take such a thing..."

"Your gums are pale." He handed her the vial, which she tossed back (while giving him a good Snape-ish scowl) and then wheezed and choked (while receiving a smug Snape-ish smirk).

"If you don't mind," she said, unable to look him square in the eye, "I think I'm going to take another hot bath."

"I think that's an excellent idea." His voice was a soft chocolate rumble in his chest, and she could no more stop her eyes from flying up to meet his unfathomable depths than she could stop her heart from beating.

"And then..." she said breathlessly, somehow feeling the need to keep talking, "I have Arithmancy homework...."

Which she suddenly realized she could be quite easily convinced to ditch.

And she suddenly wished she hadn't brought it up at all.

Especially when she saw the change ripple through him.

A change she could not describe but could practically taste in the air between them.

"I need to make rounds, and then--we should dine with the others tonight before Dumbledore decides to invade."

And then, he was gone in his usual billow, and she was left with an empty, gleaming white tub and an empty ache in her lower abdomen that hadn't been there before.

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Fucking hell.

Homework.

If that didn't define everything that was wrong in his life...

No, not everything.

Just what was beginning to feel like the most important thing.

Which in itself was ridiculous.

Almost as ridiculous as the fact that he'd followed her into the bathroom to offer to wash her back.

Her slender back with a delicate line of vertebrae that he remembered in clear detail, a back with water streaming down it as she hunched over, quivering, on that occasion when she'd attempted to defoliate herself from top to bottom. A back that he could imagine stroking while it was soap-slick, sliding his hands beneath the surface of the water to delve...

He stifled a growl.

He'd never washed a woman's back in his fucking life, and thank Merlin *his wife* had *homework* or he'd be doing it now, and nothing good could come from such an activity, of that he was sure.

Wife.

Homework!

Fucking hell.

What had happened to the bit of bliss he'd reveled in for all too short a time?

Oh, that was all too easy to answer.

She could make him laugh.

She could *not* change the fact that they were unsuitably matched and in a totally unsuitable situation.

He decided it was a good time to flush out the idiots from the Astronomy Tower.

Fuck that.

It was time for a chat with Albus.

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Hermione sat demurely at the High Table in her jeans and jumper, her hair an ever-worsening mare's nest because she kept forgetting to deal with it, and besides, Professor Snape only had one mirror in his quarters, so she didn't actually have to think about how she looked all that often.

Which probably explained a lot about how *he* looked, too, she thought, watching him hide behind a hank of hair as he drank deeply from his goblet.

She played with the shepherd's pie, letting it drop from her spoon into the bowl, over and over again. She didn't want to be here, was quite tired of eating with everyone watching. Why did Professor Dumbledore care whether they came out of their quarters, anyway? What made it his business?

She felt quite put out about the whole thing. They had been having such a nice "simply" time and now it was over.

Madam Hooch was regaling Professor Snape with some Quidditch story; he seemed totally disinterested but that didn't stop Madam Hooch. And besides, he also seemed totally disinterested in Hermione, which, well, *hurt*.

She continued to play with her food.

"Hermione? Professor Snape?"

Good heavens, Colin Creevey, beaming like an idiot, his ubiquitous camera hanging from his neck.

Professor Snape gave him a full-wattage glare. "If you place any value on that thing, you will not even think about aiming your camera in my direction.

"Hi, Colin," Hermione said with forced friendliness, hoping to defuse the atmosphere just a tad.

Colin, of course, was oblivious. He grinned at the two of them. "I wanted to give you something, you know, for your wedding. I went through all my pictures all of them back to my first year...and finally found one." He presented the magical photo which even at first glimpse, Hermione recognized from her fourth-year Yule Ball by the swirl of blue that had been her gown.

She took it eagerly and leaned forward and...her breath escaped in a soft sigh. "Look," she said to Professor Snape. "We're both in it!"

She felt rather than saw him lean slightly toward her, toward the picture in her hand, then heard his soft snort.

In the foreground, she and Viktor swirled by, her face radiant, his entranced. It was a "moment," one that stopped her breath.

But, not because of Viktor. In the background a lean figure in black leaned against the wall, not even looking at her. Professor Snape glared off into the distance, and the reality of it struck her as charming and ludicrous at the same time.

"Look," she said again, laughing. "It's perfect, isn't it?"

"In what way do you define perfection, pray tell?" he growled.

"I don't know," she said. "I honestly don't know. But it seems ... I can't explain. It's funny and sweet and very *real*, that the only way he could find a picture of us together is to find a picture of us *not* together." She looked up at him expectantly.

"Well," he agreed, "it's certainly not inappropriate."

"Of course it's not because there was never anything inappropriate, was there?"

He snorted again.

She looked up at Colin who still grinned. "I thought you might like to have it, and wanted you to have it now, before..." He broke off unexpectedly.

"Before?" Hermione asked.

Colin blushed. "I can't explain... yet. But you'll see."

"Thank you." She had no other words, but somehow they must have been heartfelt enough because at that, he blushed, turned away and took off for the Gryffindor table.

When she realized Madam Hooch was holding court again, she smoothed the photograph tenderly and pushed the shepherd's pie out of her way.

It was the only photograph she had of Professor Snape.

They were on their way out of the Great Hall when Professor Dumbledore intercepted them. "Severus," he said with his insane twinkle. "Hermione."

She forced a smile and held back a sigh.

Professor Dumbledore bent at the waist and offered his arm like a gentleman from a different age. "Come with me, Hermione. I believe we have some work to do."

She froze.

She whirled to look at Professor Snape, but he just gave her a languid flick of the fingers. "Go along, it won't take long. "

She felt panic seize her. "I don't want to." She peered into his eyes...desperately. *Please don't make me.*

But he didn't relent.

She rushed to his side and pressed the photograph into his hand. "Don't let anything happen to it," she said, unable to understand the coil of tension tightening around her heart.

He leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "Fight like fucking hell, Miss Granger."

And just like that...in a single instant...the tension was gone.

She felt herself grin, felt herself glow, and felt a surge of energy jolt through her.

"Whatever you say, Professor."

She whirled away from him with a flounce and, ignoring Professor Dumbledore's repeated offer of escort, strode briskly ahead of him to the staircase that would take them to the Seventh Floor.

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Severus watched her priss her way up the staircase, leaving Albus to follow, and had a sudden disturbing awareness that Albus was going to get a very close-hand view of his wife's jean-clad arse twitching its way up seven flights of stairs.

And then would dive into her mind for an easy backstroke through ... everything.

He hoped Albus Dumbledore got trapped and had to stay there. It would serve him bloody well right.

But as Severus took the staircase down to the dungeons, he knew that he hoped no such thing. In fact, every part of him was wanting to dash back after them, stop them, grab her and bring her back down where she belonged.

He gave a disgusted sigh and tried to shove such ridiculous urges out of his mind.

Ten minutes later, he was at the stone gargoyle on the Seventh Floor, discovering that the password didn't seem to work.

Fifteen minutes later, he was pacing, realizing that the old bastard had blocked entry.

Thirty minutes later, he was barely able to contain his rage. What the fuck was Albus doing? Thirty fucking minutes?

Forty-seven minutes later, the gargoyle leapt aside and the wall split open revealing the spiral staircase.

He was already halfway up when he heard the Headmaster's voice call out sharply, "Hospital Wing!" and he burst into the office to see the last of the green flames as the floor fires died down.

The office was empty.

Hospital wing?

He dove in after them.

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And burst from the fire to find Albus awaiting him, arms outstretched to stop him from flying to the bed where she lay, white and still and lost in the wild tangle of hair that, spread across the pillow, seemed bigger than she was.

Severus reached to fling Albus out of his way, but the old wizard drew upon all his power to stop him.

"What did you do to her?" he snarled, the words torn from him in a burst of anger and fear.

"She's fine, Severus, she's fine. She just exhausted herself..."

But the expression in Albus's eyes belied the false reassurance of his words.

Poppy stood over her, casting diagnostic spells, and Severus realized in an instant what she was looking for.

Even Albus didn't have enough power to withstand him as he flung the old man aside and, in turn, shoved Poppy aside, as well.

Dark magic? They thought there was something Dark happening to her?

His terror knew no bounds.

He whipped out his own wand and began casting the spells himself. As if Poppy's skills held a candle to his when it came to the Dark magic.

He heard their voices but ignored them. Heard Albus tell him that she'd blocked him totally and completely. Heard Poppy say that she'd exhausted herself magically in the effort. Heard them both trying to get him away from her, and finally sensed them watching his every move as he pushed on relentlessly, casting each diagnostic, leaning close to her skin to inhale, to look for the telltale glimmers of black, to look for any residue at all of Dark magic.

Could it have really happened? Could she have been spelled without him even noticing? Had he been that fucking blind?

Finally, relief coursed through him, even though it did little to ease the tension that tightened him to the breaking point. "There's none," he said in a hoarse whisper. "She's clean. There's nothing Dark here."

He forced his head up, forced his eyes away her face, from the purple smudges under her eyes, from her pale lips.

He looked up at them and repeated, "She's clean."

And it wasn't until that moment that he realized what they'd been looking for.

His Dark magic.

They thought *he'd* done something to her.

"I'm glad," Albus said quietly, "but that still leaves us with a question that has to be answered."

Severus could only stare at him, his heart not recovered from the blow of suspicion.

"What are you not telling me? Why would she do this?" Albus waved at her body. "What is she hiding, Severus?"

"Why was she willing to die to protect you?"

"*Die?*" The word rocketed through him. "What did you fucking do to her?"

"It seems we've found yet another area of unexpected expertise in Miss Granger," Albus replied. "She not only blocked me...she blocked me down to the third level, before..."

"The third level? Were you *trying* to kill her?" It took everything in him not to aim his wand, not to cast an Unforgivable. His voice trembling with rage, he scooped her into his arms.

"No, Severus," Poppy begged. "You need to leave her here so that I can care for her."

But he ignored Poppy, the force of his rage still aimed at Albus, his mentor and father-figure and friend.

"And if I'd done this to Potter, you would have trussed me up and turned me over to the Aurors," he sneered. "Don't come near her. Don't come near my wife."

He went to the fireplace. "Open the floo to my quarters," he snarled.

"Severus, she needs..." Poppy began.

But the fire flared green and he stepped into it and barked out the destination, and it wasn't until he stepped into his own quarters and realized his legs wouldn't support him...them...anymore that he realized her eyes were open.

Her eyes, glittering and glassy and, how had he not noticed before? The reddish-brown color of hot sweet tea the moment before the milk hit it.

And she opened her mouth and tried to speak, and he shook his head and pressed his cheek against hers and inhaled the sweetness, the gentleness, and the unexpected strength.

And she tried again, tried to speak, and this time, he heard her words and saw her lips form a smile. "I fought... I fought like fucking hell."

"Language, Miss Granger," he growled into her ear as he clutched her to him, his eyes squeezed closed.

She sighed into his neck, and he pulled back to look, to examine, to reassure himself.

Her proud smile faded and she gave herself up to sleep.

It was much longer before the tremors stopped quaking through his body and longer still until he was able to stand and carry her to the bed.

And longer still before he was willing to let go.

Awakening

Chapter 20 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

A short chapter because there was nothing more to say.

20. AWAKENING

The first time she awoke, she felt ... embraced. It was difficult to think of it in any other terms. The lean, strong arms wrapped around her, not just holding, but in what could only be described as an embrace.

She stirred and moaned as the talon-sharp pain dug into her eyes.

His deep, gentle crooning in her ear eased the tension from her neck, her shoulders, her spine... She felt the tension between her eyes melt away.

She sank back into his arms and slept again.

The next time she awoke, he wasn't with her, but she sensed him, smelled him, tasted him in the very air. She rolled her head, seeking, and found his hands, his long fingers, the dark blue, glass vial he held to her lips, his fingers soothing her temples as she swallowed and choked and coughed ...

And slept again.

The next time she awoke, she knew immediately that he wasn't there. She jerked awake to see goggle-eyes widen in alarm and then disappear with a *CRACK*.

Fear, and worse, emptiness, filled her. She tried to sit up, but was too weak. Tried to roll out of bed, but couldn't.

The fireplace flamed green and he was with her again.

Soothing.

Crooning.

Touching.

She felt him wipe away her tears.

This time, she turned away from the vial.

She refused to sleep again. She wouldn't. Not if he would be gone when she woke up.

But it did no good.

She couldn't refuse him when his lips were whispering into her ear, his fingers stroking through her hair, and his eyes ... Oh, god, his eyes, she could drown in his eyes.

She opened her mouth and swallowed his potion.

She could refuse him nothing.

XX

Double Potions.

Slytherin and Gryffindor.

Could hell be worse than this?

He paced the aisle and hovered without really watching, relying on the mere bulk of his presence to keep everyone alert and afraid.

His own attention was elsewhere.

Most immediately, listening for the *CRACK* in his office to indicate Dobby's presence.

Most importantly, with the sleeping feminine form in his bed.

Draco finally interrupted his pacing with a disturbed, "Professor...?"

He looked around at the cleared tables, the bottled samples on his desk awaiting his grading. The faces staring at him (most expectant, two suspicious and accusing) waited to be dismissed.

Had the bell rung?

Evidently.

He dismissed them and was halfway through the door to his office when Potter blocked his way.

"Did 'class dismissed' not penetrate your thick skull?" he hissed.

"What's wrong with Hermione?"

How the fuck did he know about Hermione?

"She was supposed to meet with us after breakfast, and she wasn't there. What's happened to her?" the Insolent Sod Who Lived demanded.

"I'm sorry if the many demands on Madam Snape's attentions caused her to miss your little soiree, Potter, but—"

CRACK!

"I'll tell her you were concerned," he spat and took off for his office.

He slammed and warded the door behind him and crossed to the fireplace faster than Dobby could speak.

"Her's waking up, Prof—"

He stepped from the flames and into his quarters to find her sitting up in bed, eyes wide, watching for him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, whipping out his wand and holding it near her eyes as he studied her for symptoms.

"Next time I get sick," she groaned, "don't forget to give me your potion."

"I've been pouring potions down your throat all day," he said placidly.

"Not the one that counts. My mouth tastes like dung."

He felt a smile quirking at the corner of his mouth. "Dobby!"

The house-elf appeared immediately with a *CRACK*.

"Tea."

CRACK!

They were alone again.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

She sank against his body, wrapped her arms around him and clung to him, sighing, such a delicate, sweet sigh.

He felt the tension ease out of his neck, his shoulders, his spine.

Felt the tension between his eyes melt away.

Felt the little warrior in his arms curl more closely to his body.

He buried his face in her tangled mare's nest of Hermione-scented hair and felt his sigh come from his very soul.

His.

Revelation

Chapter 21 of 92

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Thanks to JK Rowling for everything.

And many thanks to Southern_Witch_69 for validation efforts way beyond the call of duty in dealing with my buggered commas and such.

21. REVELATION

Dobby returned with tea all too soon, but as its heat coursed through her, she felt immensely better. She nestled in the crook of Professor Snape's shoulder and felt as if she were soaking up strength just from touching him.

"So," he said matter-of-factly. "You would rather die than reveal my Dark secrets."

She sat straight up and stared at him. "Die?"

"So I'm told."

"What secrets?"

"That's what I'd like to know." He sipped his tea and studied her placidly.

"*Die?*" That one was a little difficult to wrap her mind around.

"Miss Granger, it seems you put up such a phenomenal defense against Albus's attempts at *Legilimency*, he determined that you or rather, I have something to hide. Something Dark being the odds-on favorite kind of secret when it comes to me, I fear."

"But ... DIE?"

"Either Albus was being theatrical, which is not beyond the realm of believability, or ... what happened? What do you remember?"

She realized her hands were trembling when the rattle of teacup against saucer broke through her confusion. She hastily set it down on the tray levitating before them.

"We ... we entered his office. He offered me a sherbet lemon."

"Of course."

"I said, 'No thank you.' Politely. And ... " She strained to remember. "He smiled and said, '*Legilimens*,' and I said, 'No thank you.' Politely."

Professor Snape bit back a laugh. "And then?"

"Nothing. I was very polite because after all, he is Headmaster, but he kept repeating, '*Legilimens*,' and I kept refusing because that was the point, wasn't it? And then --"

"Wait. He didn't get in?"

"No, not then," she said with a small shrug. "But then..."

"Miss Granger." He sat bolt upright in bed beside her. "Are you saying that when Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard on the planet, cast *Legilimens*, you blocked him by simply saying, 'No, thank you?' "

"Well, I don't think he was trying very hard because after that, he got in."

Professor Snape stared at her, and if she didn't know him fairly well, she would think he was rather astounded. "He was trying, Miss Granger. Believe me, he was trying." He narrowed his eyes. "What did you feel?"

"Nothing. He seemed to be feeling something, though. He grew quite red in the face, and once he looked at his wand and shook it ... Oh, and then he asked me if you'd given me a potion, and I said, 'Yes, a breath-freshener,' which I really wish I hadn't mentioned because it sounds like you were questioning my hygiene, doesn't it?"

Snape exploded in a short burst of laughter.

Laughter.

At which point, he grabbed her and kissed her flat on the mouth. A short, hard, triumphant kiss that ended too quickly and left her leaning forward for more, blinking up at him in disappointment.

"And then?" he demanded.

She struggled to remember more. "Oh, and then oh." Suddenly, she felt a cold shaking start in her stomach. She remembered, and she didn't want to.

She shook her head to clear it. "He got in, and I was very upset, and so I just started throwing up hexes and curses at him internally, of course. I'd never do that to him physically..."

"I'm sure." He smirked.

"But I didn't know what else to do. And somehow, I felt..." The shaking was getting worse. She clutched her hands in her lap and closed her eyes and heard her voice shaking no matter how hard she tried to sound strong. "It felt wrong. He was kind, but he couldn't really be, could he? He was trying to know things about me, and all I could remember was you telling me, 'Fight him, fight like hell, fight like fucking hell' and it just felt vital that I keep him out, and somehow it began to feel like I was keeping Voldemort out because if I couldn't keep the Headmaster out, and I knew he meant no harm, how could I keep Voldemort out and and "

"Miss Granger..." His voice was so gentle, so calm.

She turned to him in desperation.

"What were you afraid he'd see?"

"Something that would hurt you."

"Something...? No particular thing?"

She shook her head and tears spilled onto her hands, wet and hot. "You told me to fight, and I knew I had to, so I did."

She felt rough fabric against her cheeks and opened her eyes. He was wiping her tears with a corner of those awful sheets.

"Miss Granger, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Your magic is almost traumatically depleted because of your desire to protect me, and the fact that you did it...brilliantly, I might add...leaves me breathless. The fact that you stumped Albus makes me want to buy you diamonds. Don't get any ideas about that, however," he warned her with a glare. "But the fact that I led you like a lamb to slaughter without preparing you adequately..." He broke off and shook his head. "Did it ever occur to you to eject him?"

"I can do that?"

"Yes, absolutely, if anybody could, you could have tossed him out on his arse, figuratively, and I'm not discounting literally." He dug his fingers into her hair and hauled her in, pulling her against him and soothing her, and she felt his heart pounding against her. "And I didn't show you how. I never dreamed you'd be able to... I didn't think. I fucking didn't think."

"But...about the *dying* part?"

He lifted her teacup, warmed it with a flick of his fingers, and held it to her lips. "Drink."

She did.

"Albus had no fucking business pushing in that hard, just because you'd blocked him so easily. He almost depleted your magical stores, which is why you'll not be doing any magical application for two more days, at least."

"But...but my potions!"

"Will wait."

"No!" Her frustration welled up in her and threatened to spill over in tears, which she would not do, *would not do*. "Not my potions. You're the only one who has given me real work..."

"And you're not getting near a cauldron until Wednesday, at least. But we have plenty to do between now and then," he added, chucking her under the chin like she was a child, but the expression in his eyes was concerned. Guilty, even.

"What?" She let the word hang there, demanding response.

"I need to see what Albus did."

"You mean..." She looked into his black eyes and understood. She sank back against him and relaxed and allowed her eyes to go languid.

His entry was so gentle that she hardly felt it at all. Suddenly, he was simply there. This time, she didn't rocket along with him, seeing everything he saw. This time, her mind filled with his eyes, his black, black eyes, and she could have floated there forever, his arms around her, his mind in hers, his eyes holding her steady.

Except she felt a tightening in her jaws and throat, and felt a quiver of sick rise in her, and half-fell from the bed in her attempt to get to the bathroom.

She made it, barely.

Fighting to hold her hair out of her face, she lost everything that had been in her stomach as spasm after spasm rocked through her.

She only vaguely became aware of the strong arms supporting her, of the cool rag on the back of her neck, and when her body had exhausted itself in an effort to purge, she was only weakly able to accept the sips of water and then spit them out into the toilet.

And thus, she found herself tucked back into the bed like a child, swallowing more potions.

She wondered if he knew what she needed and how badly she needed it.... He must because he gave it to her without question, lying beside her, his fingers tangled into her hair, his eyes open for her to float in... until she finally drifted back into sleep.

XX

While classes on Tuesday had been less traumatic, he was hardly less distracted. Despite the potions he'd poured down her, he'd not wanted her to return to her regular class schedule, and so she was propped up in bed and surrounded by books and parchments and quills.

He'd popped in once to check on her and found her dozing, a quill in one hand and the other splayed across a book.

He'd wanted to cast everything to the floor and climb in beside her and take her...slowly and deliberately and thoroughly...starting while she slept and watching her slowly awaken to his touch.

At what point would she waken? At his first touch, when he brushed her hair away from her face? Or would he get farther? Would his lips trace her cheekbone, tease her ear, capture her mouth, before she realized she wasn't dreaming? Would he smooth his hands up her legs, her thighs, and higher, to finally pull her out of slumber?

It took him a moment to realize with a guilty start that what he was really wondering about was the strength of the potion he'd given her to relax.

Oh, there's a fucking romantic thought, Severus, he told himself. *Drug her into a stupor and then have your way with her.*

He'd left her with her books and forced himself to be satisfied by removing the quill and book from her hands, and adjusting her pillow.

And deducted ten points from Ravenclaw upon his return to class for no reason whatsoever.

But when the last class was finished, he returned to her with a mission.

"You've got more post," he announced, startling her awake. "I can tell you what it says."

"You perform *Legilimency* on the post, now, or you read my mail?" she complained.

"Neither. No sooner did a house-elf bring it, than Hagrid showed up at my classroom to ask if you were coming." At her questioning glance he added, "He has invited you to tea today."

"I don't want anybody else's tea. I want tea here. With you."

"Stop pouting. You need some fresh air. Poppy refuses to believe it, but I know from experience that it will replenish your magical stores if you get out, as long as you don't overdo it."

XX

Not overdoing it was problematical.

They stopped the first time on the front steps of Hogwarts, and Professor Snape lifted her onto a pedestal to lean against a sculpture of Helga Hufflepuff and catch her breath. Since afternoon classes were still in session, there was no one around to stare at them for a change.

The second time they stopped outside the first greenhouse. Hermione sat grudgingly on a garden bench, frustrated that she was so weak. Professor Snape leaned against a tree and scowled across the park at the Forbidden Forest, evidently just on principle.

By the time they actually approached Hagrid's hut, she regretted ever agreeing to the outing.

But Hagrid saw them coming and flung his door open wide with a huge grin. "Hermione!" Then as an afterthought, but with a smile just as genuine, "Professor Snape!"

He showed them in and Hermione dropped to the floor to welcome Fang. She'd devised a charm in second year to stop him from drooling when near her and now found the beast quite easy to like.

Professor Snape sat down at the table and looked at her askance. "Do you always wallow on the floor with the hound?"

"Always," she grinned, rubbing Fang between the ears.

The old dog rolled over and farted.

She burst into laughter, peals of laughter, and realized suddenly that had Ron and Harry been there, they'd all be laughing together.

Professor Snape merely rolled his eyes, although the corner of his mouth might have been tilted in the tiniest of smirks.

And of course, Hagrid took it in stride as if nothing had happened. He was long accustomed to Fang's gastrointestinal issues.

Hermione leapt from the floor and cast an Air-Clearing Charm before taking her place at Hagrid's table.

Hagrid brought a tray of mugs to the table and distributed the tea. He remembered, of course, how Hermione liked hers, and surprisingly knew how the professor liked his, as well. Did Professor Snape come to tea often? That was a rather odd thought.

Hermione was about to decline one of the rock-hard cakes when she saw Professor Snape bite into his and moist crumbs fall onto his robes. She cocked her head, surprised. He took a cake and placed it on her plate and when she touched it, she felt the shimmer of his magic.

Why hadn't she ever thought of that?

A sleep lassitude eased through her, but she fought it and instead focused on tea and cake while Hagrid discussed the need for a healing potion for Fluffy.

That suddenly soaked in. "Fluffy? I thought he was gone?"

"He's been in the Forbidden Forest since, well, your first year, warn't it?" Hagrid mused. "But 'e's been a bit peaked lately and I thought, well..."

"I'll see what I can find for you," Professor Snape said dismissively, his eyes on Hermione. "Hermione has been a bit under the weather," he remarked, "and we should start back now, if you don't mind."

Hagrid grew flustered. "Not yet, I hadn' given you wait," he stammered.

He lumbered across the hut to the table beside his huge easy chair and picked up a piece of paper. "It were my idea, and I talked to Professor Dumbledore, and he said it were a'right for Colin Creevey to go back and..."

"What was all right?" Hermione was lost, and it didn't seem as if things were going to get any clearer.

"He used a Time-Turner," Hagrid said, for all the world, blushing. "I reco'nized that nobody else noticed nobody saw but it were your wedding, weren't it? And you should have something to remember it by, now shouldn't you?"

He held out his hand, and it took a moment for Hermione to realize that the piece of paper was actually a photograph.

A magical photograph.

She took it from his hand

It was a picture of their wedding.

Not just the wedding.

The kiss.

"I 'ad 'im slow it down, cause it all happened so fast, but I saw it, y'see, and ... it were beautiful, wadn it?"

First, the backs of their heads. Her hair was a tousled nest of brown, not even combed, and his was long and black and, well, stringy. She stifled a bit of laughter, but then their heads turned simultaneously, oh so slowly....

Her picture-self looked up at him, half-frightened, and seeing that moment frozen before her, she felt the lurch in her stomach.

He looked at her, eyes narrowed, considering.

They both seemed to retreat behind closed eyes as they leaned together and their lips brushed.

And both sets of eyes flew open with lips joined, hers filled with wonder, his startled.

As they pulled slowly apart, their eyes continued what their lips had ended all too quickly.

And magical bonds of silver wove through the air around them.

Hermione watched, her hand clutched in the folds of her robe over her heart and felt the air slow in her lungs, the blood in her veins slow to honey.

And it ended.

And started over again.

She watched it repeat, and watched it the third time, unable to tear her eyes away.

"Hagrid... it's beautiful."

"I know," the half-giant said softly. "I know."

She finally held it out to Professor Snape. She knew better than to expect him to reveal anything more than a casual interest. No flicker of emotion showed on his face.

But she noticed.

He watched the kiss three times, too.

She refrained from snuggling up next to him to watch it again.

Just barely.

"I had Colin make copies. I figgered you'd have friends and those as couldn' be there you might want to give 'em to," Hagrid continued.

Hermione saw the small stack of photos he held out to her and hesitated. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, but who would she give them to, other than her mother and father?

And would they see what she saw, or would they see a disheveled daughter and a surly man twice her age performing a ridiculous sham of a marriage...

"Thank you, Hagrid." Professor Snape took the top photographs off the stack, leaving only one behind.

"I know there was others you'd rather have had there," Hagrid began.

"No." Hermione heard the ferocity of her voice and didn't bother to temper it. "I chose you. I chose you. And if I had it to do over, it would be the same."

"Aw, gee..." Hagrid pulled his tablecloth-sized handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. Loudly.

Hermione kissed him on the cheek.

The trip back to the castle didn't take nearly as long as the trip to the hut. All too quickly, the castle entrance loomed before them, and she knew at a glance, which three figures waited for them under the Hufflepuff statue.

"Fuck," came from beside her.

"Language, Professor," she responded with a smirk she didn't feel. What did they want now?

"Hermione!" Ginny was the first to speak. "Where have you *been*?"

"Yeah," Ron added, "you didn't show up to that meeting you arranged and nobody's seen you in class and..."

Harry stared at her in silence. His eyes took in everything. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded. And then, his hand tense on his wand, he shifted his attention to Professor Snape. "What are you doing to her? So help me, if you're hurting her, I'll--"

And before she knew what was happening, Hermione felt the rage boil in her that anybody should dare accuse Professor Snape of hurting her and she raised her hand and flung a pointed finger at the Boy Who Lived.

And marveled at the stream of red that flowed from her fingertip to Harry and hit him square in the throat. And she took a step forward to do it again...

"Grab her, Weasley!"

She felt rather than saw Ron grab her from behind and tackle her to the ground as Professor Snape flew to Harry's side.

"Let go of me," she growled. "Let me go!"

Professor Snape was bent over Harry's frozen body. "Miss Weasley," he ordered. "A warming charm. *Now!*" He lowered his ear to Harry's chest and breathed a deep sigh of relief, raised his wand and whispered a soft incantation as Ginny, pale and wide-eyed, cast a warming charm over Harry's body.

Hermione twisted in Ron's arms, horrified at what she'd done, but equally horrified at being pinned down against her will.

She wrenched herself away from him and took off across the grass to Professor Snape, but he shouted, "Weasley, hold her, goddamnit!" And then his eyes locked onto hers. He plumbed and saw and said more softly, "Calm her down. Make her feel safe."

Safe? With Ron? When Professor Snape was there...*right there*...and she needed him?

And then Ron had her again, but this time his hands were soft on her arms. "It's all right, Hermione. It's okay. Everything is going to be okay." And she didn't fight him because she was watching Professor Snape, waiting for him to look at her again.

To forgive her. Because this was bad. This was really, really bad.

With a flick of his wand, Ron retrieved the photographs that Professor Snape had let fly when he'd gone to help Harry.

Harry.

She'd hurt Harry.

What was wrong with her?

"I didn't mean to..."

Ron held the photo where they both could see it. And then, softly, "Hermione. Your wedding..."

She glared, tried to pull away, but he held her and stared down at the photograph. "You're so beautiful..."

She yanked the pictures from his fingers and watched the kiss happen over and over again until she finally realized the rage had eased out of her.

Ron had released her, but still sat near as he stared from the photograph to her face. "You mean, you really...you really love him?"

Again, emotion surged in her. Only this time it was words that poured out. "How can you be such a prat? How can you be so *thick*?" Her words burst from her with as little control and as much force as the hex from her fingertips, and she heard herself saying...

"Of course I do!"

And as soon as the words escaped, she burst into tears and found herself buried in Ron Weasley's arms.

Many thanks to slasher454 for this. Words can't express how amazed and touched I am, nor can words describe its beauty!



Brewing

Chapter 22 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

As always, my thanks and adoration to JKR for everything you recognize.

And as always, my undying gratitude to Leigh-Anne for knowing just what to say and exactly when I need to hear it.

22. BREWING

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley. I told you to take care of her, not reduce her to tears," Snape snapped, watching his young wife fling herself into the idiot's arms.

Oh, he'd heard what was said, every fucking word, and noted that she wasn't without her feminine wiles when it came to manipulation. Evidently, she had manipulation of the Weasley brat down to a very fine art indeed. But he'd think about that and deal with it later. Now, there were more dangerous things to handle.

He rose to his feet alongside Potter, who was still shaky, but well on his way to recovery.

"Continue," he instructed Miss Weasley. She followed beside Potter, keeping him warmed with a delicate bit of wandwork. "Ten points to Gryffindor," he snapped softly, not certain whether she heard, and caring even less.

After a moment's consideration...in which he gnashed his teeth at the necessity...he led them away from the main entrance and to a small side door generally warded from view, much less entry, by students.

"Forget you've been here," he snarled as they entered. "Because you won't see this door again."

Minutes later, he had them in the Potions classroom with the door shut, silenced and warded.

"Here," he said silkily, "is where it gets interesting."

Ginevra sat by Potter, sending scathing looks toward Hermione.

Ron sat near Hermione, looking baffled but, for once in his life, almost capable. He seemed ready to spring into action whether she erupted with more hexes or more tears.

Hermione stared at the floor.

"Mr Potter. You have the right to file a formal complaint against..."

"Fuck off," Potter sneered, startling Ginevra.

"Watch it, Harry," Ron hurried, casting a nervous glance at Hermione.

Hermione continued to stare at the floor.

"Am I to take it that you will not be filing a complaint?"

"Of course I won't." Potter cast a narrow-eyed gaze in Hermione's direction.

"I'm sorry, Harry" she whispered, but her eyes never left the floor.

"Which is only half the problem. We may still have to deal with the fallout if anyone else witnessed the... altercation," Severus announced.

"Easy," Ron said. "Harry opened his gob and called you a git, and Hermione hexed him."

Severus blinked. Weasley was actually correct.

"She could have killed him!" Ginevra protested.

"You've hit me with worse." Ron shot back. "It was just a hex."

"With wandless magic," Potter added, casting another glance in Hermione's direction. And then, suddenly, almost eagerly, to Severus, "Did you teach her that?"

"If I had taught her to toss wandless hexes, I can assure you I would have also instructed her on when *not* to toss them, Potter."

Potter snorted.

How elegant.

"And you still haven't told us what's going on with you." This time Potter was talking directly to Miss Granger. "What's going on with you? What happened?"

He stopped short of aiming any more accusations in Snape's direction, but the inference was still apparent.

She raised her eyes and managed to look almost prim as she announced, "I'm having a rather difficult period, if you must know!"

Snape sighed. *Wonderful.*

Ginevra's expression as her eyes darted from Snape to Hermione and back again changed from astonishment to embarrassment. Her cheeks flamed, and then she was ducking, hiding her face, too.

A little late on the uptake, suddenly Ron covered his head with his hands. "Oi! Too much information!"

Only Potter seemed unmoved. "Bullshit. Something's wrong with you, Hermione, and I'm not leaving until I know what it is."

"Why do you care?" she snapped. "When did you start caring..."

"As inspirational as this is," Severus interrupted, unwilling to be party to more emotional outpourings, "I see no benefit in continuing it. Potter, you've recovered, and you have no intention of reporting this incident, and I think it's evident to all that Madam Snape..."

"What kind of shite is that? It's *Hermione*, you git!" Potter snarled. "And I want to know what's going on. Whatever it is, it's magical, not..." At this, he broke off, having reached the limits of his ability to deal with her feminine issues.

"Oh, Harry! Just drop it. Everything is under control."

"Right you are on that," he snapped back at her. "So under control you almost killed me."

"I'm sorry!" And this time, her eyes were pleading. "I'm not myself, okay? I overextended myself."

"Doing *what*?"

"Occlumency, if you must know!"

At which point, Potter raised his eyes to Snape's, and it didn't take Legilimency to read murder in their depths. "You bastard."

"Before you say anything else," Snape hissed, "perhaps I might remind you of what landed us in this little *tete-a-tete*?" He then shot a warning glare at his own dear, sweet wife before she finished the job she'd begun on the castle lawn. "It's a pity you can't borrow some of her ability to block entry to the mind, Potter. But don't look at me. I'm not the one who drained her."

Potter blanched. "Then...then who? Not Volde..."

"Potter!" Snape barked. "Don't say that name in front of me." And then, with more than a small bit of satisfaction, he added, "Ask the *Headmaster*. I'm sure he'll be happy to tell all. "

Before Potter could respond...

"Harry, did you read the book I gave you?"

His glare faded into embarrassment. Now, he was the one staring at his toes. "That's why I'm here. It got confiscated."

"You lost my book?" She jumped to her feet, her wand fisted in her hand.

"Filch took it!" the selfish little prat whined, dragging his fingers through his unruly hair.

"Oh, so this is why you're so upset with me? Because you need me to help you out of a bind? Charming." She tilted her nose into the air. "Severus," she said sweetly, "will you please take care of this? I'm sure you can get my book back for me." She cast one last glance over her shoulder at her "friends." "I have some *personal* needs to attend to."

Even Snape blanched at that one.

The little witch.

Leaving him with the Prats of Gryffindor and her own messes to clean up.

"Professor Snape," Ginevra said crisply, "you're a very bad influence on her."

"Thank you," he responded, equally as crisply. With a flick of his fingers, he un-silenced and unwarded the doors. "One more thing. You *will* keep the details of this little escapade quiet. Especially the wandless magic."

He left without waiting for their responses.

XX

Hermione paced before the fireplace, wringing her hands. Her fingers still tingled, especially the one that had erupted in a hex. She stuck it in her mouth to soothe, and even her tongue tingled. She yanked it out.

What was happening to her?

She had little time to contemplate, however. The force of energy that entered the bedchamber with Professor Snape was more palpable than if a door had slammed open.

She whirled to face him.

His face was white, his features livid. "What the fucking hell was that?"

"I...I don't know!"

He crossed the room to her and grabbed her by the upper arm. "Then figure it out fast. Pull a stunt like that at the Malfoy's..."

"Owl them! Tell them I'm ill and can't make it!"

"We will be there, and you will be under control if I have to put you under an Imperio. Is that clear?"

"You wouldn't dare!" But she knew as soon as she spat the words that oh, yes, he would dare. "I didn't do it on purpose!" she amended hastily, rubbing her hand on her robes.

Abruptly, he released her arm and took her hand in his to examine it.

As soon as his fingertips touched hers, she felt a jolt of something part electrical, part magical. She tried to pull her hand away, but he raised her fingers closer for examination. Maybe he didn't feel it. But if she didn't get to sit down, she was going to collapse from the sensations. She staggered backward, landed on the edge of the bed, gasping.

And still he didn't release her fingertips. He held her hand in one of his while stroking her fingertips with his other hand. Each stroke, each caress, sent another jolt through her. She could hardly breathe. "Please. Stop."

The eyes he raised to hers were as black as she'd ever seen them. Blacker. Narrowed and gleaming. With a sharp tug, he pulled her back to her feet so that she was standing inches away from him.

"Now that I've seen how easily you manipulate Weasley, I feel I must make myself very clear, Miss Granger. Do not play me. Do not cry false tears on my shoulders or think you can plead feminine distress in order to distract me. I won't tolerate it. And I won't tolerate watching you do that to the *boys* you call your friends."

"Is that what you think I was doing?" she gasped.

He yanked her closer. "And what else would you have me believe?" he asked in his most silken tones.

Oh god oh god oh god. The truth was too raw and quivering, and she'd die before she'd blurt it out again.

"I will not be used to taunt them or tease them or do whatever else it was you intended." He slid his hand up the back of her neck, beneath the heavy fall of her hair, and his fingers dug into her scalp with a sensual pressure that caused her to go limp; her head fell back into his hand. "I'm a man, Miss Granger, and a powerful wizard, of this you were well aware when you chose me to rescue you from your fate worse than death," he sneered. "I am not one of your *boys*."

And then, with a movement as violent as it was sensual, he lowered his face to hers and crushed her lips beneath his, and her heart pounded--she wanted to push him away--she wanted to pull him closer and cling to him and feel his hard body pressing into her. When she thought she'd die if he didn't let her breathe, but would surely die if he broke the kiss, he drew away, heaving in air and pushing her against the bed, lowering her to it, and then, hooking a finger into her robe, baring her shoulder to the cold dungeon air, to his hot, dry lips, to the tip of his tongue as it traced the delicate bones from her throat, sending a shiver through her body.

He drew away from her and inhaled deeply, as if searching for a scent on the air, and his black eyes were hooded as he said, "You're a child, Miss Granger. But you've joined a dangerous game, and I'm not going to let your foolishness get us both killed. And..." he nipped the skin at her throat, and she gasped...it hurt..."I'm not going to watch you throw yourself into Ron Weasley's arms to win his comfort and support."

"I *didn't*..."

"And," he overrode her with the force of his dark velvet voice, "I'm not going to listen to you spread romantic lies and fantasies about us to soothe your ego and provide an excuse for the sacrifice you believe you are making."

Romantic lies and fantasies.

If he'd hit her, she couldn't imagine it hurting more. And she only knew one way to make it go away--*please, please, make the pain go away*--and so she slid her fingers through his hair and cupped his head and pulled it to her and forced him to kiss her again, to give her more of his drugging kisses, to chase the pain away and replace it with the dark, sweet comfort she found in his arms. And even as her lips met his, she felt him bracing to pull away, and she rose with him, making him pull her weight with his own, refusing to break the connection between them, the yearning, desperate joining of lips and soul...

And the moment, the very instant, she felt him soften, she traced his lips with her tongue and sought entry, wanting to taste him, to savor him, to take in his darkness and make it hers as well.

He jerked away from her.

She reached between them and found him hard, bulging beneath his trousers, and knew a momentary triumph...

Too brief, because he slapped her hand away.

"Don't," he snarled.

And something in her broke, something angry and aching. "Why not? Because it's not Saturday? Who made that rule? I didn't! It's just a way...a way to control, and what if I don't want to be controlled. What if I don't want to be an appointment on your calendar, 'Fuck Miss Granger,' and nothing more than that? What if I want you now? Am I not your wife? Don't I have any rights?"

He yanked her left hand up between them and held his near it. "I made that rule! I made it to salvage the last little bit that is left of any control I have of my life, my own fucking body. The Ministry uses these rings to monitor, to make sure we're doing our part, you realize that, don't you? Through these bloody rings they know when we fuck, and I have to live knowing that somewhere in some office in the bloody Ministry of Magic somebody is monitoring when Severus Snape fucks his child bride! And worse, that somebody there might notice if he begins to partake of her loveliness a little too often, that he might even exhibit a little bit too much fondness for her flesh, because if that happens...it will come to the Dark Lord's attention, Miss Granger. He will know. And he will know how to hurt me. And he will hurt me by hurting you. And that's why we're not going to fuck today and why we must fuck on Saturday, even though I don't want to give them the satisfaction. Because when I entered into this marriage, I turned my body over to the Ministry to monitor, and I live with that every fucking minute of every fucking day!"

Oh god. And she thought she'd known pain.

He rose, trembling, and turned his back on her.

Something inside her ripped open, and not even tears would fill the need to despair.

Would her indebtedness to him never stop growing?

If she couldn't even give him sex, what was left?

He braced his hands on the mantle and hung his head, fighting for air.

She couldn't touch him.

And so it was she found herself yet again falling back on the finest of English tradition.

With trembling hands and aching heart, she began brewing the only potion at her disposal.

Tea.

Tea

Chapter 23 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Undying gratitude to JK Rowling for everything. Undying gratitude to my beta, Leigh-Anne, for everything else.

Author note: If you want to see the teacups, go to my live journal blog: <http://miamadwyn.livejournal.com/13522.html>

(Remove extra spaces in URL.)

23. TEA

"Wait."

She was halfway to the bathroom with the tea tray following behind. She stopped and turned so quickly, she almost collided with it.

He whisked it aside and approached her and took her hand in his again, scowling.

This time, the reaction was less severe. Even so, she felt tingles of reaction and wanted to pull her hand away.

"It's better, then."

She nodded.

He leaned over her hand and studied her fingertips; his hair brushed her wrist. "When did you realize your magical strength had returned?"

She tried to remember. "It wasn't before we went to Hagrid's. I barely made it there."

"But by the time you returned to Hogwarts, you were flinging hexes from your fingertips." He dropped her hand and focused his attention on her face, still scowling at her. "What happened that restored your strength?"

A thought flickered through her mind. Not that she thought it possibly could explain her magic, but...

"Our photographs. Where are they?"

Professor Snape blinked. "Weasley had them."

Panic clutched at her throat and she forced out the words. "I want them."

He studied her more closely, a tight frown creasing his eyes.

"I want them back *now*." She whirled, ready to go get them herself...but he stopped her with a touch of his hand on her shoulder.

He snatched up a parchment and scratched a few words on it, then sealed it and tossed it into the Floo with a sharp, "Gryffindor Common Room."

And the penny dropped.

"Professor, why did you tell Ron to grab me, to *make me feel safe*..." The words were ludicrous, even more now than when she'd first heard them. "Why, if you're so convinced that I'd...I'd..."

"You were out of control," he snapped. "I couldn't expect the Weasley girl to handle you."

She studied him through narrowed eyes. "You've been in my mind. You know I have no feelings for him, none at all. You knew that."

"So, you think that's all that is of consequence?"

"What else?"

"He has feelings for you, damn it!"

"He doesn't," she said. "Or at least not those kinds of feelings. He only wants me to be happy."

The professor glared at her. "Are you blind?"

She looked at him. Simply *looked* at him. "Are *you*?"

He dragged one trembling hand through his hair and turned away. "I'm going out to wait for Weasley."

"Please. Don't be hard on him."

"Miss Granger, if you knew the irony of that request..." he snapped in disgust.

With a finger flick, he opened the wards and walked into the corridor, leaving her to stare at the wall as it reappeared, separating them.

XX

Fucking hell!

He strode to the Potions classroom, his blood boiling. Had she no sense at all when it came to teenaged wizards? She honestly thought she could cling to the boy that way, sob on his shoulder, and not have him respond?

He shoved away the memories, memories he thought he'd buried.

He rounded the corner in the corridor and saw the flash of red hair.

Weasley was waiting, slumped against the classroom door, the stack of photographs in his hand. He looked up, saw who was coming, and disappointment flashed across his too-easy-to-read features. He stood straighter, his brows lowering.

"Thank you," Snape said, his tones glacial. "I hope I didn't interrupt a scintillating conversation."

Weasley just sighed and held out the photos.

Severus reached for them, but when his fingers closed over them Weasley didn't let go.

"Sir, there are so many extras..." His blue eyes flashed up, and Severus had a mind to dive in, but they flickered away immediately, and his cheeks flushed. "Do you think it would be all right if I kept one?"

He felt his lip twist into a sneer. Felt the ice creep through him. Felt the need to toss off a hex of his own. Instead, he forced one word through his lips, a word that was threat and challenge both. *"Why?"*

Weasley still looked down at the picture, at the kiss that repeated over and over and over.

"I just kind of wanted something to remind myself that she's happy," he said softly.

Not trusting himself to speak, Severus yanked the photos out of his hand. He flipped through them, finding one with a bent corner, and presented it to the boy before he could think better of it.

"Thank you, sir."

As he watched the tousled mop of red hair disappear up the stairs, he already was thinking better of it.

XX

She stood in the bathroom with the Brown Betty in her hands, swirling the boiling water to heat it. The actions of brewing tea were as comforting to her as the drinking of it.

"Tell me about your tea," he said from behind her, and his words went through her like electricity. She had no idea he was back. She hadn't heard him.

"Tell me what makes it different." And then he lifted her hair off her back and twisted it into the now-familiar knot on the back of her head.

Was this his effort at apology? She forced herself to continue as if his presence behind her didn't fill her with a sad ache and deep longing. As if...

"It takes time and patience," she said, struggling for composure. "Every step is important."

She felt him step closer to watch over her shoulder.

"The teapot must be round," she said firmly. "No silly, little, fancy teapots, but good, sturdy, round ones are required. And you must warm it thoroughly...." She raised the teapot in her hands to demonstrate. "To prepare it."

"Of course," he said, as if this were all familiar to him. Which, of course, it probably was to a Potions master.

The teakettle began its soft whistling, the precursor to its all-out shriek. "Will you fetch the water please?" It was with regret that she felt him step away from her as she emptied the hot water from the teapot into the sink.

She spooned the loose tea in, and an extra spoon for the pot, and then set it down in the sink and stepped back as he returned. "There, if you'd just pour in the water...hold it high, yes, like that--and let it splash a little as it hits. But not enough to make a mess or burn yourself."

He arched an eyebrow in question, but did as she said. She followed his eyes as he watched the interior of the teapot, and she knew what he saw, having watched in fascination so many times herself...the burst of motion as the water hit and the swirling, churning tossing of the leaves. She knew what he was so clearly inhaling, the sharp fragrance of tea oils released into the air. She smiled at the expression on his face as he took in a deep draught of scented steam, then she efficiently removed its source as she placed the lid on the teapot.

He cocked his head. "That's it?"

"Difficult because it's so simple. It's easy to take shortcuts because, after all, it's *just tea*. Hot water and a teabag, right? But each little shortcut takes its toll," she said primly. "You need to take the water just before it comes to a boil, and never when it has boiled too long. Boiling releases the oxygen from the water, and without oxygen, the tea tastes flat. That's why you pour the water in the way you do. It gets more oxygen mixed in as it spills down to the pot."

He leaned against the bathroom's stone wall, watching her every move.

She eased the old tea cozy over the pot to hold the heat in. She raised her eyes to his. "And then, when the water hits the tea leaves, they *burst* and release their oils. It's almost... violent, in a way. You want the water to swirl and roil..."

"Hmm," he said thoughtfully, watching her through hooded eyes. "Preparing... bursting... releasing ..."

His voice sent a tremor through her, and she couldn't imagine why.

She swallowed. "And swirling. The round teapot." She picked up the teapot and gently swirled the liquid within. "The leaves don't explode if they don't have room, or if the water isn't hot enough when it hits them. If you use a teabag or, heaven forbid, put it in cold water and then pop it into the microwave..." She shuddered.

He shoved away from the wall and smirked. "And your grandmother the witch taught you this."

"My grandmother was not a witch, and she taught me this." She carried the teapot in and put it on the table by the bed and Summoned the tray. "Of course, I do have an unfair advantage over the kitchens, even if they didn't use magic to brew tea," she said with a half-grin. "This was her teapot, and these are her teacups and her teaspoons. She said she brewed love into her tea because she only brewed tea for the people she loved. Anyone else got tea from the kitch...the cook."

What had she just *said*?

She forced herself to continue blithely, "It's just the silly kind of thing grandmothers say to little girls."

She braced herself for his response, cursed herself for speaking without thinking.

"And so you give up your secrets this easily?" he taunted her, sinking into the chair.

She avoided his eyes as she poured his cup. She finally glanced up from beneath her lashes, allowing the ghost of a wicked grin to form on her lips. "I didn't tell you how much tea."

He acknowledged her from behind his curtain of hair. "Witch."

"Yes." Two sugars. Milk. Three clockwise stirs, one anticlockwise. She handed him his rose-spangled cup and let her grin spread.

"You think I can't figure it out?"

She watched his face as he took the first sip and felt the sweet warmth spread through her body as surely as it spread through his. "Perhaps... but I think you like having me make it for you even more."

His startled eyes met hers, and she broke the connection, lowering her gaze to pour her own cup.

"And you still haven't had my grandmother's teacakes."

"Nor have I sampled the largesse of the second finest wine cellar in the South of England." He smirked. "Tell me, have you decided what to wear to Narcissa's tea?"

Narcissa. "We need to visit The Grange." *And my mother's closet because I certainly don't have anything suitable!*

"Indeed," he responded. "Tomorrow."

XX

He didn't miss the chill that rippled through her at the name *Narcissa*.

Good. She needed to be wary. He had much to tell her about this tea, about the Dark Lord, about... things he didn't want to tell her, but must for her own safety.

But he would wait. The less time she had to fret over it, the better.

When they'd finished their tea, he'd said, "Allow me," and had Scourgified the tea things other than the ridiculous teacups, which Miss Granger would insist had to be washed and dried by hand. Muggles were so odd. Why use something that had to be coddled so?

Now, she was stretched across the bed on her stomach, chewing on the feather-end of her quill as she searched for a word.... Even without Legilimency, he saw her straining...then suddenly she returned to writing, her graceful, loopy scrawl spreading across the parchment.

Two days before she would have been in his shirt, her bare legs waving in the air. Just remembering brought a tightness to his groin. Now she was in her blue jeans, and while her dainty feet, their insteps so curved and toes tipped with a pearly peach shade of Muggle color, were quite entertaining to watch, he missed his shirt.

On her.

He wondered if he had another like it.

He crossed to the armoire and opened it, then stopped. He looked back at her, at the hand clutching the quill.

He found himself sitting down beside her on the bed.

She looked up, startled. "I'm sorry. I only have four more inches, but if you want here..."

He took her hand, delicately removed the quill and put it safely aside on the table. He stroked her fingertips and felt no echo of magic there. He raised his brows to her.

She shook her head, relieved. "It's gone."

"For now," he said. But she'd watched their kiss, watched it wistfully, hungrily, desperately. It was difficult to imagine, but it was either watching the kiss or rolling on the floor with Hagrid's hound, and if that was what had returned her magic...he shuddered.

She stared at him, stared at his mouth.

"What happens if we..." He leaned over her and captured her lips with his and felt the charge go through him, the same charge that he'd first felt that awkward moment in the classroom when she'd given him that fast, off-center kiss to Seal them, and had felt ever since.

And where their fingertips touched, he felt it even more strongly. A flicker of magic that leapt from her to him and raced straight to his core.

He felt her lips part under his in a gasp, then she joined him, her lips softly moving beneath his, her fingertips dancing across his, setting off sparks.

He inhaled deeply... searched the air for even a hint, a mere trace... but there was none.

She set him on fire. She seemed to feel something, too.

But there was no scent of arousal.

No scent of her body needing his...

The way a woman needed a man.

There was magic. Magic he didn't understand.

But it wasn't enough.

He gently closed her hand.

Her disappointment was tangible.

But that wasn't enough, either.

He stared down at her moist, parted lips and wanted nothing more than to capture them again.

She had said he was patient with his potions.

Oh, yes. He was.

No less so, then, with her.

"Miss Granger," he said, tugging a strand of hair away from her face and tucking it behind her ear, watching her respond to his voice, his touch. "I hope you have no plans for Friday evening."

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes, watching her hand flex and close, flex and close, instead.

"Good. We have some brewing to do. A special potion that takes a lot of ... " He let his voice drift away and waited for her to raise her eyes to his, and he settled for the word, "...*patience*."

"Wonderful," she breathed, her eyes gleaming with anticipation.

He felt his own surge of anticipation in an entirely different portion of his anatomy.

He was willing to take all the time in the world to brew this very special potion.

Preparing.

Bursting.

Releasing.

Indeed.

Bothered

Chapter 24 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

If you recognize it, it isn't mine and is JK Rowling's. If you don't recognize it, don't blame Jo.

Thanks to Leigh-Anne, as always!

24. BOTHERED

The dungeon bedchamber was pitch black; he couldn't see the definition of bedpost or wall unless he lit his wand.

But that made no difference.

He could hear her.

Her soft, even breathing revealed that she slept.

Slept, while he could do nothing but lie in blackness and listen to her breathing.

That wasn't true, he corrected himself.

He could usually feel her, too.

He usually felt her heat.

Insufferable girl. She didn't seem capable of sleeping unless she was pressed against him in some way.

The dungeons were cold, of course. And the bed was too large. His own bed had been small but that meant that the heat from his body, trapped under the blanket, kept him warm.

This bed, however, was too large. If she slept on her own side, they both ended up cold. So she sought his warmth in her sleep, and he allowed it, because, after all, it was preferable to shivering alone in the darkness.

There was no other reason for her to seek him, after all. No other reason to keep him awake with the listening, the feeling, the yearning, the seeking.

Tonight, she slept on her own side.

She must not be cold tonight. She wasn't pressed against him.

And he couldn't bring himself to seek her for warmth.

For anything.

So he settled for the listening....

And the smelling. Merlin, the scents of her.

He closed his eyes, even though it wasn't necessary in this pitch-black room, and inhaled.

He smelled ink from her fingertips, the black eel ink that he preferred and she now used...without even asking, he might add if he were being petty, and Merlin knew he was prone to pettiness.

He smelled his own eucalyptus and spearmint scent; she still would rather soak in a hot tub filled with that than the jasmine and rose and lavender scents he'd offered her. She clearly dumped the crystals in with wanton abandon. What was meant to be a crisp yet subtle scent radiated off her in seductive waves. Did she think he had nothing to do but brew potions and then reduce them to crystals for her bath, so that she could laze hours away with textbooks levitating in front of her? And she called this enterprise studying? Leaving the door to the bath cracked open, no less, so that the steam permeated their entire quarters? Had she no sense of propriety? He had half a mind to inform Minerva to keep a closer watch on her fucking Gryffindors. Surely Miss Granger hadn't started such inappropriate behaviour since their marriage. He'd assumed she was the modest type, and yet her actions...

He refused to think of her *actions*. He was having enough trouble sleeping. He shifted, rolled toward her, and smelled his potion on her breath, with each sweet exhalation.

And found himself easing closer, closer, drawing in deeper breaths.

Because it wasn't a breath potion.

It was a taste potion.

He'd brewed it because he didn't like the taste in his mouth after he slept.

Now, he inhaled deeply.

And wanted to taste it in her mouth.

To slip his tongue between her lips and... taste.

Did her mouth taste the same as his? Would like meet like (potion meet potion) and recognize and join? Or would her lips taste of something new?

Not that he would act on the desire.

But the longing, oh Merlin, the longing.

He shouldn't be awake. He should be asleep. Didn't she know that on those rare occasions when she wasn't pressed against him or wrapped around him or lying across him...sometimes he found it necessary to roll toward her and listen, and smell, and feel....

To reassure himself that she was still there?

On those black, cold nights in the dungeon.

A shiver trembled through him.

Because he was cold.

Because the bed was too big.

Because he refused to cross the expanse of bed and touch her, smell her, taste her, make her moan.

And then, as if sensing his need...

She moaned in her sleep.

He closed the distance between them and pulled her into the curve of his body.

And buried his face in the horrid, tangled mass of frizz that passed for her hair, and kissed it.

Nobody would know that he kissed her hair.

Not even she would know.

And finally, he slept... with her.

XX

Hermione stormed down the second floor corridor instead of heading for the Great Hall and lunch.

Professor Vector! The...the harpy! Whatever had Hermione done to deserve being cut off from the special assignments that had once been her norm? Was Professor Vector deliberately attempting to sabotage her Arithmancy NEWT?

Hermione burst into the girls' bathroom with rage simmering in her veins, assuming that the only thing she'd have to deal with was Moaning Myrtle. She had to get away, to hide, to bring herself under control before something erupted unbidden, again.

Which is why she managed to burst into the middle of four other Seventh-Year witches before she realized that the bathroom was already occupied.

Hermione stared.

They all stared back.

Moaning Myrtle hovered above, giggling in delight. "Ooooooh! Look who else is hiding from her husband...! And who can blame *her*?"

"I most certainly am not!" Hermione sputtered, clenching her wand more tightly.

Myrtle swooped down and stopped six inches from Hermione's face. "Is he that good, then?" She let out a maniacal giggle. "Or does he not bother you at all?"

Hermione felt her cheeks flame and stared at the others.

The other brides.

They stared at her openly, but even so, she could easily tell what had been happening the moment before she entered. One, the Hufflepuff Leticia Spiggot...well, she supposed it would be Leticia Merriman, now...was openly weeping with the others consoling her.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, despite herself. "Are you hurt?"

Leticia laughed bitterly, but hid her face in embarrassment.

"Some girls," said Moaning Myrtle viciously, "don't appreciate how lucky they are to have a boy in their bed!" And then she flew to the furthest corner of the ceiling and burst into noisy sobs. "Tormenting me! Talking of things I'll never know!" She sobbed even louder.

Hermione wanted nothing more than to whirl and leave the way she came in. She did not want to hear any more of this.

But it was too late.

One of the Ravenclaw brides leapt to her feet. "Hermione, you've got to help her."

Hermione fought the magical surge trembling through her and clutched her wand. If she were going to have any kind of magical surge, at least let it involve a wand. "What?" she demanded.

"She's hurt, all right," the Ravenclaw said bitterly. "That wretch she's married to has her so raw she can hardly walk!"

Raw? What on earth?

Oh.

Oh!

Oh.

Like a bad dream from a different lifetime, Hermione suddenly remembered that awful fateful day when she'd stormed into Professor Snape's classroom and demanded that he save her.

"I refuse to be shackled to a teenaged boy who thinks I'm available for him to rut any time he gets the urge because I'd never get out of bed!"

And she supposed that meant getting raw, too.

She shuddered with disgust.

"Well," she said crisply. "First, go to Madam Pomfrey..."

"I'd be too embarrassed!" Leticia moaned.

"Don't be a child," Hermione said officiously and hypocritically, and realizing both, and not caring. "You are a young woman with a young woman's problem, and Madam Pomfrey will be able to help you. There are potions that will help you..."

"Really?" One of the other brides gave Hermione a knowing look. "And they work?"

"One would *presume*," Hermione responded with Professor Snape's most scathing tones. If nothing else, Hermione had learned to scathe from her husband. *Don't even go there*, she glared silently. "And then, after all, you *are* a witch. You have a wand. Use it!"

"You don't mean..." Leticia looked horrified.

"I'd hex his bollocks before I'd hide in a haunted loo crying my eyes out, too sore to walk," Hermione snapped.

The Ravenclaw gasped. "You'd hex Professor Snape's bollocks!?"

"I...I...that's not exactly..."

"Of course not," one of the others piped up. "He's *Professor Snape*. It's not as if he'd expect Hermione to...to...you know...every waking moment!"

"According to my research, it shouldn't take that long, anyway, as you're hardly a boy any more."

And on the heels of that, the memory that literally took her breath away.

"You're a teacher! And I'm a student!"

She sank to the floor.

And this time it was his voice she heard....

"I have to live knowing that somewhere in some office in the bloody Ministry of Magic somebody is monitoring when Severus Snape fucks his child bride!"

This is what she'd wanted, after all. A husband who didn't *bother* her.

A husband who understood that she was, after all, *a child bride*.

Who would keep her safe and protect her and not bother her, and certainly not expect her to...

Stupid, selfish girl.

She stood up warily, realizing that they were all staring at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I came in here because I wasn't feeling well."

She turned to leave, and stopped, looking back at Leticia once more. "Go to Madam Pomfrey. Now." She looked at the young women on either side of her. "Take her, if you have to."

She was so lucky...so *lucky!*

But Professor Snape. He deserved more than this.

She had to prove to him she was not a child bride.

She could do that. She knew she could.

She looked down at the ring on her left hand.

Tricking the Ministry of Magic, though.

That might be a bit more difficult.

XX

When she hadn't appeared at lunch, he'd gone hunting.

He hadn't gone far when he'd rounded a corner and been struck by a body coming from the other direction. He hadn't even considered hexing; eucalyptus and spearmint would have announced her identity if the wild mane of billowing hair hadn't.

"Miss Granger."

"I'm...I'm sorry. I'm trying to get to lunch before it's too late."

He grabbed her arm. "Your magic is shimmering. You do not need to be in the Great Hall." He half-dragged, half-guided her back to their quarters.

He hadn't time for more than listening to a few terse words about Vector before telling her to order lunch from the kitchens and to take a calming draught. He had to attend a staff meeting, and then they'd go visit the wine cellar she'd been dangling before him for days.

The contents of which were sounding better and better all the time.

He eased into Albus's office and stood in his usual place, the back corner, leaning back with the walls for support. Many a meeting had he dozed in this spot. Merlin, this had better be short. He hadn't the patience for it.

When Albus entered all a-twinkle, he'd had the good grace to avoid Severus's eyes all together.

"Thank you for coming," he beamed at all of them. "I realize this is unexpected, but we do need to put our heads together and come up with some solutions before the situation gets any worse."

What? A sherbet lemon shortage?

Oh, if only it were that simple. Instead, Flitwick rose to report. "We have three married couples in Ravenclaw and of course, one in Hufflepuff. It's awkward but not totally impossible as the castle has kindly provided us with extra suites for privacy, but there's no denying that we'd be better off if the married students had their own section of housing and their own ... for lack of a better word, House."

"That's an extreme measure," Albus responded, "but one I'll certainly take under advisement."

"Perhaps," Minerva said crisply, "Professor and Madam Snape would consider overseeing such a venture, since they're already turning the entire history of Hogwarts upside down with their marriage."

Well. That certainly silenced the room.

"Minerva," he said pleasantly, "bite my arse."

Albus gave him a long look over the top of his glasses. "I expected you to be a bad influence on Miss Granger, not the other way around."

Severus slouched more securely into the corner. "I know Minerva doesn't consider her suggestion to have the slightest bit of merit, so perhaps she should tell us what is really bothering her?"

Minerva managed to straighten even more, as if a second poker had been crammed up her arse. "I don't know who is more to blame for this ridiculous situation, Miss Granger or you. I only know that the very idea of a professor and a student involved in a sexual relationship...married or not," she inserted before he could interject, "...is unsettling to the staff and causing untold issues amongst the students. I resent the fact that she is still in my classroom any classroom, for that matter."

He allowed his voice to go to pure silk, his eyes to dead black. "If this is truly representative of the feelings of the staff, steps need to be taken to remove my wife from all her classes because I will not allow her to be subjected to such petty treatment. I expected it from her fellow Gryffindors, of course; I must tell you, however, that I anticipated a far better standard of behaviour from a faculty of which I am a member, and most especially from her own Head of House."

Albus interjected. "Don't jump to conclusions, Severus. I'm sure Minerva didn't mean it the way it sounded, and of course this staff holds nothing but the highest regard for Hermione. There will be no reason for her to discontinue her course of study."

Unexpectedly it was Hooch who cocked her head and looked him straight in the eye and said, "Severus, it has been said that Granger...sorry, Madam Snape, is not looking well, that she's stretched too thin, that her unexpected marital status has made it unlikely that she can see her education fulfill the promise it once offered. Furthermore..." she cut him off with a hard warning look. "It has been noticed that she is not herself. That she pays no attention to anything that happens around her, unless it involves you. That she looks like a whipped puppy that tags along after you like she's trying to earn her master's grudging affection. It has been said..."

"How dare you."

"I merely deigned to repeat what has been whispered, so you can have the opportunity to respond."

"How you must love to be the bearer of such glad tidings," Snape spat. "It appears that her presence is so problematical that Vector..." a curt nod and glare in her direction "...has chosen not to even offer her NEWTS level revision." He cast scathing glances at each professor in turn as he continued, "Flitwick, at his most Charming, is so filled with thoughts of improper horrors he simply pretends she doesn't exist." Dipping into her memories to check up on Albus's atrocities had provided unexpected dividends, and he continued to reel off each teacher's inadequacies in a litany of silken attack, and would have continued.

But Albus cut him off. "That's enough!"

Severus raised his gaze to the old wizard. "Really? Odd you should think so. I would have thought it was too much, but clearly you're having difficulty making such judgments these days.

"I think when you dare compare my wife--my brilliant little *warrior* of a wife..." That, he aimed straight at Albus, who received it without reacting. "To a *whipped puppy*," he sneered, "you should revisit the issue of cause and effect. Contrary to popular opinion, I'm not the one who has been kicking puppies."

He left the Headmaster's office in a billow of robe and took the stairs down two at a time, blind to anything but rage and the need to return to her.

He was halfway down the stairs to the fourth floor before he realized somebody was following him.

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder...

Fucking splendid. Hooch.

"Severus."

He didn't slow.

"Just wanted you to know what was being said. But I don't want you to think I believed it or was the one saying it."

Whatever.

"Severus?"

He stopped and whirled to face her with a snarl.

"Make sure she knows the way to my quarters. Should she ever need, well, something close to female companionship." And responding to the expression on his face, "Oh, sod off, Snape, you can trust me. I know she's not my type."

"Indeed, she is not." He drew a deeper breath. "Thank you," he said belatedly, and then continued, "Rolanda, she might actually need some sessions with you, but if this could remain strictly confidential..."

She simply looked at him, waiting.

"I haven't even informed Albus, yet."

She raised her eyebrows at that.

"She tossed a wandless hex at Potter that flattened him. Straight from her fingertips." He saved the best for last. "Silently."

"Well, well, well. Spontaneously, too? Isn't that a bit of a trifecta?" Hooch didn't hide her surprise. "Agreed. Just let me know when. And warn her that I hex back."

She gave him a curt nod then angled down the stairs toward another corridor, leaving him to proceed to the dungeons.

And he hadn't even begun to prepare her for tea with the Dark Lord and the lovely Narcissa.

Fuck it all. He wanted nothing more than to crack open a bottle of wine, find a dark corner of the second best wine cellar in the South of England, and get pissed.

Home

Chapter 25 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Eternal gratitude for JKR who continues to allow fanfic writers to play in her universe.

And as always, thank to my beta, Leigh-Anne!

25. HOME

Hermione spent an hour in the Library. It felt almost like old times, save that no Gryffindors were hovering and attempting to lure her away.

She'd quickly scanned through the Restricted Section for obscure books on Charms and Incantations. She had all the Potions resources she could ever want in Professor Snape's library, after all. She finally narrowed her search down to two books that she promptly checked out, ignoring Madam Pince's offended sniff, and hurried back down to the dungeons.

Her mind whirled with ingredients and possible incantations, but most importantly she needed a ring.

Not just any ring.

And that was the problem.

It was one thing to know that "not just any ring" would work.

It was another thing altogether to know which ring might.

XX

"We'll just pop out to The Grange," she'd said cheerfully. "It won't take long."

Of course, nothing could be as easy as that had sounded, fuck it all to hell.

She'd changed into the most disreputable Muggle clothes he'd ever seen and then insisted that he must do the same. And then she'd promptly laughed at them.

She was lucky he hadn't hexed her.

But after a bit more giggling, he finally met the standard she set, though he didn't trust her judgment at all as he shifted uneasily in the Muggle tweed jacket she'd transfigured for him.

"Believe me, this is what you should wear in the country," she'd announced. And then had burst into a new spate of giggles. "Never mind. Wear your cloak."

And so, wearing his usual dragon hide boots, black trousers and a black turtleneck jumper under his cloak, he followed behind her as she trudged up a gravel drive to The Grange.

"I believe this is where you're supposed to give the Professor Snape version of a gasp and expletive, and I'm supposed to say, 'What, this old heap?'" she said nervously as they rounded a curve and caught their first glimpse of the manor house.

He stared at what had once been a Tudor jewel but had been enlarged and "improved" until only a few architectural details revealed its origins: a bit of half timbering here, tall and narrow, multi-paned, leaded-glass windows there, and a multitude of chimneys complete with chimney pots pretty much everywhere else.

He restrained himself from gasping, expleting, or otherwise revealing that he might be impressed in any way.

Barely.

He was damned if he intended to fulfill her swotty expectations at the first sight of the family heap. "Are we going in, or do they intend to heave the bottles out the door?" he snapped.

She seemed relieved. "We're going in."

She marched up the pebbled drive to the broad front steps and stood before the huge door where she finally, after heaving in a deep breath, rang the bell.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "No magic in front of the servants."

The door opened.

A tall, dour male with a white apron over his black trousers and shirtsleeves rolled back to expose bony wrists and age-spotted hands took one look at Miss Granger and broke into an unlikely but genuine grin.

"Russell!" She threw herself into his hug...did the girl have to cling to every male with whom she came in contact?...and the elderly man patted her back with great affection.

She pulled away and, still smiling, remembered that she wasn't alone.

"Oh, Pro...um, Russell, I am honored to present my husband, Professor Severus Snape."

Russell gave the appearance of being introduced to his young mistress's husbands on a daily basis. He gave a small, polite bow and opened the door wide, stepping aside. "I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Professor."

And before Severus could do more than nod in response, Miss Granger had him by the hand, pulling him inside.

"Your father told me that a selection of his finest wine was to be readied for you, miss...I mean, madam." Russell indicated a case of wine of varying vintages on a side table beneath an oil portrait of some previous Granger. No buck teeth were in evidence, and the hair was beneath a wig, but there was still something recognizable about the eyes....

Severus squinted, willing it to move, but it did not.

"Unless," Russell added, "you would prefer to make your own selections?"

"No, I'm sure this is fine," Miss Granger responded airily. "We'll be upstairs in my bedroom."

Severus fought to keep his cheeks from flaming as he extricated his hand from her iron grip and chose to follow her at a more sedate pace. Not two minutes in the 'heap', and she was dragging him to her bedroom! She'd have the servants' tongues wagging before they'd reached the first landing.

Everything about the place oozed privilege and wealth and a genealogy that would put Lucius Malfoy to shame. He was glad Lucius didn't know. Somehow, he didn't think that would go over well, even if Lucius were inclined to think none of it counted because it was all Muggle.

And of course Miss Granger sailed through it all with a nonchalance that chilled him. She took too fucking much for granted and had too little idea how quickly her life could go pear-shaped. How much it already had, for that matter.

By the time they reached her chambers, he was more than relieved to close the door behind them and ward it and silence it. "You could have at least let me see the wine cellar," he complained.

"Russell is far more capable of choosing wine than either of us are, I'm sure."

Well, if *that* wasn't insulting.

The only thing that kept him from retorting was that he had no doubt it was true. His knowledge of Muggle wine was less than limited. It was only the assurance that her father's cellar was so stellar that had piqued his interest in the first place.

And now that he was in her bedroom...

A treasure trove of Hermione Jane Granger Snape awaited his exploration.

"Erm, this is it," she said unnecessarily, with a general wave of her hand.

And of course, the first thing that anyone would notice about her bedroom (other than the fact that it was half the size of a Quidditch pitch) was how positively ~~green~~ it was.

He smirked. He grinned. He almost...not quite, but almost...laughed.

The counterpane on her bed was dark green quilted velvet. The draperies hanging around the French doors that led out to a balcony? Also dark green. The walls a pale shade of fern. The floor was a dark, wide-planked oak, but the worn, Persian carpets had the only Gryffindor red in the room, and even that was offset by liberal use of green along with gold, brown and cream.

"I like green," she said with a glower.

"What's not to like?" he asked silkily, walking over to pick up a stuffed lamb from its place on her pillow. A lamb! Could she get any more Hufflepuff?

She snatched it away from him and almost seemed to hug the thing as she carried it with her through a door into an adjoining chamber.

He took the opportunity to peruse her bookshelf. Muggle science books...some but certainly not all aimed at children...dominated the shelves. A burner of some sort and vials of powders and an assortment of beakers sat on a small table as if they'd only been used the day before.

When she emerged again, he looked up startled from a shelf of vintage Jane Austen novels. So, she had a romantic streak. Not that he should be surprised....

She stood before him, her hair a wild Gryffindor mane, eyes huge in her thin face, wearing an indecent fluttery floral frock that ended inches...inches!...above her knees.

She looked all of fourteen years old again, if that.

All long legs and school girl body and ridiculous flowers and...and like she was wearing a girlish nightgown, not something to be worn in public, and certainly not mixed company, and most certainly not within site of Lucius Malfoy, who would likely rape her on the spot.

"This would be perfect," she said...

He growled.

"...except that it's for summer. I don't have anything for this time of year. I'm usually in school robes at Hogwarts."

"You will not go to the Malfoys' with your legs exposed like a common trollop from Knockturn Alley."

Her mouth flew open and for once, she appeared that she might actually be speechless.

"Surely that's not what one would wear to a proper tea..." he continued.

"It's called a tea dress. Which means, in short, one would wear it to tea." She tilted her nose in the air in disdain. "However," she added with a wry shrug, "it's a couple of years old and not really what a *married woman*," she hid her face but he could almost swear she was blushing, "would wear to *apropo* tea...." She sighed. "Let me see what else I can find."

When a knock sounded at the door, Severus looked up from the bottom shelf and its amazing collection of books on comparative religion *comparative religion?*...and saw that she either hadn't heard or expected him to see to it, like he was her bloody house-elf.

He braced himself, lowered the wards and opened the door.

Russell stood with some sort of portable telephone in his hand.

"Lady Granger, sir," he said politely.

Not knowing what else to do, Severus took the telephone gingerly between his thumb and forefinger and said, "Thank you."

And shut the door.

And stared at the instrument in his hand.

XX

Having put her jeans on, Hermione struggled back into her boots. At the sound of the knock, she sighed deeply.

It hadn't taken Russell long to let her mother know she was here, had it?

By the time she emerged from the small dressing room, Professor Snape stood in the middle of the room staring at the telephone in his hand, clutching her prayer book in the other. She honestly didn't know which struck her as more absurd.

She relieved him of the phone. "Hello, Mummy."

"And what are you doing at The Grange when you know we are in town until Christmas? Not avoiding me, are you?"

"No, Mummy, I'm looking for something to wear for a special occasion."

Her mother's voice changed abruptly, growing much more tolerant and possibly even interested. "Really, darling? What kind of 'something' are you looking for?"

Hermione glared at Professor Snape, pushed the button for the speakerphone and put it on the table. "Severus," she said awkwardly, "asked me to dress as if I were going to have tea with the Queen."

"Good heavens! Why on earth does he want you to look like a frump?"

Hermione stifled a giggle at her mother's words and at Professor Snape's highly offended reaction as he curled his lip and looked down his hawk nose at the offending telephone.

"I'm sure he doesn't realize that's what he was asking for."

He sniffed.

"Then tell me, what is this occasion and who is hosting it?"

"It's tea, and, erm, it's being hosted by Narcissa Malfoy. You don't know her."

"Why does that name sound familiar?" her mother asked sharply.

"Possibly because... she would have been my mother-in-law if Professor Snape hadn't married me, first." Hermione winced.

"And the man wants you to look like a frump. Brilliant."

Professor Snape winced.

"I don't think he actually intended me..." she began, watching color rise in Professor Snape's cheeks. "But, I've been looking through my closet and..."

"What does she look like?"

Hermione sighed and, avoiding Professor Snape's eyes, said, "She's quite beautiful."

"Is he in love with her?"

Hermione choked, and again, could only stare as the color so recently attained drained from her husband's cheeks.

"No!" she said. "At least...I mean, no!"

Oh, dear. She thought Professor Snape might be about to do a little wandless hexing of his own, and as she was the only victim handy, she felt more nervous than she cared to admit.

"Hermione, go into my room and into my closet and get my Chanel wool."

Hermione pumped her fist and grinned. Her mother's closet. Yes!

"Yes, Mummy," she answered demurely, already on her way into the corridor.

"And my kid boots."

"Yes, Mummy." She was absolutely skipping down the hall.

"And whatever jewelry you think appropriate."

Yes!

Narcissa Malfoy wasn't going to know what hit her.

XX

"How do you propose we take the wine without using magic?"

She stared up at him, clearly not having considered that complication.

"I'm not leaving it here," he said firmly.

"Russell," she called down the stairs, "would you please call us a cab?"

XX

"This is preposterous," Professor Snape said, "wasting money on a cab when..."

"Shhh," she said. "We're not going far."

They arrived at the village train station, and Hermione slid out of the back seat, leaving Professor Snape to hoist out the case of wine as she paid for their ride.

"Follow me," she said and headed around the corner of the station to a dark shadowy corner. "We can Apparate from here," she said.

"Then grab my arm," he answered. "We aren't returning to Hogwarts, yet."

Astonished, she did as he said, felt the sickeningly familiar tug behind her navel, and swallowed back her distress until they landed quite firmly in a dark, dusty, dismal room she'd never seen before.

"My family estate," he announced with a sneer. "Spinner's End."

He put the wine on the floor and, with a wave of his fingers, brought light to the room.

She saw his reticence, his embarrassment, and didn't know what words to say to relieve him. Until...

"You've got electricity?"

"It is a Muggle home, yes."

"That means...oh my!" She quickly scanned the room, saw the door that looked like it most likely led into a kitchen, and took off.

"Miss Granger!" he called after her.

It was a truly awful kitchen. It was old and even smelled. The floor looked like it hadn't been cleaned in yonks, and a thin coating of grease layered the cooker and even the fridge.

And in the corner...

She literally jumped up and down in glee.

She whirled, bumped into a very disgruntled Professor Snape, grabbed him and kissed him. "You've got a washing machine!"

A half hour and a quick Apparation to and from Hogwarts later, she was ensconced in a chair in the corner of the sitting room, reading the Charms book she'd brought from the library while the ancient twin tubs swished and clanked away in the kitchen, hot water and soap doing a number on the red sheets and white shirt, and she couldn't have been happier in a mansion.

Professor Snape was off digging around in a room upstairs. She hadn't wanted to follow him or to appear too nosy. He clearly was uncomfortable with her being there at all, though she couldn't imagine why, since he was the one who'd brought her there, after all.

She'd skimmed half the book when she heard him coming back down the stairs and trained her eyes on the faded page in her lap. When she'd suffered under his glare as long as she could possibly tolerate it, she finally raised her eyes to his and asked the question that had been hammering in her mind since she'd realized the incongruity. "How did a Pureblood wizard end up with a Muggle house?"

From the expression on his face, she should have let the question keep hammering.

"Quite simply. Tobias Snape was a Muggle."

"But you're...you're not Pureblood?"

"I am Pureblood."

She sat there, mouth open, and then closed it.

Well.

There weren't many ways around that except the obvious. "He wasn't your father."

"He was my *legal* father."

There were so many things she could say and none of them at all helpful. Finally, she said the one thing she could say with utter sincerity. "I'm glad you have a Muggle house." She blushed and went back to her reading.

XX

Insufferable know-it-all.

Well, for once, she hadn't known *anything*, had she?

Fuck.

He pushed out of his chair and went to the kitchen to check on the washing. Washing! What would she have him doing next?

He'd used a long-forgotten spell of his mother's to shorten the length of time it took the twin tub to do its work. It was spinning now; within five minutes they'd be able to return to Hogwarts.

He looked around the dingy kitchen with something that felt close to despair. How on earth could such a place bring such a smile to her lips? It was pure, unadulterated joy, nothing less, that he'd seen when she'd flown into his arms and bestowed him with a ridiculous kiss, all over a washer that was old when he was a boy.

All so that she could keep her ridiculous red sheets.

Her ridiculous *soft* red sheets.

And the shirt, of course.

He mustn't forget the shirt.

The spinning grew louder, and then with a heavy clunk, began slowing. Before it had totally stopped, Miss Granger had appeared at the door, her eyes wide. "It's already finished?"

He whipped out his wand and levitated the damp sheets out of the rinse tub and into the air and to the middle of the room. With a murmured incantation and a flick of the wand, he had them spinning in midair until they were dry. Another flick, and they folded themselves.

"Open your arms," he ordered her and watched as she accepted the neatly folded sheets and shirt and drew them close to her and inhaled.

"Oh!" she said, clearly delighted. "They smell like lemon!"

"Indeed."

XX

Upon arriving back in the dungeons, Hermione practically flew across the stone floor to the bed with her bundle of linens. She was about to rip the hated white sheet from the bed when his voice stopped her.

"That will have to wait."

She turned and looked at him expectantly.

He stood by the fireplace, staring into it, his face hidden beneath the curtain of his hair.

"It won't take long to..." she protested, giving the white sheet a tug.

"Miss Granger." Her name was a command, and while part of her wanted to rebel against his tone, another part was aware of something deep and urgent that compelled her to obey.

She sat on the edge of the bed, fresh linens forgotten.

"First, I've made arrangements for you to receive extra tutelage in the art of wandless magic."

"Why can't you teach me?"

"Because," he snapped, "there aren't enough hours in the day for me to give you as much *attention* as you seem to need."

She felt as if she'd been slapped.

"And it just so happens that we have a tremendously skilled mistress of wandless magic here at Hogwarts whose schedule is less demanding than mine..."

That left out Professors McGonagall and Sprout, both of whom had their own Houses to look after. Vector? No, please no. Trelawney? Ridiculous. Her mind raced through the possibilities.

"Madam Hooch will be expecting you after breakfast tomorrow."

"Madam Hooch! You've got to be jesting!"

"I am not," he snapped, glaring at her.

"And...I'm supposed to be brewing advanced potions for you after breakfast..."

"This takes precedence."

"But, it's not fair!"

"Don't speak to me of fair," he sneered. "I am the last person to complain to if you think your life is unfair, wouldn't you think?"

"But you're the only one who gives me challenging work, and now you tell me I can't even do that?" She felt like throwing a hex at him but judiciously kept her eyes on the floor on the off chance he might not notice.

"In case you've forgotten," he said in a velvet sneer, "your little tea party tomorrow is not just an occasion to dress up in Mummy's clothes and jewels."

She leapt to her feet, enraged.

His black eyes drilled into her, and she glared back at him, refusing to back down. "Indeed," she sneered back at him with a toss of her hair.

"You will be on display for the Dark Lord, and need more preparation than I can give you alone. Tomorrow morning, you will spend with the one faculty member in this castle who actually harbors us no ill will at this moment, and you will show her the respect she is owed. You will not assault her with questions about her skill and her history with that skill because that is her story to tell, if and when she chooses to tell it. Suffice it to say that it is not something that is bandied about lightly."

Hermione swallowed back the questions that were already jumbling in her head, fighting their way to be first.

"Afterward, you and I will take lunch here, alone, and at that time I'll reveal the things you should know before undergoing the afternoon's tea with *outrights*."

A chill ran down her spine at that single word and all it represented.

"And thus, if you have no more comments or questions, I'll go make my rounds."

And since she couldn't ask what she really wanted to ask... "Please hold me and make me feel safe again,"...she nodded bravely and returned to her Charms book.

She had her own work to do.

She dragged the book with her into bed...the bed with the despised rough sheets. She plumped the pillows and brightened the tip of her wand, the better to read by. There had to be a charm or potion or incantation that would help her, there just had to be.

She knew she'd be asleep before he returned, even though it was cold and the sheets harsh. She would sleep so that she couldn't be blamed if she ended up curled against him again.

She felt her cheeks blaze with embarrassment.

How carelessly she'd pressed herself against him for warmth and comfort and safety without considering what it did to him. She'd awakened each morning with the hard evidence of his morning erection too prominent to ignore, but that was normal for males, wasn't it. She'd read all about it...oh, she could just hear him sneering at her over the fact that she'd read it in one of her *fucking books*, that it was normal and that it had nothing to do with sex, not really, and so she'd politely pretended not to notice, even as she pressed against him....

But things had changed. She knew with a thickening of her pulse what she'd been doing to him now, and felt shame, and tried to stay on her own side of the bed so as not to add to his torment, and did her research, determined to find a way to eliminate it....

And so she drifted off to sleep, her book splayed across her lap and her wand still in her hand, propped up in the bed that was more home to her than the home she'd lived in for the first eleven years of her life.

And when she awoke to the icy blackness of night in the dungeons, she felt his breath on her shoulder and his arms around her...

And sighed in the deepest contentment she'd ever known, because it wasn't her fault.

And she snuggled deeper and fought against sleep, just so she could soak up the sensations of being safe... at home... in his arms.

Bludgeoned

Chapter 26 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Thanks to JKR for the world.

Thanks to Leigh-Anne for being my beta!

26. BLUDGEONED

The Quidditch pitch was sunny and cold and the last place Hermione had ever expected to spend even an hour of her Hogwarts education.

Yet here she stood, muffled and bundled against the wind, deflecting Bludgers of all things!

Madam Hooch stood some distance away, arms folded and expression smug as she wandlessly tossed Bludgers at Hermione with increasing speed and velocity.

What had begun as a silly exercise...a Bludger lazily sailing toward her and a whisk of her wand to send it back...had now turned into deadly business.

Hermione's anger grew as she slashed her wand to send back two Bludgers at once and, with narrowed eyes, made sure to send one close enough to Hooch's head to part her spiked hair.

"Why, Madam Snape," Hooch crowed, "I had no idea you enjoyed a bit of sport!" And she promptly sent three Bludgers at once

Followed by a shout of, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione felt her wand yank from her fingers at the same time she saw three Bludgers headed straight for her head...

And flung out a protective hand...

And felt the zing of sparks leave her fingertips and meet the Bludgers in mid-flight...

Dropping them to the ground with heavy thuds, not three feet from her body.

"May I please have my wand back?" she snapped, her heart thudding wildly in her chest.

"I think not," Hooch said, sauntering toward her thoughtfully. When she reached the Bludgers in the grass, she sent them back to the equipment box and then circled Hermione slowly, her sparkling eyes dragging from head to toe and back again.

"Well. It's clear he never would have chosen you on his own."

Hermione felt her skin burn with embarrassment and anger.

"How long had you been crushing on him, child?"

Hermione clenched her hands into fists. "I hadn't," she said in clipped tones.

"Mm-hmm." Noncommittal and disbelieving at the same time. "You never noticed that voice, eh? Never watched those long fingers working their magic and... imagined them *working their magic*?"

Hermione whirled to face the older witch who was now behind her. "Absolutely not!"

Hooch's eyes met hers, assessing. "Ah, interesting." Then she continued her slow circling, her hands clasped behind her back. "Of course, it's perfectly clear," she said, "that Severus has had his eye on you for a very long time."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Oh, dear, surely you don't buy into that 'too professional to notice students' malarkey that he tries to foist off on the gullible, do you?"

Hermione felt her rage bubbling within.

"You think Severus Snape would have given even a moment's thought to marrying you, if he hadn't already been planning to get into your knickers and realized that having you in his bed as his bride was a boon beyond that even his Dark Lord would offer..."

STUPEFY!

A flash of red

And then, blackness.

Her head rang, and she felt sick rising in her throat at the distant voice saying, *Ennervate!*"

"Here, girl." She jerked her face away from Hooch's hands and immediately regretted it as the world spun around her in a dizzying view of blue sky and green grass.

"Don't be foolish. Drink this."

This time, when Hooch pressed the mug to her lips, she swallowed.

"You didn't really think I'd let you hex me, did you?" Hooch asked casually. "I wouldn't be much of a witch if I didn't have my shields up, now, would I?"

Hermione glowered at the older witch and muttered, "Bitch."

Hooch let out a howl of laughter. "Good girl." She pressed the mug into Hermione's hands. "Finish up, then we'll talk in my office."

Hermione followed her across the pitch and into the small office beneath the stands.

Hooch conjured a cushion for the hard-backed chair that sat opposite her desk. "Take your time. Catch your breath."

Hooch took her place and stared at Hermione until Hermione felt herself forced to stare at everything in the room except Madam Hooch. A dizzying array of magical photographs decorated the walls...Quidditch players darting hither and yon, not even staying within their own frames. Many were Hogwarts teams...the most recent ones with flashes of red hair as various Weasleys swooped across the skies.

Then there were older photographs, including one in which the Quidditch robes were in patriotic red, white and blue with the Cross of St George on their backs. Without thinking, Hermione stood up and walked over for a closer look. "I forgot...Ron said you played for England?"

Before she reached the wall, Hooch flipped a finger and the picture frame flipped and faced the wall.

Hermione turned back to Hooch, surprised.

"Yes, for half a season." Hooch shifted in her chair and straightened some game charts on her desk. "But we're not talking about me, are we?"

Hermione returned to the chair, frustrated. Even polite discussion was evidently not allowed. And Severus thought Madam Hooch meant them no ill will? He clearly was misinformed.

"Why did you say those horrid things to me?" she demanded. Then she pinned Madam Hooch with a glare and dug deep for the courage her mother would have shown. "Are you in love with him?"

Hooch stared and then sputtered, then laughed. Laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. Laughed until Hermione was one finger-twitch short of sending another hex her way.

"Hermione Granger, you are a tonic!" Hooch finally gasped. "Don't you ever listen to gossip?"

Hermione blinked. Gossip. The gossip, of course, was that Madam Hooch was a..."Of course not!" she said self-righteously.

"Dear girl, you're more my type than Severus is, and you are not my type."

Hermione blushed to her roots.

"Now sit still and let's talk about our business together." Hooch leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. "One, you are powerful, more powerful than I ever dreamed. Two, you are more controlled than I expected. Three, if anyone dares insult poor Severus, all is lost."

Hermione stared at her own clenched hands, trying to stop them from trembling.

"You're shimmering with magic. Did you know that? Shimmering with it, because you're repressing it. It's quite uncanny, a girl your age with that kind of power, and it's no wonder you're having trouble with it. But you simply must find a way to release it before you do real harm when somebody makes some perfectly justified observance about your husband, who at best is a miserable excuse for a human being and at worst..."

Her raised hand deflected the spurt of red that flew in her direction, and she laughed as she watched it hit the wall and take a chunk of plaster out. "You are so predictable. Gryffindors. What a waste of power."

Hermione clutched her hand miserably. She hadn't meant to do it. She'd intended to prove that she could control herself. But...but...*miserable excuse for a human being?*

Hooch leaned across her desk and used the tip of her wand to raise Hermione's chin. "We're going to have to work on this. Believe me, if attacking you personally got the same result, I'd be glad to let your man alone and go for your own jugular, but you handle that, don't you?"

Hermione still refused to meet her eyes, even with her face raised. She stared at miniature Harry and Ron zipping from picture to picture on the wall behind the older witch's head.

Hooch let out an exasperated sigh.

"All right. Lesson one. If you feel yourself losing control, break something. Try to make it something insignificant, by the way." She pointed her wand at the empty mug Hermione had placed on the desk. "Let's try this again."

Hermione was determined that this time Hooch was not going to get the best of her. She braced herself for the horrible things that the old bitch might say, and clenched her fists. She would not react. She would not.

"You realize, I assume, that you're not the first student who found her way into his bed?"

A split-second before the hex left her fingertips, she blinked...

The mug exploded in a shower of glass splinters.

Her chest heaved with the aftermath, but--

Her hands didn't tingle.

The hex had died unthought, unsent.

Hooch clapped slowly, her smile broad.

With a flick of her fingers, she sent Hermione's wand back to her.

Hermione snagged it with a sense of relief and homecoming.

Hooch glanced at the clock on the wall. "Lunch time, and I believe your husband is waiting for you." She nodded to the door, which opened slowly, to reveal Professor Snape leaning languidly against the underpinnings of the Quidditch stands, bored and examining his fingernails.

Hermione jumped to her feet and was halfway to the door before she forced herself to stop and turn and say, coldly, "Thank you for the lesson."

"I look forward to the next one," Madam Hooch said, grinning. "And girl..."

Hermione froze.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist. And don't let lies about your husband hit you so obviously. That's a weakness, you know."

Hermione stared at Hooch and Hooch shook her head. "You know him better than that, don't you?"

"I knew they were lies, yes," Hermione said. "That didn't make them easier to hear."

"People will believe those lies and you can't change that," Hooch said gently. "Not when your own actions seem to support the lies."

The witch's gentle words hit her with twice the power as her lies.

Mind reeling, she left the office and crossed to her husband, carefully falling into step beside him, trembling.

She felt him watching her. And finally, she burst out, "Why did you send me to her? She didn't help me...she made me worse. I can't go to the Malfoys' like this! I...I'm out of control!"

"Indeed," was his only reply.

"You didn't hear her!"

"She did what I told her to."

"What? You told her to tell me lies about you? To rip me open and make me bleed?" Hermione knew she was on the verge of hysteria, but her body thrummed with emotions she couldn't contain...

"If you know they're lies, then forget about them," he said sharply. "It's the truth you'll have to deal with soon, and Miss Granger, I can assure you that it is worse."

Rings

Chapter 27 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

With extreme gratitude to JKR.

With special thanks to my fabulous beta, Leigh-Anne.

27. RINGS

When they arrived in their quarters, the table was already laid, and a lunch of soup and sandwiches awaited them. They both, however, ignored the lunch. Hermione fidgeted on her pile of pillows on the bed, nibbling deliciously out-of-season grapes, her stomach too tight with tension to accept more than one at a time, her mouth too dry to savor them.

"First things first," Professor Snape said, and with hardly a twitch of his hand, he brought a bottle of wine sailing through the air toward them. He magicked it open and laid the cork aside, then inhaled. "Tell me, Miss Granger, can you imbibe without making a fool of yourself?" he asked, as he then beckoned a large wooden case from the lowest of his bookshelves.

"It puts me to sleep."

"Ah, so sad, then I suppose I'll have to drink alone." His fingers caressed the wooden case as he watched her toying nervously with a grape stem. "Although a sip or two would most likely do you good."

He opened the case and nestled in black velvet were eight crystal goblets. Not just any crystal. This was a type of glass she'd never seen before. She couldn't restrain her gasp.

Professor Snape lifted one in his long, beautiful fingers and held it up to the light. The goblet was as sheer as gossamer and looked as though a single breath would shatter it.

"Elfin crystal," he said grimly. "The only possession I own that came from my father."

She didn't have to ask which father.

He answered her anyway. "The wizard who seduced my mother when she was sixteen years old and then returned to his wife and family on the Continent. Upon his death, I received this set. It's valuable and, one would presume, a family heirloom. I suppose in the end he felt some sort of guilt." His upper lip curled as if the very idea of his father's guilt offended him.

Hermione remained silent as he held the goblet beneath the bottle and wine like liquid garnet flowed into it.

Again he held it to the light, and this time microscopic facets were clearly visible across the surface. Before, they'd seemed more like cobweb, but now with the addition of colour, they burst into their brilliance and glowed, reflecting warmth back onto his pale hand.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," she breathed.

He inhaled deeply again, then finally sipped. "I consider it a weakness that I wanted you to see this before we go to the Malfoys." He avoided her eyes and drank more deeply. And then, eyeing her speculatively, he pulled out another goblet, was on the brink of filling it when...

He reached across the table and offered her a sip from his own.

She leaned forward, felt the shimmer of elfin magic touch her lips, and then the lovely warmth of her father's wine. She didn't realize until he pulled it away that she'd closed her eyes, the better to savor. She pulled them open to find him staring at her, and all she could manage was a breathy, "Oooh."

He drew back in his chair. She noticed he wasn't eating. He stared into the distance and finally spoke again.

"Whatever you think you know of the Dark Lord, put it out of your mind. It is time for you to know the truth."

If not for the wine still warming her mouth and throat, she would have shivered. But somehow the wine (or the goblet? or his strong fingers holding it to her lips?) braced her. She took a slice of thick bread off the top of a sandwich and began tearing it to shreds, watching her fingers, afraid of what he was going to say, yet desperate to hear it, to arm herself for what was coming.

"I told you that he has never hurt me. It's true; he has never physically harmed me in any way. In fact, he can be affectionate with his followers."

She looked up, wary of that word affectionate.

"Yes," he said, his eyes drilling her. "Affectionate. If he thinks affection will get him what he wants." Again, he looked away. "The thing you have to understand about the Dark Lord is how infinitely clever he is when it comes to finding one's ... soft spots."

She remembered his words to her, his fears about the Dark Lord knowing too much about their, their physical union, and knew a chill. "And he uses them to hurt you."

"No." He took another deep drink. "Not usually. The knowledge that he can and will, of course, is heavy. But the fact is..." He looked at her quizzically, as if testing her ability to discern what he was telling her. "There are Death Eaters who derive great pleasure from Muggle-baiting, from raping, from torturing, from destroying. The Dark Lord is happy to oblige them with targets."

She dropped the bread, not even able to pretend an appetite.

"However, he would never force those of us who have no taste for such activities to participate. Instead, he uses us for other of his business."

Again, he stared at his goblet, now empty, and took time to refill it. "The Dark Lord has no sexual nature. He didn't seem to even before his return. Odd in a man with his physical beauty," he said bitterly, "but he'd turned his desires into different directions at a young age, and evidently wasn't seduced by his hormones. And yet..." Another sip, another swallow, another thoughtful groping for words.... "And yet he appreciates pleasure, or rather, appreciates providing pleasure and seeing his followers partake of it."

"Revels," she whispered. She'd heard of the revels.

He inclined his head in a nod, and the curtain of limp hair fell back, exposing his eyes and throat to her. "Indeed."

She didn't want to know. She didn't want to know what he'd done at revels, or whom he'd done it with. She kept her hands clenched in her lap, knuckles white, waiting for him to tell her things she didn't want to hear.

"And at the revels, there are those who *revel* in taking their *pleasures* for the pleasure of our Lord. Who display themselves for him and for all present to view...." His voice drifted for a moment. "Lucius and Narcissa were his favorites." Another deep gulp of wine. "They always had a bit of the exhibitionist about them. They liked being... observed."

She felt her cheeks burning, and she no longer saw her clenched hands because her eyes were clenched shut just as surely, and her heart hammered in her breast.

"But even though they were his favorites, when Narcissa conceived and they decided it was no longer appropriate to participate in the revels, the Dark Lord never said a word. It was their decision to make."

She forced the words from her lips, even though she didn't want to hear the answer.... "And you?"

"I did not participate in revels."

She could breathe again.

"There are those who only participate in revels, though. Women whose only desire is to *please*...."

She looked up at that.

His eyes pierced through her. "With the use of Polyjuice Potion. And Heart's Desire. And lust potions."

She felt sick rising in her throat.

"Because all they want to do is *please*... and there are those who are very willing and eager to be pleased in such a manner, and I am not one of those men."

Oh god.

"I, however, provide those potions. And if those were the only potions I provided, those to be used by willing participants, my sins would be few enough. But I also provide the potions that keep the Dark Lord... functioning. Potions that poison. Potions that heal. Potions that torture. And of course I mustn't forget the Veritaserum that will ultimately bring the downfall of those who are now my compatriots. And every batch I brew, I wonder if someone will swallow it and then reveal my betrayal of the Dark Lord...." He dipped one fingertip into the wine, and then watched the drop splash onto the tabletop, idly, as if he discussed the weather. "I wonder if, perhaps, this time I'm brewing my own death."

She reached out to him, reached to touch him...to comfort him...and instead he pulled away and shrugged out of his frock coat, then rolled back his left sleeve.

To expose his Dark Mark.

She'd never seen it, really seen it, before. Glimpses, yes, but never bared for her to examine, but instead she sought his eyes. His flat, black eyes, which jerked back toward his arm, ordering her to *look*, to *see*.

The skull. The snake. The tortured black magical tattoo on his angel-white skin.

Her eyes stung. She felt her shoulders shudder and realized she was crying. "I'm sorry," she gasped. How could she be so weak? She shook her head, dug her fingers into her hair as she pushed it out of her face. *Control yourself, you stupid girl!*

"Why are you crying?" His voice was low, calm.

"It must have hurt horribly. To get it. To... to *want* it."

His head snapped up at that. "Perhaps... yes, when you put it that way, the wanting of it was an ache, a pain that could only be relieved by receiving it, or so I thought." He stretched his arm further and touched her cheek and forced her to look into his eyes, eyes that now glittered.

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice turned to velvet. "It did not hurt to receive the Dark Mark. Receiving the Dark Mark ignites every pleasure sensor in your body, in your mind. It turns your body liquid, your mind incandescent. It's an explosion unlike anything you have ever experienced before, or will again...."

His eyes were pure black seduction, and fear jolted through her. Fear that if he wanted her to, she would do anything for him, and for one terrifying moment, anything was a frightening thought indeed.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" he asked.

No. No. She wanted to pull away, but couldn't. *No*.

Suddenly, he gave her cheek a sharp slap. Not hard, but stinging. "Think!" he snarled. "Tell me what I just told you. Use your brain...."

She rubbed her cheek, suddenly angry, the spell broken.

"How dare you!"

He grabbed her hand and held it. "*Think*."

Choking on fear and anger, she finally reached for control and tried to do just that. What had he told her? And why?

And then it came to her.

"The Dark Lord... doesn't control his followers through fear, but instead... he exploits their desires...."

His grip on her hand loosened, and he stroked her cheek. She flinched away from him and refused to meet his eyes.

"And...?"

And. She swallowed. "He allows people to be used the way they want to be used." And suddenly, with sharp clarity, she realized something else, something even more frightening. "He doesn't send you off to risk your life and do things you hate doing and pretend to be someone you aren't, for the greater good. He allows you to serve him in ways that bring you... satisfaction."

"Very good, Miss Granger." He retreated to his glass. "Although the day always comes when his desires take precedence, the fact is that he has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to lackeys to do his bidding. Why force anyone to do anything they might find distasteful? Why refuse someone anything they might find pleasurable? The way to build a loyal base of followers isn't through fear, but through temptation." He glanced at her across the rim of his goblet. "And what would your temptation be?"

She jerked her eyes away from him. She tossed the grapes onto the table and rubbed her hands on her blue jeans and felt the uneasy energy skittering through her veins. *You* was the word that echoed through her head and the reason she refused him access to her thoughts.

You.

A thought that confused and terrified her.

"In all fairness," he continued, though even she knew that he was not easily confused with a 'fair' man, "Albus is at a disadvantage. If he only asked people to do that which they found easy, who would do the difficult things? It's not as if the Order is overrun with members with no conscience and few morals."

She glared at her fists as they clenched in her lap. "Why must you be so hard on yourself? There are Aurors who cross every line that exists, and nobody concerns themselves with their lack of conscience and morals!"

He flashed his Dark Mark at her. "Why, indeed?" And tossed back some more wine.

"You're getting drunk," she accused.

He snorted. "There's not enough wine in this bottle to accomplish that feat."

She hoped he was right.

"And tell me," he asked, "why did I choose to serve one master over the other?"

"Because... because Professor Dumbledore is on the side of what is good." She knew even as the words left her lips that they were feeble and foolish.

"I chose Albus because his terms of service came with an end date. If this war ever ends, and I survive it," and at that, his laughter was bitter, "which is unlikely...my role can end. I can walk away."

"Is there no other reason?" she asked.

He averted his eyes. "None that I care to discuss."

"Professor," she said, "I don't believe you. I don't believe that you would choose the Dark, not today. Not now. *I don't believe you*." And what she wanted to say was, *'Stop scaring me.'*

He shrugged.

"What was your... soft spot?" she asked.

She felt him retreat.

"What did he use to tempt you?" she pushed.

She felt his anger.

"Would it work again?" she demanded. "Tell me, tell me what I'm fighting!"

"Don't be a child," he snapped. "You don't get to demand answers from me."

"Why not? Whether or not you think I'm a child, I am your wife."

He stared at her.

She stared back.

"I believe it's time for you to dress for tea."

XX

He leaned against the mantle. What the fuck was he doing?

More to the point, what was *she* doing?

She'd been in the bathroom for an hour, though the quiet Miss Granger who had entered with her things in some sort of zip-bag over her arm was nothing like the Miss Granger who had bounced in from their outing the day before, practically vibrating with excitement over the things she'd brought back with her.

He felt almost guilty for that. She'd been looking forward to her little game of dress-up, and now her movements were heavy with misgiving.

Good. It wasn't a game.

But part of him, a very small part, wished she had a glimmer of the joy she'd had before.

And now, he just wished she'd come out.

She hadn't let him see what she'd retrieved from her mother's closet, and the tension was gnawing at him. What would he do, say, for Merlin's sake, if it was unsuitable?

And now...now, he waited for her to come out, waited with the small accessory he'd retrieved for her, and each moment that passed left him with more misgivings.

It was as if she was hiding from him.

Oh fuck.

She was hiding.

He walked to the door.

"Miss Granger?"

Silence.

"*Miss Granger.*"

"I'll be right out..." Her voice was muffled. And... unhappy.

And fuck fuck fuck.

He dragged his fingers through his hair and forced himself to be calm, to think, for fuck's sake. He could send an owl and tell them she was ill. He was ill. The whole fucking school was ill.

He braced himself for the worst and opened the door.

Holy fucking Merlin's ghost.

Where the fuck was Miss Granger?

And who had taken her place?

She was taller.

Slimmer, if that was possible.

And a woman.

There was nothing girlish about her, and he felt a quite perverse pang of loss, as if someone had robbed him of something... of years, of years *with*er, because she wasn't his Miss Granger, she was someone new who looked like Miss Granger but... wasn't.

He cursed himself for an idiot and forced himself to breathe.

This was what he wanted, what he needed, for fuck's sake. For her to grow up, damn it, and the sooner the better.

He just hadn't expected it to be so...*sosudden*.

He wanted to touch her.

She was sheathed in a soft, topaz-hued garment that skimmed down her body and begged to be touched.

Before he could move or speak, she turned to face him and braced herself against the sink, her eyes wide and shimmering.

"What's...what's wrong?" he asked, his mouth dry. He stepped closer, closer, until he'd joined her at the sink, and fought to keep his hands to himself.

"My hair..." she whimpered. "I can't..." She shook her head helplessly. "It's awful!"

"Horrid," he agreed absent-mindedly, giving in to temptation and stroking her shoulder with his fingertips. "But I'll have you know I've grown quite fond of it."

"Really?" Her eyes were huge, beseeching.

"Miss Granger, would I lie?"

"You are an excellent liar."

He ran his hand from her shoulder, down the snug sleeve that ended at her wrist. She was demurely covered, yet he felt himself stirring as if she were naked.

"I thought you'd end up in *tweed*." He attempted to force acid into his voice, but wasn't at all certain that had worked.

"It's cashmere," she said, her voice choked.

Of course it was, though he'd never imagined an entire frock made of it.

"It's not quite my size. It was made for my mother, and I think, I think it's supposed to cling more." She stared at herself in the mirror and ran her hands down her sides.

Was she blind? No, the dress didn't cling... it caressed.

It wasn't obscene, but Merlin his body reacted as if it were. It draped over her small, firm breasts and hugged her waist and fell to well below her knees, where her calves were hidden by tight, black kid boots...with heels that explained her sudden growth spurt--and he suddenly felt sorry for Narcissa. How cruel, to see this young *Mudblood* enter the room looking like *this*....

And he felt a surge of something that tasted almost like a victory hard won.

His wife...*his wife*...glowed.

And her hair was a disgrace.

"It's a very good thing we stopped by Spinner's End," he snapped. He opened his hand and revealed the charmed hair comb. "It was my mother's."

She took it with a gasp. "It's beautiful!" She traced the carvings...phoenix, runespoor, and unicorn entwined with moonvine. She turned her face up to his, and her lips were parted, and he dearly wanted to kiss them...

He took her hair in his hands and gave it a twist, then secured it with the comb. "Where is your wand?"

She pulled it out of her sleeve.

"Stick it through," he ordered.

Eyebrows meeting in a furrow, she reached behind her head with her wand, and he guided it through her hair at a diagonal.

"It's charmed to disappear," he said. "With this comb, your wand is invisible, but should you need it..." He pulled her hand down to her side and then released it. "Reach for it."

She reached and whipped it out in a fluid movement, then slowly put it back. She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

She stared at herself in the mirror, and he wondered what she saw, and knew from the consternation in her eyes it wasn't what he saw...and he forced himself to swallow.

"Fuck," she muttered.

"Miss Granger!"

"I wanted to surprise you." She turned a pouting face toward him. "I wanted to make an entrance."

"Believe me, you will."

"Really?" Her eyes lit up, and she pushed past him and practically *cheeked* her way out of the bathroom and to the small wooden casket on the bed...

Fuck, if those boots and that dress didn't elevate her normal level of cheek to new heights.

--And she opened the casket and ran her fingers through...

"Bloody fucking hell," he said, following her to stare at the contents.

"My grandmother's rubies," she said matter-of-factly, holding a choker up to her bare throat. "Overkill?"

If there was any blood in his body that wasn't on its way to his groin, it was in his cheeks. Fucking hell, he'd wanted to impress her with his fucking goblets, and here she was, running her fingers through fucking rubies like they were mere trinkets.

And he didn't dare let her wear those rubies to the Malfoys'.

But how to tell her without sounding like a fucking sod who was simply humiliated by her privilege?

Which he fucking was.

She looked up at him and frowned. "Okay, too much." She dropped them back into the casket with a shrug. Then she lifted a ring, simple ring, if one didn't consider the size of the ruby ostentatious, which it fucking was.

"I need a ring, though...." She hesitated, stopped short of actually sliding it on her finger, and then looked at him with an expression of sheer disdain. "This belonged to my grandmother, the witch, not to be confused with my grandmother who was not a witch, but the grandmother who everyone called a witch simply because 'bitch' was considered rude. These rubies were the spoils of war from her third marriage."

And still, she held the ring and didn't put it on.

"Why do you need a ring?" he finally managed to ask.

She was avoiding his eyes; he knew that look, and it almost always meant trouble. Again, the half-shrug. "I just... wanted a ring besides the Ministry ring."

Odd, the way she stressed the word wanted, almost like she meant *needed*.

"It's a very nice ruby," he said placidly, quite proud of his aplomb in the face of extreme duress.

And still she didn't put it on.

"Your grandmother must have been a harridan."

"Well, pretty much so, yes." She twisted the ring in her fingers. "But it's not that, not really." She sighed and was about to slip it on when he closed his hand over hers and stopped her.

"If you don't mind that it's barely larger than a chip..."

She looked up at him expectantly, her lips parted.

"I have a ring."

She inhaled, and her breasts swelled beneath the cashmere, and he cursed himself for raising her expectations.

He crossed briskly to his armoire and opened the drawer. He pulled out the ring box.

She took it from him and opened it, and he saw the silver ring with its runes worn smooth from age, and it's lone, small, dark emerald, and it looked even shabbier than he remembered.

"Please... " she said softly. "Put it on me."

He slid it onto her finger, and it looked ludicrous beside the golden Ministry ring. He was about to pull it off again when she gripped her hand over his fingers and stopped him, and he saw her lips moving and her eyes closed and felt a moment's suspicion. What was she doing, why did she need a ring, and why did she want him to put it on her?

This was spellwork, not sentimental desire.

"Miss Granger," he growled.

Suddenly, her eyes flew open. "Oh! I almost forgot!"

She pulled his hand to her hip, and he felt the outline of her boy-cut knickers, and he totally forgot what he'd been about to say.

Boy-cut knickers. He felt ridiculous relief ease through him.

She was still his Miss Granger.

Then, her eyes fixed on his, she flickered her fingers and...

They fucking disappeared.

"Miss Granger!"

She grinned. "My mother would kill me if I didn't wear appropriate foundation garments."

"What garments? If you think you're going within ten feet of Lucius Malfoy without you knickers..."

"Welcome to the twentieth century, Professor Snape. It's called a thong, and it's miserably uncomfortable, and you're the only person on the planet who could get me to wear one."

She prissed away from him to fetch her cloak.

He swallowed thickly.

At least she didn't seem to be nervous any more.

He hoped that was a good thing.

Sweetly

Chapter 28 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

As always, my regards to JK Rowling for allowing us to revel in her world.

And my profound thanks to my betas, Leigh-Anne and GinnyW!

28. SWEETLY

Hermione climbed the stairs ahead of Professor Snape, and thus was the first to see who waited for them in the Entry Hall.

Professor Snape's soft, "Fuck," revealed the moment when he saw as well.

Professor Dumbledore stood, clearly expecting them, and twinkling for all he was worth, though Hermione saw in an instant that as had often been the case recently, the twinkle seemed all surface and little substance.

"Ah, Severus," he said jovially. "I thought I might catch you on your way out."

Hermione sensed Professor Snape's gait slowing beside her, and the expression on his face was just as misleading as Professor Dumbledore's. He appeared to have the same relaxed sneer he wore most of the time around the Headmaster, but she saw a quick throb of pulse at his throat (and wondered why she should note such a thing) and knew he was caught off guard.

"Albus." He nodded and took Hermione's arm as if to guide her.

"If you don't mind, I think I might walk a bit of the way with you. It's a lovely day, isn't it? I spend too much time cooped up in my office, I fear."

And with that, the three of them were through the front doors and walking down the steps together *genially*.

"Alas, I'm never invited to tea at the Malfoy's, and I do suspect that it's my loss. I wonder what kind of biscuits Narcissa will have. The Black girls always received the most delicious lemon biscuits from home."

Hermione felt Professor Snape's arm turn to marble under her fingers, and she squeezed it silently.

"Tea at the Malfoy's can be a disarming experience," he agreed *genially*, "as long as one is careful to check for poison before sipping."

Professor Dumbledore's laughter filled the air around them. "I'm sure you'll both have a delightful time." At that, he aimed his twinkle full bore at Hermione. "Do give Narcissa my best regards, Miss..." He broke off and tried again. "Hermione."

"I will," she responded nervously.

"Did you have anything in particular to share, Albus?" Professor Snape spat, there clearly being a limit to how much geniality he could muster.

"No, have a lovely time," the Headmaster responded, sucking on a sherbet lemon. "Oh, and if you'll just allow me..."

Hermione felt her cloak billow and a strange, gentle suction swirl around both she and Professor Snape.

"All gone, now." Professor Dumbledore beamed. "Cat hair."

XX

Fucking hell.

Snape's mind raced.

Albus knew about the tea, *how?*

And of course, that wasn't the issue at all. In fact, Albus *should* know about the tea.

The issue was much worse, was appalling and unprecedented.

Snape hadn't told him about the tea.

He hadn't told him *anything*.

He hadn't reported in after the last summoning to the Dark Lord.

And Albus knew it.

And his mind raced.

Fucking hell. What had he been thinking? What the hell had he--

"Professor, I have to stop in at the greenhouses," Miss Granger said, her tone worried. "We have time, don't we?"

He looked down into her eyes, and it came back to him in a wave.

He hadn't gone to Albus to report, because he'd gone to her.

He'd entered the castle with no thought except to go to her.

He'd gone in full Death Eater mode.

He'd found her worried, as if she actually cared what happened to him.

He'd suggested that she prove it.

She had hit him.

He hadn't gone to Albus.

No fucking wonder Albus looked at him with suspicion.

No fucking wonder.

She tugged his arm lightly, and he allowed her to. He allowed her to go to the greenhouses...why the greenhouses?...while his mind raced. How else had he slipped? He hadn't reported in to his superior, for fuck's sake. What else had he missed?

He watched her bend over the charmed cutting garden and, with her wand, neatly cut a handful of silver jonquils. She rose, and with a bit more wand waving, charmed them in a stasis spell and bound them in white ribbons.

The eyes she turned up to him were concerned; she put her hand on his arm and led him back toward the path that would take them to the Apparition point outside the grounds.

Fucking hell.

XX

They Apparated straight into Malfoy Manor.

Apparating at best was disconcerting, but arriving in what she could only think of as an enemy's home was worse.

And so, she suddenly found herself standing in a black marble Apparition Foyer clinging to Professor Snape with a bouquet of out-of-season flowers, off-balance, and being stared down by Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. The black marble had been chosen with care to provide the perfect dramatic backdrop for Malfoy beauty.

Both faces melted into the most gracious of welcomes.

He wore dark charcoal robes; hers were silver-grey. They were both tall and elegant with long white-blond hair that hung past their shoulders. And they were so beautiful.

She flickered her eyes away...were either of them capable of Legilimency?...as an unwanted image of *revels* flashed across her mind.

No wonder they had been the Dark Lord's favorites.

"Severus," Narcissa cooed, leaning forward to give Professor Snape kisses on either side of his face. Then she turned to Hermione and held out her hands. "And your blushing bride."

She recognized the scent from the invitation. Narcissa's scent was as lovely as her face, and then...it was gone. Vanished. Hermione glanced at Professor Snape. His eyes told her nothing, but she was sure he'd done that.

Hermione stepped forward with a smile and offered the bouquet. "Madam Malfoy."

And she felt herself *twinkling*.

Narcissa looked startled as she accepted the flowers.

"*Narcissus argenteus*," Hermione explained with a sweet smile. At least, she hoped it was sweet. She was aiming for sweet. "I saw them and thought of you."

"Lucius, aren't they lovely?" Narcissa lifted them to her nose and inhaled, seeming delighted. "And please, you must call me Narcissa, and I must call you Hermione if we are to become friends."

Friends?

And then Lucius Malfoy bent over her hand and brushed his lips across her fingertips in greeting, and she willed every cell in her body to submit with grace... even as she felt his eyes drag up her body centimeter by centimeter as he slowly rose and smiled into her eyes. "Interesting rings."

"The Ministry ring is hideous, isn't it?" she asked, "but I'm stuck with it, I'm afraid." She touched the emerald. "This one, however, I hope to wear for a very long time."

He merely arched his eyebrows.

She didn't allow herself to look for Professor Snape's reaction.

"Come with me, Hermione," Narcissa said, taking her hand. "I thought we'd have tea in the sitting room. I'm sure the men will want to retreat to Lucius's study."

"On the contrary." Professor Snape's silken voice behind them sent relief coursing through her.

"Surely, Severus, you haven't developed a tolerance for female nattering," Narcissa cooed.

"Hardly. But I seem to have developed a recent fondness for tea."

Narcissa's sitting room was stunning, and to Hermione's great surprise, a deep shade of rose. Simply by entering the room, Narcissa's icy beauty took on an astonishing warmth. She couldn't have chosen a better colour for herself, and Hermione felt at once totally out of her realm, not to mention totally lacking in femininity.

She also felt a sense of wonder that anyone should devote so much attention to showing themselves off.

She noted the lovely Regency work table, rosewood with inlaid ebony, against the far wall...a table not unlike the one at the V&A that her own grandmother had donated before her birth.

And the gold-framed mirror hanging over it.

The charmed mirror? No doubt.

She looked away with a chill, knowing she'd not look directly at it again.

A small arrangement of deep pink roses centered the tea table. Narcissa held the silver jonquils over the roses and released them. With a gentle wave of her wand she performed a spell that sent them nestling here and there in the bouquet, resulting in a perfect counterpoint to the unrelenting pink.

"How sweet," she said, eyeing it thoughtfully, then turning her attention to Hermione. "I've never... Nobody has ever associated my name with the flowers."

"It's a beautiful name." Hermione sat in a dainty chair. "We aren't all so fortunate."

"No one told me you were such a sweet girl," Narcissa replied, taking her own seat, leaving the men to perch uncomfortably on chairs clearly not intended for comfort.

Narcissa poured the tea and offered a cup to Hermione.

Which was promptly intercepted by Professor Snape, who sniffed it, before passing it along.

"Severus!" Narcissa exclaimed.

Lucius choked back a snort of amusement.

"No offense, but I can't be too careful," Professor Snape drawled, and Hermione was stunned by his bluntness. Until he added, "It seems my wife isn't popular with house-elves."

This time Lucius didn't hold his laughter back, and even Narcissa smirked.

Hermione aimed a glare at her husband, who blithely ignored it as he offered her the cup. "It's safe," he reassured her.

Hermione took it with as much aplomb as she could manage, added milk, stirred, and then left it sitting on the table. She'd lost any appetite she'd had for tea.

She noticed Professor Snape sip his, grimace, and put it beside hers.

Quickly, to cover his rudeness, she said, "Professor Dumbledore asked me to send you his regards. He said he has fond memories of your lemon biscuits."

"I'm sure," drawled Lucius Malfoy with ill grace, "he has only to mention them to *Dobby* and he can have his fill."

Oooh, that still smarts, does it? This time it was Hermione who hid a smirk.

Narcissa spoke up quickly this time; it seemed the role of the women to keep peace. "We'd hoped Draco could join us today, but alas, Professor Dumbledore didn't consider this an important enough occasion to excuse his absence from Hogwarts." She offered Hermione the biscuits. "I hope Draco has accepted your marriage with grace," she said smoothly. "We have raised him to be a gentleman."

A gentleman? Is that what they called it? "He has accepted my marriage with all the grace of the gentleman that he is."

The silence in the room intensified as three people pondered her meaning and Hermione avoided everyone's eyes. She took a small bite of lemon biscuit. They were quite nice; she must ask Dobby for some. Then, deciding to meet fire with fire, she added, "But I'm sure Draco is quite happy. It's not as if he really wanted to marry me." She met Lucius Malfoy's grey gaze across the table without blinking.

"And Severus did?" he responded, eyes gleaming.

Narcissa flinched.

Professor Snape froze.

Hermione smiled prettily. "I don't think he had a choice."

"Lucius," Professor Snape snarled, "don't you have some brandy to offer me, before my child bride further emasculates me?"

But she had the distinct feeling that he was pleased.

And it didn't seem fair that men got brandy while she was stuck with truly horrid tea.

And this time when he said "child bride," it didn't sound like he was complaining.

She watched the two men leave and felt a dull pang as the door closed and Professor Snape was gone.

"Well then," Narcissa said, "we can settle down to witch talk." She glanced at Hermione's flat stomach. "I suppose it's too early for you to be showing, but I hear you and Severus have happy news?"

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione stared from her own body to Narcissa, astounded.

"Oh, good news does fly quickly, my dear. Draco owled me when he sent his regrets for tea."

"But...why would he owl such a thing? It's not even true!"

Narcissa's elegant eyebrows managed to rise without wrinkling her brow. "Well, I suppose it might be a false rumour?"

"Extremely," Hermione responded, confused, and planned to hex a certain Slytherin swot for spreading it.

"Well, never fret, that will happen soon enough," Narcissa soothed, as if soothing were in order, for Merlin's sake. She reached for a white leather album on the table and began flipping through the pages of magical photos. "I thought it might be amusing for you to see some pictures of Severus when we were all young together."

Hermione kept her expression properly schooled to polite interest. "But surely you still are. Young, I mean?" She met the older witch's eyes and smiled.

Narcissa's own smile was thin-lipped. She found the picture she was looking for, and her eyes gleamed with triumph. "I've always been particularly fond of this one."

She offered the album to Hermione, turning it so that she could see.

Narcissa seemed entirely too pleased with herself. Hermione finally lowered her eyes to the photograph.

It was a stunning contrast of light and dark, of beauty and drama.

The picture had clearly been taken at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Narcissa lounged on one of the ostentatious green sofas, leaning against Lucius. They were so incredibly young but filled with confidence and almost too beautiful and elegant for their surroundings.

It was no wonder that it took her longer to shift her attention to the other couple on the sofa, a couple as dark as the Malfoys were light. Her heart caught in her throat. Professor Snape. Oh, god, he was younger than she was now, but still with that soft sneer curling his lips as he let one languid hand curl around the bare neck of the beautiful black-haired witch sitting beside him, leaning into his body, practically purring.

Hermione found herself transfixed by his hand, his fingers, delicately stroking that graceful throat as the girl arched into the sensation, her own face half-sneer, half-lust...

Hermione felt a quick stab.

Desire, sexual awareness, and *experience* simply sparked between them. It was so palpable that it was still evident two decades later.

The young witch in the photograph turned her head to glance up at her young lover, her lips parted in sultry invitation...

The girl's movement exposed the back of her head.

And the heavy coil of glossy black hair.

With a wand shoved through at a diagonal, holding it securely in place.

Bellatrix Black.

"I knew someone once who..."

She fought for calm, fought not to show how bloody hard it was to breathe. She fought not to raise her eyes to Narcissa's, knowing what the older witch was waiting to see.

And then she did it. She met Narcissa's eager gaze and said, her voice smooth and steady, "She was so beautiful."

Narcissa blinked. This was obviously not the reaction she expected.

"How sad," Hermione said evenly, "that life has been so unkind to her." And she knew they were now both thinking of the cadaverous woman with skull-like features who had broken out of Azkaban and was now at large.

"Yes," Narcissa said crisply, taking the album back. "But then," she added, her voice cold with thinly-veiled threat, "life isn't through with any of us, yet."

Hermione reached behind her head and yanked the charmed comb out of her hair and let her hair come tumbling down.

She tucked her wand up her sleeve and reached for a lemon biscuit.

XX

"Interesting," the Dark Lord said softly. "Very interesssting."

What the bloody hell was that about?

Severus and Lucius sat in leather wing chairs on either side of the Dark Lord, a large charmed mirror Levitating before them so that they could view the actions in Narcissa's sitting room.

Actions such as Miss Granger sitting as regally as a queen, smiling with something that could almost be mistaken for warmth if one didn't actually know Miss Granger.

And now, as she yanked his mother's comb from her hair and sent it spilling down around her shoulders in a wild, tangled mane.

Her eyes burned in her face, and he noted the slightest tremble in her fingers as she tucked her wand into her sleeve.

What the bloody hell had Narcissa said?

The album. A photo album. Pictures...

Bella.

Yet, despite it all, Miss Granger still seemed wrapped in a polite calm. She continued to make small talk, her posture as perfect and effortless as Minerva only wished hers was.

He couldn't tear his eyes from her and, luckily, didn't need to. The Dark Lord would assume he was simply worried that his young wife would embarrass him.

Lucius, too, was fascinated. While that should bother him, and did, at this point he just wanted her to survive for a few more minutes, and then they could take their leave.

"She seems... shaken, Severusss. What type of seduction have you used to have her so smitten with you so quickly?" The Dark Lord sounded truly intrigued. "A potion?"

"I'm struck that you think I'd need a potion to inspire such an affection from my young bride. Truly struck." He fought to calm his pulse. "I believe it's known as Stockholm Syndrome."

The Dark Lord barked with laughter.

Lucius merely looked put out. He didn't like being left out of jokes, but liked lowering himself to ask for explanation even less.

"She doesn't seem like she's broken, Severus," Lucius drawled in a voice that was everything rich and seductive that his son's was not. "Tsk, tsk, I expected better from you after all your boasts."

"You don't think she's broken?" Snape snapped. "Then perhaps you have no idea that she loathes you completely...that even being in your home goes against her every instinct...and yet she's here because I demanded it."

Lucius adjusted his position in his chair and stretched his long legs out before him. "I suppose that exquisitely seductive gown she's wearing could cover a multitude of bruises," he said.

Severus didn't dignify his statement with a response.

Bella.

How had he not seen this coming?

And suddenly, the sick feeling was there again. What the hell else had he missed?

"The problem with you, Lucius," the Dark Lord remarked softly, "is you don't realize that the most effective bruises don't show."

XX

Narcissa offered a silver-wrapped package across the table. "I know you'll appreciate that I saved this to give you in private," she said. "Just a little bride-gift."

"Too pretty to open." But it was too much to hope that she could actually put off opening the thing until Narcissa's...and the Dark Lord's...eyes weren't on her. Hermione touched her wand to the pretty silk ribbon, and it slithered out of its bow and to the floor.

The lid levitated, and the box lay open in her lap.

A red negligee with gold cord at the shoulders.

See-through.

Gaudy.

Horrid.

"Gryffindor colors," Narcissa said sweetly.

"I've never had anything like it," Hermione responded with enthusiasm and brutal honesty.

"Ah, I'm glad you like it."

"Indeed."

"Severus always liked Bella in red."

Hermione felt she had choices.

She could continue the farce.

She could continue the game.

But since she'd already decided against that, she had a myriad of ways to end it, some quite diabolically pleasing.

But somewhere in this house, Professor Snape waited for her to finish with poise.

He'd brought her here...blast his black-hearted soul to hell...brought her into this nest of beautiful vipers.

His friends.

But he'd told her his expectations, and she'd be buggered if she didn't meet them.

So she drew on her training, and even though she felt the desire to hex and destroy shimmering in her fingertips, she focused on the teapot...

And watched it explode and shower the room in porcelain shards.

One of which hit the gold-framed mirror on the wall.

Which promptly shattered as well.

How is that for a bit of wandless magic, Professor?

Then she managed to look as shocked and perplexed as Narcissa.

XX

"Very interesting."

The mirror before them now only reflected back their images. A flick of fingers, and it disappeared.

"I believe," the Dark Lord continued, "your little bride has had enough tea today, Severus. Don't you agree?"

Relief coursed through him. "Indeed."

"Lucius," the Dark Lord said silkily. "Please escort Madam Snape back to Hogwarts."

"But, my Lord..." Snape began.

"I live to serve," Lucius responded, bowing with a smirk.

With a *pop* he was gone.

Leaving Severus and the Dark Lord alone.

Tested

Chapter 29 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

29. TESTED

Hermione closed the gift box without touching the thing inside it. She rose to her feet, determined to end the farce.

"I'm so honoured to have been your guest," she said, "but I fear it's time for me to return to my studies. You can just tell Professor Snape that I..."

"No need to tell *Professor Snape* anything," Lucius said, lounging in the only door to the room. His stress on her formal address would have made her cringe, if her heart hadn't already been in her throat and her body practically trembling with the need to get away.

Narcissa raised a brow at her husband in curiosity.

"Severus asked me to tell you that he is *involved* and won't be able to escort your return to Hogwarts." He sketched a quick but courtly bow. "Thus I am to stand in his stead."

"I can assure you that I don't need an escort," she began, heaping an entirely new collection of curses on her husband's dark soul.

But Lucius would have none of it. He ignored his wife and turned his commanding presence to Hermione. "I wouldn't hear of such a thing," he oozed, guiding her back to the Apparition Foyer. "In fact, I quite look forward to..."

Hermione had no idea what he was looking forward to. Nor did she intend to find out. The instant her foot crossed the threshold into the Apparition Foyer, she whipped out her wand and Disapparated.

Leaving Lucius Malfoy standing, beautiful mouth agape in mid-sentence.

XX

"Your little Gryffindor kitten is jealous, Severusss."

Fuck. Of course the Dark Lord would know what Narcissa was up to. He had most likely planned the entire thing. Snape shrugged, waiting for more.

"So very jealousss."

"I hope you find that satisfactory, my Lord?" he ventured.

"Indeed. The question remains, are you?"

"Satisfied?"

"Jealous."

Ah.

Severus eased from the leather chair and knelt before the Dark Lord, offering him his eyes.

The images flew by, and he could sense his Master's pleasure as one image after another revealed Potter.

Potter, angry. Potter, worried. Potter, sending malevolent glares from behind his cauldron in Potions. Potter, toying with his wand and staring at his Potions master, when he thought he wasn't being observed.

Weasley, confused, holding her as she cried.

He stopped there, as Snape knew he would.

He withdrew.

"And what was that about, Severusss?"

"My wife crying in another man's arms because she loves me." He smirked.

"So you do make her suffer." There was silence, and then, the Dark Lord's slow applause. "Bravo, my boy. Bravo."

Snape returned to his chair. "You ask if I'm jealous. That would imply that I *cared*." He traced the soft leather with his fingertips. "However, I must confess to being possessive. When one has little, one grows selfish about those few things that one truly *possesses*."

"Poor boy. You aren't going to pout because I sent Lucius to take your witch home, are you?"

"Pout? Me?" He let his slow smile quirk and eased more deeply into the chair, prepared for a long visit.

Again, the laughter. The Dark Lord seemed in a very good mood this day. "It was a test, Severusss. A test. Surely my professor understands the need for testing from time to time?"

"I only hope I performed adequately."

"Ah, Severusss. And who said the test was for you?"

XX

She Apparated with a stomach-churning *crack* and landed off-balance, falling against the stone wall with a sharp blow to her forehead.

She pushed herself upright and shook her head to clear it. Nobody had seen her; she was safe so far.

She stepped into Diagon Alley feeling horribly conspicuous in her Muggle clothes. She must be shimmering...she felt the way she'd felt when Professor Snape had dragged her to their quarters so she wouldn't be seen, when Madam Hooch had told her that her magic shimmered, and now she desperately needed to find a safe place, a place where Lucius Malfoy wouldn't find her, where nobody would see her.

She knew he'd gone straight to the Hogwarts Apparation spot, assuming that's where she would go. But hopefully he wouldn't think of 93 Diagon Alley.

She shoved the door open and belatedly realized that the absolute worst place to lose control of her magic would be in the middle of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. She fought a hysterical laugh and pushed her way past a group of young wizards examining the fake wands, walked faster...faster...until she reached the counter, and a tall redhead turned to look at her, startled.

"Fred."

"I'm George," he answered, staring at her and then letting out a low whistle. "Hermione, you clean up quite nicely..." he began.

"I need...I need your failed bits," she gasped. "Where are they?"

Evidently her appearance was enough to convince him. George took her by the elbow and dragged her to the back room and a barrel of discarded products.

"Where's...where's the alley?" she begged.

George pointed to one of the doors, and Hermione desperately levitated the barrel ahead of her. "Stay back," she gasped.

And closing the door behind her, she whipped out her wand and levitated the first discarded item into the air and broke it.

Then another.

And another.

Until the ground around her was littered with broken bits of products that hadn't passed muster and hadn't been deemed worthy of selling.

Until she felt the uncontrolled rage and magic easing from her fingertips, from her heart, from her body.

When she slumped against the wall, the door opened, and the twins came out, staring from the debris to Hermione and back again.

"Wicked," George said. Or was it Fred?

The other one added, "What did the greasy git do to get you so worked up, 'Mione?"

She stood up straight, forcing her voice to be calm. "I need an escort back to Hogwarts."

One of the twins...clearly George...looked askance. "Seems like we've done this before."

"I'm serious. I've got to go back and..." She looked away. "I think Lucius Malfoy might be waiting for me."

The twins exchanged glances and this time it was unison. "Wicked."

She had her escorts. Two of them.

XX

"If not for me, then who is the test for?" Snape ventured to ask, hoping he wasn't overstepping by asking, but unable to let it hang.

"Do you trust your friend?"

"Should I?"

"You are too slippery by far, Severusss, but I will let you get away with it... today."

At that moment Narcissa entered the study.

"Your wife," she said coolly, "didn't trust Lucius, it seems. She Disapparated and left him behind."

Snape closed his eyes briefly. *Fuck, did she just fail the test dismally or pass it brilliantly, and what exactly does passing or failing mean?* Despite it all, he felt a momentary surge of relief that she wasn't alone with Malfoy.

Yet.

"Where is Luciusss?"

"He went after her." Narcissa lowered her head respectfully. "She is an ungrateful girl who knows nothing of wizard etiquette." With that, she glared at Snape.

"I'm sure you did your best to teach by example," the Dark Lord replied.

She froze and slid a cautious look in his direction. "I did."

Snape stifled an urge to growl. He needed to leave, to find her...

"Severusss..."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Go find your wife."

He dropped to the floor and kissed the Dark Lord's hem.

"I live to serve," he said fervently and left without a word to his hostess.

XX

"We'd better do side-along," Fred said firmly. "Frankly, Hermione, you look like shite."

And for once, she didn't argue. With a twin on either side of her, each grabbing an arm, she felt the sickening tug behind her navel and the squeezing and...

They landed outside the Hogwarts gate.

This time, she didn't fall. This time, she was supported.

It was almost dark and the shadows were deep. She scanned the area. It seemed empty.

But....

"Come along," George...she thought it was George...said. "We'll get you inside."

"Walk slow, though," Fred added. "It's a lovely day for hexing a Malfoy."

They laughed, and she wished she could feel better. Safer? Yes, she felt safe as houses. But better... she didn't expect to feel better for a very long time.

I know someone who...

She fought to walk straight, to seem strong, and was doing a good job of it when Lucius Malfoy stepped forward on the other side of the gate.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Weasley, but I don't believe Albus would appreciate you hexing a guest of Hogwarts," he said unctuously. And then, to Hermione, "Hermione, you left so quickly..." He held out her cloak and her bride-gift. "You seem to have forgotten your things." His smile was gracious, his manner polite, and everything about him reeked of insincerity.

She met his eyes. "Thank you." She took them from his hands. "And thank Narcissa for a lovely tea." She wanted to ask, "Where is he? Where is my husband?" but she felt that the words, if spoken, would turn into shrieks....

She turned away from him blindly and joined the twins and walked toward the castle.

"Mione," Fred asked quietly. "What's going on?"

"Just a very bad day," she whispered. "That's all. I know it sounds foolish, but nothing is really wrong. It's just been a very bad day."

They reached the top steps and after casting a look over her shoulder, and seeing Lucius still at the foot of the hill, watching, Hermione entered the castle with the twins on her heels.

"That's not a bad day," George muttered. "You're terrified."

She turned her eyes on him and pinned him. "Terrified of what I might do to him if we're left alone together," she snapped. She swallowed hard. "Thank you. Thank you for bringing me."

"Hermione," Fred said with a grin, "you asked the wrong twin to bring you here the last time. If you'd asked me, I would have had you at Gretna Green within the hour, and you wouldn't be married to the old bat now."

George cleared his throat.

Hermione followed his gaze.

The old bat was standing behind them.

She wanted to fly into his arms.

Instead, with her cloak and the awful, awful bride-gift clutched to her breasts, she walked past him and headed to the stairway that would take her to the dungeon.

XX

When he found her, she was sitting on the floor by the fire. She had lit no candles; only firelight illuminated the room.

She held their photographs in her hands.

The one from the Yule Ball that the Creevey boy had given them.

The one from their wedding.

"Miss Granger..."

She raised bright eyes to him...too bright. "I wish I had a photograph of you from back then," she said, her voice hoarse. She rushed on, "Not that one. Not Narcissa's. But ... another one."

Fuck it all to hell and back.

"Miss Granger, I am not going to apologize for something that happened before you were fucking born."

"Of course not." She didn't meet his eyes.

"And I'll be damned if I explain a tawdry little episode from when I was fourteen..."

"Fourteen!" She dropped the photos to the floor, and her face, if possible, blanched paler in the firelight.

Fuck.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammered. "It has nothing to do with...with me. With us." She grabbed a fistful of her own hair and pulled it forward, hiding her profile from him.

Her hands trembled.

Her shoulders trembled.

What the bloody hell was he supposed to do? He couldn't erase his past. Even she seemed to admit that...yet she was acting as if he'd done something to her.

It had nothing to do with her.

And he wasn't going to pretend it did and apologize just to make her feel better, damn it.

And then, he caught a glimpse of her forehead...a bloody gash. He lunged forward, pulled her face up the better to see, and touched it. "How did this happen?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I did it when I...when I Apparated."

And she burst into tears.

And he pulled her against him and put his arms around her, confused. When she Apparated?

"Why..." she gasped. "Why did you tell *him* to bring me back?"

He felt a sickening lurch. "I didn't...Merlin, is that what you thought?" Hell, of course that's what she would think. He stroked her hair, her horrid hair, out of her face.

But he'd let it happen, hadn't he?

He'd had no choice.

But he'd let it happen.

And he had no excuse to offer her because he'd be bloody well damned if he told her at this moment that he'd allowed the Dark Lord to make that decision for him.

Fuck.

"Miss Granger." He turned her face up to his. "Look at me."

Her face was splotchy and her eyes swollen as she looked up at him, swallowing her tears.

"You were brilliant." He held her chin firmly, not letting her duck away from him again. "Narcissa still doesn't know what hit her."

She drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

"I can't imagine how the hell you thought the Weasley twins could protect you from anything," he added with a sneer, "but under the circumstances, they were better than the alternative."

"If you consider Lucius Malfoy the alternative, they were a damn sight better!" she snapped.

"Language," he warned.

"Bite me," she said, and it would have been a lot more impressive had it not been accompanied by a loud sniff. And then, "Really? I was...?"

She evidently couldn't bring herself to say it, so he said it for her.

"Bloody fucking brilliant."

And as she nestled closer against him and he stroked her horrid, horrid hair, he considered that, once again, he had forgotten to go to Albus first.

Friday

Chapter 30 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Thanks to JK Rowling for allowing these liberties.

Thanks to Leigh-Anne for fabulous beta-work.

30. FRIDAY

She drifted in and out of an uneasy sleep.

Sometimes, it was voices haunting her.

"... a tawdry little episode from when I was fourteen..."

Fourteen!

Sometimes, eyes.

Glittering black eyes, staring down at her up tilted face.

"You were brilliant."

Sometimes, it was an image.

Half-sneer, half-lust.

Bellatrix.

Voice.

"Bloody fucking brilliant."

Narrowed blue eyes.

"Severus always liked Bella in red." Bella...

She'd thought the dreams couldn't get worse.

"Receiving the Dark Mark ignites every pleasure sensor in your body, in your mind. It turns your body liquid, your mind incandescent. It's an explosion unlike anything you have ever experienced before, or will again...."

Oh, god, what kind of pleasure was that, and how it must haunt him. Did he still hunger for it?

Or ever will again.

Pain gnawed at her, the tightness in her chest grown to a surly beast.

And then, those blue eyes she loved so well.

"You mean, you really...you really love him?"

And her own foolish voice.

"Of course I do...."

And then, dimly...

Red eyes.

She awoke in terror, the pain full-blown and horrible, and trembled with it.

"Shhh..."

She heard the quieting noise in the darkness and then his voice.

"...just a bad dream..."

He pulled her to him.

Attempted to stroke her hair.

His hand fell limply across her face as his soft, steady breathing warmed her throat.

The blood in her veins slowed.

Calmed.

Finally, she slept.

XX

Hermione pretended an interest in her bangers, beans and toast. Thus, she paid no attention to the owls, not expecting any. However, when one dropped a Hogwarts-issue internal message in front of her breakfast plate, she was more than a tad startled.

But when a second arrived with a familiar (and thus alarming) red envelope, she was astonished.

She reached to open it; not to open it would be worse.

Immediately, Molly Weasley's voice blasted into the Great Hall.

"So, none of my boys are good enough for you, young lady, but every time you get in trouble you turn to a Weasley to bail you..."

And it exploded.

As ash drifted over her plate, she watched Professor lazily replace his wand and return to his own breakfast.

"I didn't know you could shut off a Howler," she said.

"Now you do."

A glance toward the Gryffindor table revealed Ron's flushed face. She wasn't sure whether he was angry or embarrassed, but it was clear from the expression he shot at Professor Snape that he'd dearly love to know that spell.

"You have another," Professor Snape reminded her with a soft sneer.

She reached for the unopened message. It unrolled when her fingers touched it.

Fortunately, this message was routine and silent.

A summons to the hospital wing for "routine healthcare" signed by Madam Pomfrey.

"I'll be late," she sighed to Professor Snape, showing it to him.

Hermione wished she could send a Howler in response.

XX

"Now, Madam Snape," Madam Pomfrey said as she bustled about, closing the white curtain and casting a privacy charm. "This won't take long, but it's a bit overdue. I'm meeting with all our new wives..."

"This isn't necessary," Hermione interrupted, "and it's making me late to my Potions study."

"It is necessary," Madam Pomfrey said crisply. "It won't take long, but you will cooperate with me."

Hermione clutched her school robes closed in a reflexive action.

"You don't have to undress, dear. This is a quite superficial exam." Madam Pomfrey flittered about, whisking her wand and muttering soft incantations under her breath. "Open, please," she said and checked Hermione's throat. Then her ears, her eyes, and a whisk of the wand over her wrist revealed a silvery set of numbers that were evidently her blood pressure and pulse.

One last whisk of the wand over her abdomen and another quiet incantation, and Madam Pomfrey seemed relieved and satisfied. "So, you're not pregnant?"

Hermione felt herself draw up straighter. "Of course not! Who said...has Draco Malfoy been spreading more lies about me?"

"Mr. Malfoy?" Madam Pomfrey looked surprised. "Why would he know anything about your medical conditions? No, Letitia Spiggott...I'm sorry, Merriman...was in, per your advice, or so she said? Very good of you to send her to me." She shook her head in frustration. "I was able to give the Merrimans some literature that will help them in the... transition required as a newly married couple learn to adjust to one another," Madam Pomfrey ended primly.

Then she fixed a sharp eye on Hermione. "And next time you decide to offer marital advice, my dear, I hope you remember that when advising a young wife on how to handle a Hufflepuff husband, one's responses don't have to be as extreme and physical as you evidently think is necessary when one's husband is Slytherin?"

Hermione stared at her, mouth agape. What had Letitia done?

And worse, what did Madam Pomfrey think Hermione had done to her... Slytherin husband? She thought Hermione had...would...

Madam Pomfrey patted her hand. "There, there, I know it's difficult. These things can take time. Has... has Severus been too..."

"No!" Hermione cried. "He hasn't been too anything."

"You can tell me, Hermione. I'm a medical professional and..."

"There's nothing to tell." Hermione fought for calm. Even in her distress she realized that overreacting would make things look worse. "I can assure you, I have had no need to hex my husband." She tilted her nose in the air in an affronted sniff.

"I should think not," Madam Pomfrey muttered, but clearly she assumed it was more out of fear of the husband in question than the absence of need.

Hermione stood. "I really am late. Thank you for your concern, but...Oh, Merlin. Letitia told you she thought I was pregnant?"

"She said you sought refuge in the girls' bathroom because you weren't feeling well, and I'm afraid she jumped to that conclusion, yes."

"And Draco Malfoy passed that information along to his mother," Hermione said through gritted teeth. "So what you're saying is, all of Hogwarts thinks I'm pregnant?"

"I can't answer for the whole of the school, but gossip being what it is..." Madam Pomfrey spread her hands apologetically. "I'm sorry, dear. Time will prove them wrong, though, won't it?"

Hermione left the hospital wing with a snarl.

XX

He had assigned a simple Swelling Solution to the second-year Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff class and had managed to control them with the occasional glare and sweep around the classroom.

Now, he sat at his desk with nothing to distract him from the image he'd seen in Miss Granger's memory.

Merlin's sodding bollocks, he'd forgotten how beautiful she'd been.

It was hard to blame his fourteen-year-old self for falling under her spell. But those were memories he'd managed to put aside, and now they were back full force.

He'd never quite figured out how he'd earned her interest, other than the fact that his height had made up for the fact that she was older, he'd been a dab hand at contraceptive potions and she wanted to learn more, and they had made an exotic contrast to Cissy and Lucius's pale glamour.

Bella had been older and definitely more experienced, and his offended refusal to participate in her more sophisticated sexual tastes...not being willing to stick his tongue in any of her orifices...had meant the end of their little affair a little sooner than he would have liked. But there was no heartbreak there. He'd been swept into the Slytherin inner circle, had enjoyed a willing witch's attentions, and those were heady things indeed for an attention- and affection-hungry young Severus Snape.

He didn't hate himself for it.

He also didn't like remembering it.

It had been tawdry with much shagging in inappropriate places, and once...he'd never been convinced it had been purely accidental...Lucius had walked in on them and waited a bit too long before coughing and retreating with a few words about locks and silencing charms.

And Bella had arched and laughed and increased her movements in response. And he'd responded to her, even as he felt blistered with embarrassment that he quickly forced to anger.

Even now, he blistered at the memory, but the anger was too old to surface on command.

But not his anger at Narcissa for bringing it all back.

For wrapping it in a pretty bow and bringing it to Miss Granger.

Though of course it hadn't been Narcissa at all.

Fuck the Dark Lord and his fucking tests.

He raised his head to see a young Hufflepuff with hand lifted in the air. "Professor Snape," the child said, voice wobbly, "I chopped my anitottle root instead of shredding it."

"Five point from Hufflepuff. Go into the supply closet..." He broke off. "I'll fetch you some more."

He stood and walked through the corner door to the closet.

She was so caught up in her brewing she didn't see him standing in the doorway, even after he closed it gently behind him.

Her face was flushed with steam, and her hair wild around her face as she stirred, counting under her breath. She should have spelled the stirring rod instead of risking getting the count wrong. The only thing that stopped him from telling her so was that the very act of pointing out her error could, in fact, cause her to get the count wrong.

With a wave of his fingers, he retrieved another anitottle root from the pile on the work counter.

She didn't notice it fly across the room.

Nor did she notice when he opened the door again and sent it to the student who awaited it.

Nor did she notice when he closed the door again and leaned against it, studying her and her project.

The color of the liquid was near perfect...a dark aubergine. When she completed the stirring and let it sit for five minutes, if brewed correctly it would take on a pearlescent shimmer.

She stopped stirring, lifted the rod straight up out of the liquid so that it disturbed as little of the surface as possible and in fact only dripped a single drop of mixture, and that exactly into the impression that the rod left in its absence. The surface smoothed over like glass.

Perfection.

She raised her eyes to his and glared.

"Everybody thinks I'm pregnant."

Ah. She knew he was there.

"And this would be because...?"

"Because I ducked into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom to have a bit of privacy, and the idiots who were in there hiding assumed it was because I was ill."

He arched his eyebrows.

"All right, I told them I wasn't feeling well, but that was no reason for them to jump to the obscene conclusion that..."

"Obscene?"

"Professor!" She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Will you please allow me a little hyperbole? The entire school thinks I'm pregnant!"

He sighed. "One, you are married. If you were pregnant, it would not be a great scandal. Two, we both know you aren't pregnant. So other than the tedium of living in a fishbowl where everyone is watching your every action, what bothers you about this?"

"Living in a fishbowl where everyone is watching my every action!"

He shrugged. "That won't be changing." He indicated the cauldron. "It looks adequate. In future, I suggest you use a stirring spell to assure the count of rotations."

"I chose to count to keep myself too distracted to hex somebody or something."

Fuck.

This mood didn't bode well for his *brewing* plans.

Not that he would change them.

No, there would definitely be *brewing* tonight.

And her thoughts evidently followed his.

"Tonight," she said suddenly, her expression animated. "What do I wear tonight? Old robes? Will it be messy? You never told me what we'd be brewing, either. Is it..."

"I have no time for your questions, Miss Granger." He drew himself to his full height and looked down his nose at her. "I have a class to teach."

And as an afterthought, "Wear whatever is comfortable. It hardly makes a difference."

At which point, he returned to his class, though his thoughts never quite made it there.

Being caught up in his plans for *brewing*.

XX

Dinner was a rushed affair. Hermione ate sufficiently, but with no appreciation or notice of the delicacies of the High Table. Professor Snape offered her wine...surprising, if they were going to be brewing...but she stuck to pumpkin juice.

She excused herself early, earning a questioning raised eyebrow.

"I have some Arithmancy equations to complete. I thought if I did them first, my mind would be clear for our project."

"Excellent idea," he responded, watching her over the rim of his own goblet.

And so she'd rushed through an Arithmancy assignment that would have normally absorbed her full attention and then drifted to Professor Snape's private lab.

She wiped down the work surface and performed a quick Scourgify in preparation.

She examined his cauldrons; most of them were new. She had no idea whether they needed iron or copper or glass or ceramic or...

She heard his entrance and whirled to face him.

"Professor!" She smiled at him, excited. "Which cauldron do we need?"

"It's not there," he said, his black eyes glittering.

"Where..."

"First, it needs to be seasoned. You've never had to season a new cauldron for use, have you, Miss Granger?"

"No, the ones we buy for school are preseasoned."

"Indeed." He walked toward her with a slow, lazy, elegant stride. "Well, tonight there will be no shortcuts, and we won't be trusting any kind of 'preseasoning' that may have already happened. We will start from scratch."

"All right," she responded, as it seemed a response was required, even though she was confused.

"A cauldron that has been improperly prepared can ruin any potion put in it."

She nodded. That certainly made sense.

And she supposed that was why their student cauldrons were preseasoned, to eliminate that potential.

Why was he staring at her so intently?

She cleared her throat. "Does that mean we'll be using an iron cauldron? They're the most challenging to season, or so I've read." She winced at that last part. Book learning. Why'd she bring that up?

Fortunately, he ignored it. "No, not iron."

He stopped in front of her. She had to tilt her face up to meet his gaze, he stood so close. She felt a strange awareness that she didn't understand, that didn't seem to have anything to do with brewing.

"Then..." she pushed on, "what kind of cauldron are we using?" She glanced around nervously. "And where is it?"

He put his hands on either side of her face and turned it back to him. She couldn't look away if she wanted to. She didn't want to.

He bent closer, and she thought he was going to kiss her and thought ridiculously *But it's not Saturday night.*

He didn't kiss her.

Instead, he bent closer and murmured into her ear.

"Miss Granger, *you* are the cauldron."

Cauldron

Chapter 31 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Deepest gratitude to JK Rowling for these wonderful characters.

Deepest gratitude to my fabulous beta, Leigh-Anne, who urged me to post this chapter even though lemons start here and finish in the next. If that bothers you, blame her. (Well, and wait until both chapters are posted to read this one.) Thank you! I hope this warning is sufficient....

31. CAULDRON

She repeated numbly, frozen and unable to move, even had he lowered his hands from her face, which he had not, "I'm the cauldron?"

His fingers stroked her temples.

Alarm skittered through her and she stepped back, breaking the connection. "What do you mean?"

His voice was hypnotic as he drew her to him again. He leaned into her body and whispered near her ear, "Miss Granger, tonight you are the cauldron..."

He allowed his breath to tantalize the surface of her skin. "And the potion..."

He drew her closer, still. "And the flame."

She could refuse him nothing, *nothing*, but how could she give him something she didn't even have? She felt her regret in the tightness of her throat, felt her bitterness in the tightness in her heart, felt her anger in the trembling of her body.

"Come..." he spoke softly, his voice a ripple of velvet.

He took her hand by the fingertips and led her from the laboratory, and she found herself allowing it, despite her strong desire to throw up shields and dare him to break them down.

They stopped at his potions cabinet. "I think we'd best begin with these, lest we forget."

He pulled out three vials. He thumbed the cork out of one and held it to her lips.

She jerked her head away and stared at him from the corners of her eyes. "What is it?"

He cocked his head. "Miss Granger, I don't believe you've questioned any potion I've ever given you. I assure you it's not a poison." His eyes never leaving hers, he tilted it to his own lips and drained it.

She watched his tongue draw in what remained from his lower lip, watched his throat move as he swallowed, watched his black, black eyes as they watched her.

"It's my taste potion," he said. "I thought you rather liked it." He offered her an identical vial.

Hands trembling, she managed to open and drink it, this time avoiding his gaze altogether.

When she'd returned the vial, he presented a second, which he held to her nose as he watched her intently.

She sniffed it, recognized it as the contraception potion, closed her eyes and drained it.

"Miss Granger..."

She forced herself to meet his gaze.

"What did you think it was?"

"A lust potion."

"Why?"

"Some misguided attempt to show me what I've been missing," she snapped.

He watched her thoughtfully. "Have you had one before?"

She whisked by him quickly, avoiding that intense gaze, unsure of her ability to lie or bluff.

As she drew near the bed and her usual nest of pillows, she felt a clutch of awareness in her stomach. She veered away from the bed and took the hard-backed chair. And glared at him. "There are some things that are none of your concern."

"Indeed?"

She glared harder.

"Well, despite the fact that lust potions were nowhere on the agenda, I find myself suffering from an insatiable curiosity. And as a Potions master, I am doubly intrigued. Surely you won't leave me in this state of... anticipation?" He didn't approach her this time. This time, he leaned his shoulder against the wall and waited.

She looked up at him, at the way his hair swept down across one eye and cheekbone and still he managed to focus on her with an intensity that left her breathless.

"We were having a little party... the Gryffindor sixth-year girls," she added firmly, "and drinking butterbeer. Lavender thought it would be amusing to slip something into mine as a joke."

"How did it affect you?"

She stifled a small shudder of discomfort. "Not as it was intended, evidently." She shot him a quick glance then stared at her hands again, suddenly feeling surer of herself. If nothing else convinced him to drop this idea, surely the failed potion would. "It just made me itch. Inside. All over." And then, lest he misunderstand, she added, "Not in *that* way. Not in any pleasant way. Just in a horrible *hothing can make this awful feeling go away* way. In fact, it was so awful..." So awful that she'd begun to sob uncontrollably and the restless itch grew into pain and Ginny had wanted to go to Professor McGonagall, and only Hermione's near-hysterical reaction to that suggestion had saved her the disgrace. "I took a Dreamless Sleep potion and when I awoke, it had worn off."

She waited for him to laugh at her.

He didn't.

The silence was most difficult.

She finally found herself sneaking another glance upward, and the way he studied her, eyes narrowed, almost made her itch inside again.

He finally drew in a deep breath, and then let it out. It sounded almost pained.

And still he studied her, and she could almost sense his mind working as he pondered her like she was a bloody potion he was trying to solve.

When she couldn't stand any more silence, she demanded, "What is it *now*?"

He shifted, seemed to pull himself out of a reverie, and said, "You told me not to do magic in front of your servants."

Well. That was certainly unexpected. "Of course not. They have no idea."

"But some of them have been there since you were a child."

She nodded, puzzled.

"They've been Obliviated?" When she could only gape at him in confusion, he demanded, "How old were you when your magic first manifested?"

"Manifested?"

"When you first performed magic, or it happened around you?"

What a silly question. "After I got my letter about Hogwarts, and we shopped in Diagon Alley."

"Impossible," he snapped. "Only a Squib wouldn't manifest at all by the age of eleven."

"I can assure you, I did not manifest, and to the best of my knowledge, I am not a Squib." As he simply watched her, scowling, she elaborated. "After we bought my first-year books and brought them home, I practiced some of the simple spells. I was greatly relieved to see that they worked, as I was very afraid it was all a big mistake."

At that, he dropped into his leather chair across from her. He slouched, his legs so long that his knees almost met hers. Again, he watched from beneath his curtain of hair. "I find it odd that a young witch with your power wasn't manifesting wildly."

"I wasn't," she said, although now that he mentioned it, it was a little surprising. "Perhaps I was waiting for permission."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Children don't have enough control to wait for permission."

"I was a remarkable child. Everyone said so." She tried not to look too smug, but really. Facts were facts, weren't they?

He snorted.

She sniffed.

"Your books...at your home, I mean. Jane Austen?"

Another left turn, away from the subject at hand. What was he getting at? She shifted in her chair. "No daughter of Winchester Cathedral can escape Jane Austen, I assure you."

"You like Jane Austen?"

"I adored Jane Austen. After all, she's *Jane Austen*."

"No fairy tales, though. No lust-filled bodice rippers."

She stiffened. "I was ten years old the last time I added any books to that collection."

"Oh, so you do have some here, then. In your trunk, perhaps?"

She felt herself colour to the roots of her hair. "Don't be absurd. I don't have time for fiction at all, and if I did, it wouldn't be silly love stories." She rubbed her arms. It was suddenly chilly in the dungeons, even more so than usual.

"Which explains the science books?"

"I might not have been manifesting magic, but I had my first Bunsen burner at the age of seven."

"Which might have been a substitute," he pondered, "but the potential for mishap was astronomical."

"I had no mishaps," she replied crisply.

"I'm sure you didn't," he responded silkily, and it was almost but not quite a sneer.

Which made her almost but not quite want to flounce into the bathroom and lock the door.

"And what about the comparative religion?" he probed.

"What about it?" She was running out of patience.

"I'll admit, I am simply intrigued by the thought of you, ten years old..."

"I was eight when I started reading on that subject."

"Of course you were." His eyes rolled.

He made that sound like an insult.

"Odd, combined with science, don't you think?"

She shifted uncomfortably. Looked at the ceiling. At her hands. Anywhere but at him. "I suppose I always knew something was going on inside me, something that made me different. I decided that maybe it was God."

"And so you read about God." He snorted with what sounded like laughter.

She glared at him again. "I was trying to figure it out."

"And what did you figure out?"

"My mother didn't know what to do with me. She is not exactly spiritual. She took me to the Dean of the cathedral and told him to answer my questions. Needless to say, he had neither the time nor the inclination to take on a precocious..."

Another snort.

"...eight-year-old girl, so he turned me over to Father Gadbury, who loaded me up with books and answered my questions and took an interest in me in general."

Professor Snape grew very still.

"He taught me about comparative religion...he's very knowledgeable, you know...and then when it was clear my interests truly were more in the Anglican direction, we focused on Anglican theology and history. When I was ten years old I took confirmation classes...those were fascinating! I was younger than the others by several years, so my classes were private. Plus, I assume my questions were more than the typical class would tolerate, and I asked for extra reading, of course."

"Of course." But his voice was strained.

She looked at him, waiting for more laughter.

None came.

But he looked very... tense.

"Miss Granger," he finally said softly, "did he...has anyone ever... forced their attentions on you?"

Oh good god, what now? "No," she said firmly.

"Behaved inappropriately," he pushed. "Made you feel uncomfortable or scared you or..."

"No!" The word burst from her. "Surely you don't think Father Gadbury..."

But clearly, he did.

She jumped to her feet. *Howdare* he?

He joined her, then, and she found herself opening her eyes to him, opening her soul to him. "Go ahead," she said. "Look."

For a moment, it seemed like he would.

Then he put his hand over her eyes. "Don't do that," he said.

"Don't do what?"

"You've got to stop offering yourself to me that way. You've got to stop..."

"Trusting you?"

"Miss Granger," he ground out, "in the past two weeks you have alternated between exploding with unbelievable powers and appearing ready to self-destruct. I don't know whether to protect you or protect myself from you. But I do know that this tendency to let me wander through your memories at will is not natural, and it has to stop! Sometimes, you simply have to talk to me."

"But you'll believe me if you see for yourself." She looked up at him in entreaty. "And I love your eyes...."

Colour flushed his cheeks. Had she embarrassed him? He looked away from her. Yes, she had definitely embarrassed him.

"Professor, no one has harmed me. I simply never had any interest or desire of that kind."

And then, because it was true, and because she suddenly felt hollow that perhaps...oh god she'd never thought of this...perhaps she had presented herself to him as half a wife, as someone inadequate and lacking and...

She fought down the panic, and returned to what she knew so very strongly in her heart. "It's not your fault; it's nothing you've done or haven't done. Why does it matter? Why do you care?" She whirled away from him, her fists clenched. "I do have a desire to be with you and to be held by you and touched by you and..." she broke off short of, *to please you*. "I desire you so very much, and I want to do the things a woman does to a man because I want to do them." She looked back over her shoulder at him, pleading. "To you."

"Then you understand," he said softly, his fingers twining into her hair, "my desire to be with you and to be held by you and touched by you and...to do the things a man does to a woman because I want to do them."

"To you."

She closed her eyes, caught somewhere between desire and despair.

"Miss Granger, if you don't stop twisting your fingers, I swear we're going to have to visit Madam Pomfrey to get them untangled." His voice grew silky, again. "I have one more question for you. I promise, it's the last one."

She allowed him to turn her back to face him and looked up at him cautiously.

His eyes...they were glittering with something that seemed to be amusement.

"What do flying, Divination and orgasms have in common?"

XX

She stared up at him in disbelief. "I beg your pardon?"

He fought the urge to laugh.

"Miss Granger, might I point out that flying, Divination and...shall we say, sexual gratification?...have at least three things in common.

"One, they are very rare in that they do not come easily for you.

"Two, they can't be learned from reading books.

"Three, once determining those facts, you quickly determined none of the three to be worth your effort."

She pulled away from him, her hair a wild aura around her face. "That's...that's...that's so absurd, it's insulting! Divination is utter nonsense...and flying is, well, I don't know, it's clearly not nonsense, but it's certainly not important, not when weighed against the value of the other subjects taught here, and in fact, compared to Arithmancy or Potions, it's a total waste of time if you're not obsessed with Quidditch," she sputtered.

"So is History of Magic, at least taught the way it is at Hogwarts, but that didn't stop you from studying it."

"I believe you are a very cruel man!"

"I hope you didn't intend that to sting."

"Oh!" she huffed, and he believed he'd managed to silence Miss Granger, which felt very satisfying, indeed.

"And now, I believe we have a cauldron to prepare." He snagged her by the waist and pulled her to him, and finally allowed himself to capture those lips, those foolish, impertinent lips, with his.

And as he had her momentarily silenced and momentarily distracted, he used a bit of magic to remove her school robes and send them flying to the chair.

She sighed into his lips, pushed against his shoulders as if to protest, then sighed again.

He touched her fingertips and felt the unexplained tingle and reveled in it.

Again, he gave a silent command and felt her jumper vanish and found silky skin in its place. She molded against him, giving herself into the sensation, and then, a bit more magic and she was naked in his arms, gloriously naked, and he cupped her and held her against him and groaned when she slid down his body and...

Grabbed her wrists when she sought his cock.

And glared into her eyes when she looked up at him petulantly.

And yanked her back to her feet and kissed her again, before waving a hand to fill the tub with hot foamy water.

She struggled in his embrace, still frustrated at her aborted attempt to distract him. But his preparations got the best of her. He saw her sniffing, puzzling, and remained silent.

When he led her into the bathroom she didn't protest, but instead scooped some of the scented bathwater into her hand and took a closer sniff. "You changed it."

"Slightly."

She closed her eyes. "It still has mint. And eucalyptus. And..." She cocked her head thoughtfully. "Citrus?"

"Five points to Gryffindor."

"Lemon."

"Ten points."

"You can't give me points."

"We'll have to think of something else, then, won't we?"

Belatedly, she seemed to recognize the incongruity of their situation. "You think I need a bath?"

"I think I want to fully prepare the cauldron."

She wanted in that tub. It was clear in the way she smoothed her damp hand down her thigh and eyed the steaming water.

But she resented like hell that it was his idea.

"I require privacy," she said primly.

"You will not get it," he responded firmly. "No Potions master would allow a cauldron to be seasoned..."

"I've heard enough of that nonsense," she snapped. "I'll bathe alone."

"I prefer to bathe you."

She gasped.

He lifted her into the air and stood her in the deep claw-footed tub.

"Why?" she demanded, her voice quivering, and now she suddenly found it necessary to cover her breasts...her lovely firm breasts...with one arm as her other reached to cover the apex of her thighs. "What are you trying to prove?"

Fuck. Of course, now he wished he could delve into her mind and see the source of her tension, and now he couldn't.

Her cheeks flamed and he realized she was embarrassed.

Miss Granger, who had held him at wandpoint and spread her legs and demanded that he perform the most intimate of healings...he fought against the memories of why such healing had been necessary, but then, wasn't that why he was caught up in this endeavor?...that very same Miss Granger was suddenly hiding herself from him?

"I'm not a child. And you are not my parent or my nurse and I refuse to be..."

He winced. The memory was as sharp to him as if he'd just seen it, his own reaction to his first sight of her nude body.

And now she stood before him, exposed.

"...to be bathed like one."

Merlin, she was going to be the death of him.

"No, you are not." He began unbuttoning his frock coat. "You are going to be bathed like a woman." And then, losing patience, he whisked his clothes away and settled his wand on the sink ledge and before she could stop him...

Stepped into the tub with her.

And knelt before her, aware of his own somewhat embarrassing erection, but ignoring same, and began the lovely task of sliding foamy hands up her thighs.

"I didn't mean for you to..."

"Miss Granger," he attempted to be conversational, but it was difficult, "we did not get off to the easiest of beginnings. I will admit...in fact, am proud of the fact...that I had never thought of you as anything but an infuriating student prior to our wedding night. And despite the fact that I'd been painfully aware of every minute that you and your friends..." His hands were now smoothing over her buttocks, and he fought to keep his voice steady. "...have been students in this school, I find that you were still in my mind as an impertinent thirteen-year-old. Perhaps, at best, a fourteen-year-old. Certainly not of age. Certainly not old enough to bed, much less take as a wife."

He pulled her down until she, too, was on her knees, facing him. Her eyes were wide and her lips moist and parted, but she was as skittish under his touch as a newborn unicorn foal, and considering that a unicorn would not be within touching distance of him, that was skittish, indeed. He carefully pushed her hair away from her face, tucked it behind her ears...not that it would stay there without springing back of its own free will...and with one hand cupping her face, he used the other to scoop the foamy, scented water over her shoulder and watched it run in rivulets down her body.

And watched her skin quiver in response.

And swallowed thickly, and fought to keep his response contained.

"And," he forced himself to continue, "I thought of you as a schoolgirl that night, and saw you as a schoolgirl that night, and..."

"I know the inadequacies of my body," she said.

He silenced her with a wet finger on her mouth. "No. I was blind. I was... I didn't realize, until..." Best not to mention her mother. Some sane part of him recognized that fact. "... that this body..." Again, he allowed his hands to spread the silky, foamy water over her. And again, he felt her tremble with the cold air, the heated water, and he hoped, the touch of his hands. He ran his hands down her firm thighs and kneaded them, and felt her sigh against his shoulders. "You do not have a schoolgirl's body, Miss Granger. It's a woman's body. A tight, lean body that will be lovely and elegant long after your friends are bemoaning theirs."

Again, some sane part of him knew not to continue in that vein, knew not to say that he'd preferred the more voluptuous womanly women's bodies until her. She had changed everything. This girl...this woman...this body...had changed everything.

He smoothed his hands up over her flat stomach and found her firm breasts, and her tight, hard nipples, and bit back a groan. "Merlin, your breasts..."

She flinched, as if to cover them, but he would not allow it.

He slid his palms over them, and then swept one hand behind her back to catch her when she sank against him, her head tossed back, her hair dangling into the water.

He caught it up in his hand, her wild and horrid and wonderful hair, and rescued it from its watery fate with a quick twist...

And she broke away from him...shoved him away...her eyes wild with anger.

And she snarled, "Don't touch my hair!"

And again, he didn't have to see into her memory to see what she remembered.

Fucking hell.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, sank back into the water, and groaned. "I only wanted..."

"You wanted it to look like *hers*," she spat.

He stared at her, aghast. "Look like hers? Like...like Bella's?" As soon as the name escaped his lips, he knew his folly. He barely managed to grab her before she sprang from the water. "Bloody hell," he snarled back at her. "If you think I want any part of you...any fucking part of you...even a single hair on your head to look like hers...if you think I wanted any memory of her at all to invade this room...you must think I'm as insane as she is."

She struggled against him, gasping for air, and the slickness of her soft body struggling against him was nearly his undoing.

"I'll let your hair soak up every drop of water in this tub. I won't touch it again, if you'll stay," he gasped. "Just don't mention her again. Don't let her filthy name be spoken, and don't let her memory destroy..." He broke off, his words failing him.

"Destroy what?" She glared up at him like the warrior she was.

And he felt immensely weary. If not Bella's name or Bella's memory, what about all the other memories of his past? How many other things must remain unspoken and unremembered and denied for him to pretend to be something different from what he was?

What had he been thinking?

He looked at his hands and felt the shame that he had even dared touch her with them.

He felt the rage that he was in this situation at all.

And the guilt that his desire was stronger than his shame.

"Forgive me," he said, "for not being the man you should have married. But don't blame me for being the one you did. It was not I who chose you, as you recall."

He watched the emotions play across her face and when they turned to stupid, foolish guilt, he was selfish enough to sink back against the tub and pull her into the vee of his legs so that he could wrap his arms around her and bury his face in her horrid, awful hair and attempt to nuzzle her neck and fight for calm as her bum pressed against his erection until he could have howled with need....

She felt it, of course. Her body was tense with awareness. Yet she allowed him to touch her, to continue to wash her with foam.

Why did she allow it? Guilt? Obligation? He didn't want to know. He just wanted her there to touch, to hold.

And gradually she relaxed into him and let her hands rest on his thighs, and her neck arched, and then her body, as he slid his hands over her contours. He watched his long pale fingers drag scented foam over skin the colour of the palest shade of peach, skin flushed with the heat of the water and dare he hope, the heat of his touch.

And when he thought he'd go mad with the torment, when he thought he'd explode if he spent another moment in this divine torture...

She turned her face to his and moaned so softly it was more breath than voice.

He Summoned towels and emptied the tub with a wave of his hand, wrapped her in a cocoon of warmth and carried her to his bed.

Potion

Chapter 32 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Bouquets and kudos tossed to JK Rowling who started it all and allows us to keep it going.

And chocolates and violets and pansies and everything sweet and wonderful to my betas on this chapter, Leigh-Anne and lifeasanamazon. Thank you both for the encouragement and reassurance.

Finally, a dreaded A/N: In this chapter you will see reference to the wedding vows they made. In Chapter 5, Mea Culpa, their wedding is described as it was experienced...rushed and confusing. The vows are not spelled out, but they were definitely taken. So don't worry if you don't recall the exact words because the words were

not given in detail. Also to American and non-Anglican readers, the specific vow mentioned here may not be familiar. But it is very much a part of the traditional Church of England marriage rite and has been since the time of Thomas Cranmer, to whom we owe deep gratitude. And now, on with the story.

32. POTION

Skin on skin.

Oh god oh god oh god.

Why had she never imagined, even considered, how this...skin on skin...would feel?

When he'd unwrapped the towel, she had shrugged her arms free and started to sit up.

He had placed his palms on her shoulders, gently and firmly, and pushed her back into the pile of pillows and onto her soft, red sheets.

She sank back into the bliss of them and for a few moments gave herself over to his desires. She could do this. She wanted to do this....

He'd eased onto the bed beside her and had meticulously dried her right hand, then her left, taking care between her fingers, tickling her palms without seeming to notice.

But he noticed. Surely, he noticed. His very noticing and pretending not to notice suddenly frustrated her.

She had jerked her hand away and reached for her wand. "I think I'd prefer a drying spell."

He had caught her wrist in his strong fingers. "There are some things, Miss Granger, that are not improved upon by magic."

Her words, her very own words! Only, she'd been talking about tea, not drying one's bum after a bath!

But if his hands hadn't stopped her from casting the spell anyway, his black eyes would have. She'd fallen back against the pillows, helpless to do anything else under the intensity of those eyes, even as her heart fluttered within her like a panicked bird.

He had continued with the slow, meticulous process of drying every fold and crevice...underarms, navel, toes, the feminine folds that made her flush with embarrassment. And he'd continued with his velvet-voiced nonsense, warning her not to interfere with the Potions master when he's preparing a cauldron, until she could have screamed with frustration.

She wanted to kick him, to twist away, because she just wanted to *do* it and get it over with. He'd taken away her desire to participate and had replaced it with a teeth-grinding necessity to just get *on* with it.

Maybe she could fake it.

She didn't want to fail.

What was worse, she didn't want fail for him, she didn't want him to care, she didn't want him to care so much.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she was laughing with near hysteria because the one thing she'd never dreamed when she'd approached him was that Professor Snape of all men would care whether or not she had an orgasm.

What had started as a tingling *what if this time it's different?* had become a desire to simply endure until he'd finally played out this frustrating attempt to make her feel things she simply didn't feel.

But finally, finally, the drying had come to an end, and she'd looked into his eyes and had seen the dilation, the ~~need~~...

And something within her flared in reaction.

And she'd offered her arms, and her voice had been raspy...she hadn't even recognized it as her own...and she'd begged, "Please... kiss me."

Because his kisses were heaven.

And now, here he was, stretched over her, kissing her, and she'd had no idea how it would feel...

Skin on skin.

--to have her breasts pressed against his hard chest. To feel their long legs entwined and sliding as she luxuriated under him, and ~~god oh god~~ she simply hadn't dreamed it would feel like this, to be naked with him, to have every square centimeter of her flesh bared to his, to feel...

Oh, god, the heat and weight of his erection pressed between them.

She felt a brief spasm of remembered pain, but surely it wouldn't hurt this time, not this time, after all, it would be the third time, and surely she wouldn't be too tender or tight...

She spread her legs, then, and thrust up, straining. It was there, and she wanted it in her, she wanted to get ~~on~~ with it...

And oh, *the kiss, the kiss, the kisses*...first her mouth, then her eyelids, then her throat; she never knew where he was going to kiss her next, and she shivered with anticipation and chills and...

He was sliding down her body.

She grabbed at his arms to stop him, to bring him back.

"Please," she rasped, "don't stop."

The cold dungeon air assaulted her as he left her vulnerable to it, and looking down, she saw his head between her legs and...surely not. Surely ~~not~~ *that*. Oh, god, how could he possibly want to do that?

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He nuzzled between her legs and inhaled.

There was no scent, no aroma of arousal.

She bucked, almost kicked at him, would have truly kicked him if he hadn't grabbed her thighs and pinned them down.

She jerked upright, panic-stricken, her hair in flight around her head. "What do you think you're doing?"

She thrust a hand between them, covering herself, and started to fold her other arm across her bare breasts, but he caught it and stopped her. "Are you really that uncomfortable?"

She flushed under his scrutiny.

"I want you to be comfortable," he sighed, and Summoned...

The white shirt.

She reached for it with obvious relief, shrugged it on, pulled her hair free, and reached for the top button...

"No, Miss Granger. We will not be doing buttons tonight."

She let it hang, not quite meeting.

Oh, if she only knew that the tantalizing game of peekaboo the shirt played with her breasts did more to arouse him than the bare flesh had.

He climbed up her body and gently, but brooking no resistance, pushed her down again.

"Miss Granger, I gather that you're distressed..."

"Yes," she hissed, her eyes sullen slits.

He couldn't help it. He had to do it. He had to kiss her. Again. To tease those unhappy lips and absorb her frustration, and *oh, Merlin*, it was more than that. It was always more than that. He covered her again, this time with the shirt between them, but it did little to cool his blood as he cradled her face in his hands and captured her lips...captured her sighs...Even she couldn't deny the pleasure of their kisses.

But these kisses were dangerous for his control, and he had to stop while he could, stop while he could still...

Her hand slid between them and she reached for him...

He broke away before she could touch him and held her wrists at her sides.

"Minx." He Summoned the bottle of oil from the bathroom and caught it in his hand. "First, the cauldron is cleansed. Then it is dried. You almost distracted me, but we aren't finished."

He turned her over and straddled her arse and reached to brush her hair aside...

And stopped.

"Will you please move your hair?"

He held his breath.

Her body was stiff under him.

"Please," he repeated softly.

And dared not breathe as she reached up with one hand and pulled it aside, baring her neck.

He released his breath in a long sigh of relief and thanksgiving.

He slid his hands up her back, taking the shirt with it.

The sight of her back, long and slender, was nearly his undoing.

He dripped the warm oil down her spine. "And now," he said, "the cauldron must be oiled."

"You're really annoying me," she said, her voice muffled by pillows.

And he laughed. "Is that what you call this? Annoying?"

She clearly had no intention of responding to that, so he smoothed one palm from the crack of her arse all the way up her spine to her neck, spreading the fragrant oil in its path. Then with the heels of both hands, he began gently spreading it outward, each push of his hands releasing more fragrance into the air.

He felt her inhale, shudder, and relax despite herself.

He introduced his fingers into the exercise, and it became a gentle kneading of flesh as he massaged the cheeks of her arse, feeling the muscles tense and quiver and fighting the reaction of his cock as it did the same.

He climbed her spine, worked across her upper back, and then...

Leaned forward and nibbled along the side of her neck that had been bared when she pulled her hair aside....

And felt her shiver.

Then he noticed beneath the overlong sleeves, her hands, her lovely hands, her lovely, long-fingered hands.

And the rings.

The old Snape family ring seemed so shabby beside the smooth, new Ministry ring, yet she'd said she wanted to wear it for a very long time. She was such a foolish, foolish girl, filled with sentiment and romantic notions, and he felt a pang of pity for her, which was more than he allowed for himself.

There would be no "very long time" for them.

She was destined to be a very young widow.

He felt a clutch at his middle, but ignored it. He wouldn't survive the war, but he was determined to leave her safe and strong and ready for what followed.

And, wasn't this a very Slytherin gift?

He was determined to leave her with knowledge of her self. Her complete self. Especially the self that she had denied, had decided was unimportant and unnecessary.

He pressed his lips to her rings, both of them, the one that trapped them and the one that tormented and tantalized with romantic notions...and then he forced his attention back to her hands.

They started stiff but became limp in his as he smoothed the oil between her fingers, kneaded the base of her thumb, and then, when she seemed turned to liquid...suckled her fingers and watched her back, her lovely back arch in response.

And then, retreating again, he slid down her body again and bared her thighs to his ministrations, dragging his thumbs up her inner thighs, but stopping short of the new growth of curls and all that they hid.

Warm oil, firm fingers, smooth motions as he worked his way down, giving special attention to the creases behind her knees, her firm calves, and finally massaged his thumbs into the tender arches of her feet and heard her soft exhalation of air, a moan in the semi-darkness as the light from the bathroom spilled over them in the dark of the quarters.

He rolled her over on her back, and kneeling at her feet, drew her toes between his warm, wet lips.

She cried out at that...flinched, then gave over to the sensation, and her moan went straight through him. He placed his mouth on the sole of her foot and suckled, and felt her reaction ripple through her body.

And then, more oil. Never too much, just enough.

And the reverse trip back up her body, over the tops of her feet, her calves, her legs, her thighs...

And then, sliding his oil-drenched fingers between her folds, into and out of the slickness, while one hand held her firmly in place, and then before she could buck or arch or kick or beg, he'd kept going over the flat of her stomach, the dip of her waist, until he dragged his thumbs under the perimeter of her breasts, then spiraled his fingers around and up until...just until...he reached the peaks...

And skipped them and went up further to the delicate hollows and angles of her shoulders and throat and neck.

Her eyes were half-closed as she watched him, limpid and dark. She'd long since stopped fighting, stopped protesting, but he wouldn't be rushed again. Not this time. This time, he wouldn't hurt her. This time, she'd feel the passion, too.

He couldn't tell her...wouldn't tell her...because she would take the words like labels and turn them back on him in rage, and they weren't labels, not for her, god, no, not for her.

But this taking from her without even a scent of her response, this knowledge that she was so willing to accept a one-sided passion, chilled him.

Because sex with a willing partner who wasn't aroused was too much like sex with a whore.

Or a child.

And he'd break his wand before he'd settle for a lifetime of that, even a very short lifetime between the delectable and surprisingly talented Miss Granger's thighs.

He straddled her legs, his cock urging him to completion, his heart pounding its urging, and braced himself.

"Miss Granger, in your reading, surely you've come across these instructions. Surely you know what comes after the oiling...."

She merely shook her head helplessly and then sighed. "You're determined to make me feel something, whether I want to or not."

Wasn't that what had been happening to him since the day she'd exploded into his classroom in a billow robes and a slamming of door?

Feeling things, whether he fucking wanted to or not?

"Miss Granger, welcome to my hell."

Her eyes flared at that. Perhaps in latent anger. Perhaps in recognition.

"You didn't answer my question. What comes next?"

And she didn't fail him. She recited, "Cleanse, dry, oil ... heat."

"Yes," he whispered as he lowered his mouth to her right nipple and took the left between his fingers. "Heat...."

He tickled her nipple with the tip of his tongue...felt it draw up to a stiff alertness that caught him off guard, it happened so quickly...and felt her hands clutch his shoulders, her fingernails digging in, and he raised up to stare at her half-lidded, moist-lipped expression and saw (and smelled, yes, this time there was no mistaking it) arousal.

"Well," he purred. And seemed unable to find another word, so repeated it. "Well."

He took the turgid nipple in his fingers and worked it as he transferred his mouth to the other one and found it already stiff and yearning and her body undulated beneath him.

This was it.

This was what he'd desired.

"And now, Miss Granger, the potion...." He dragged his thumb across the soft flesh beneath her breast. "It's brewing... do you feel it?"

She stiffened, but he placed a finger over her lips. "Shhh... just lie still and close your eyes." And that nipple, that perfect, wet nipple tantalized him. He blew across it and watched it tighten even more. "You feel it," he said softly. "Describe the potion, Miss Granger."

He watched as she started to grimace, her eyes flying open accusingly at him, but he gently covered them with his hand. "I said, eyes closed. Feel it, Miss Granger. We are brewing together, and I can't continue unless I know what the potion needs."

He felt her resistance, but he also smelled her arousal. Her body was strung tight as a bowstring as he felt her warring within herself. He cupped her breast in one hand and squeezed gently as he placed his lips on her soft, flat abdomen and kissed it. "Describe the potion," he repeated. "What does it feel like?"

"It... it tingles."

"Good," he responded. "What does it look like?"

Again, she stiffened; again, he used his hand over her eyes to keep her gently focused.

"Don't you see the cauldron?" he asked, his words silk. "Don't you see the potion?"

Her hips arched beneath him. "It's... light. Light and... liquid. And it has bubbles, tiny bubbles, popping on the surface.... Thousands of little bubbles popping...oh, god...inside of me." Again, the arch of hips, slow and languid. "Like champagne," she whispered, "down there...."

"Do you like champagne?"

An extended silence while he watched her cheeks flush, and then, "Yessss."

It was a confession, more than she wanted to reveal, and he felt a small victory. He rolled her tight nipple between his fingers, and this time, it was his tongue that stroked the skin beneath her breast. "Tell me when the potion is ready for a new ingredient," he murmured into her flesh, as she shifted beneath him and let out a soft moan.

Simmering... She was simmering.

Slowly, he explored the contours of her body with his lips, with soft exhalations of warm, moist air, with strokes of his tongue, constantly attentive to every reaction of her body, whether it was to grow still or to quiver beneath him. Quick glances at her face, at her lips, at the tongue that sometimes darted out to wet them, or the teeth that nibbled her plump lower lip as she slowly rolled her head to the side, her eyes squinted closed....

He slid a hand down her stomach until his fingertips scraped through the short, tight frizz of curls that were already growing back. Slowly, he slid his fingers lower until he cupped her mound and gave it a soft squeeze. "Describe the potion," he said, taking his voice to dark velvet. "Tell me what it needs."

Her hips twitched restlessly under his hand, and she gave her head a hard toss. "I don't know," she said. Her restlessness was fast becoming frustration, and that was something he couldn't allow. Not this time. Not when she didn't anticipate, didn't trust herself or him or even know what was ahead of her.

He slid one finger over her clitoris...she gasped...and down to part the labia and seek the slick quim where he stroked her lightly, up... and then back down. Up... and then back down. Up... He let his finger hover. "Describe the potion," he urged.

"Don't stop," she gasped.

He continued. He dragged his finger up the moist slit, slid it around her clit in a circular path, then back down, and finally, he dipped it inside, where he found her heat and her moisture, and bit back his own response.

She arched to meet him.

"Describe..." he said again.

"Sss..." She broke off, caught her breath. But ever the obedient Miss Granger, she tried again, her voice a bare whisper. "Sweet..."

"Very good," he whispered, entranced by the expression on her face, the sight of her breasts quivering with each breath, and the hot, wet feel of her.

"Thick," she added, "like.... like treacle."

He continued the gentle rhythm dragging her moisture up... around... then dipping inside.

Stroke up...

Circle...

Slip in...

Stroke.

Circle.

Slide.

"And...so warm..." She arched her neck and upper body, and he knew he'd carry that vision of skin and flat stomach and pert breasts and awakening desire to his grave and felt the heavy throb of his erection demanding its own satisfaction. "Slow and sweet and warm..." Like her voice, lazy with slow-building desire. "The bubbles on the surface are bigger...when they pop, it's like..."

Her voice drifted.

His fingers...now he used two...continued their slow rhythm.

Stroke.

Circle.

Enter.

"A pulse...when they pop, it's like..." she finally said, concentrating fiercely. "The potion has a pulse," she said breathlessly. "It's..." He plunged two fingers in more firmly, allowing them to slide over her clitoris and they found their way down to the opening, and she contracted around him with a gasp. "*Oh, god!*"

He increased the rhythm, the pressure, felt her quivering around him...

She sat up, her eyes dilated and wild and reached for his hand. "No, no, no...stop!"

He froze for a moment. Finally forced the words, "Miss Granger, what's wrong?"

Gasping, she tried to cover herself and grab his hand and roll away from him, all at the same time.

And with a flash, he remembered the fear of coming with someone watching him, with someone to taunt or laugh, and feeling more vulnerable than he had in his entire life, and no matter that he would never laugh, that he was about to die with the wanting of it, the wanting of her completion...he remembered.

"Nox," he gasped, and the bathroom light was out, and they were plunged into total darkness.

"I'm...I'm going to..." She couldn't choke the words out, but he forced her back on the mattress with gentle force, never removing his fingers, keeping a gentle but persistent pressure until she was on her back, panting.

"It's all right," he said, his own voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

"I'm going to shatter," she sobbed.

"I'll catch you," he answered.

And before she could protest again, he used his thumbs to part her labia, and this time, it was his tongue that searched in the dark, that found slickness and finally the hard, quivering nub, and as he stroked and flicked with the hardened tip of his tongue, he had the most absurd thought...that she tasted like strong, unsweetened tea...and that it wasn't a bad taste at all...and then her thighs were trembling, her hands reaching, clawing...He gave her his hands to hold, to squeeze, and buried his face deeper and stroked and flicked until he felt the tremors, the quakes, that sent triumph into that tight place in his chest. Her entire body undulated against the bed as her thighs clamped closed on him, and through it all, choked, almost-silent gasps, and then, a whimper, and he realized that his tongue had slowed with her until, when she finally lay quivering in the aftermath, only his lips made contact, gentle contact with the center of her sex.

A gentle kiss against her swollen flesh.

She jerked.

Another kiss, in her curls.

She whimpered.

Breathless, he finally rested his head against her thigh and gasped for air and held onto her hands as if he were the one who had shattered.

He didn't know how long they remained like that in the cloak of darkness and wondered if she'd fallen asleep when her small voice broke the silence.

"Professor...I'm sorry."

What the bloody fuck?

He climbed up on the bed and slid alongside her. "For what?"

He felt her cover her face with her hands.

"For...for taking so long. You had to work so hard!"

"Miss Granger," he growled. "I will personally yank your tongue out of your throat by the roots if you ever apologize for such a thing again." He pulled her to him, heedless of his erection, simply needing to feel her in his arms. "Foolish girl," he soothed, kissing her forehead.

And then she was pulling his face down so that her lips met his...

"No," he said, "you don't want to..." But she must not have heard, or understood, or remembered where his mouth had been, because she kissed him, a hungry, devouring kiss, and this time, when her tongue probed his lips, he allowed her entrance, and suddenly the kiss was an inferno of heat and wet and passion and a blend of the taste of potion and of her, and the sweet tang was like a drug.

She reached between them, and this time when she reached for his cock he let her take it in her inexperienced but oh-so-determined hand, and he groaned into her mouth, and her fingers stroked down to the base and back up again.

"I want you inside of me," she said.

"Not tonight...Don't want to hurt you...again."

He felt her push his shoulders until he allowed her to put him flat on his back "We can do it this way," she said, "and it won't be so bad." She smiled against his lips. "I read it in a book."

"Fucking books," he groaned, but without venom, as she was already straddling him, trying to...

He grabbed his cock in his hand and helped her guide it and groaned when she lowered herself until he was pressed into her quim, but just barely. She lowered herself further and gasped, and he could have snarled his frustration, but instead said, "Stop. I don't want to hurt you..."

But she pushed a little farther, her voice choked, and said, "Professor, I don't think..." She twitched around him, squeezed, jerked up then down farther with absolutely no rhythm but fierce determination, "I don't think it's going to take as long this time!"

And he realized that the exquisite tightness he felt was stretching her sensitized nerves, that her jerky movements were her attempts to scratch that sumptuous itch, and that the gasps and the contractions meant she'd done it, and *fuck fuck fuck* he needed more, but she was collapsing on his chest, and he couldn't speak, his hands gripping the sheets like a lifeline.

He stared into the blackness, her hair enveloping him, her body draped over him, her breath tickling him, and knew total and absolute despair, the kind that made him want to laugh helplessly until he cried, but all he could do was hold her and cup her arse and bury his face in her hair and glory in the absurd magnificence that was his Miss Granger.

His.

And wonder if she was asleep and whether he'd wake her if he used his hand to bring himself relief.

But her next deep, shuddering breath dispelled that notion, for she placed her hands on his chest and pushed herself back up and after giving him one more devouring kiss...

She lowered herself slowly, ever so slowly, onto his erection until he was sheathed to the hilt.

He couldn't breathe.

He heard her murmurs, what sounded like the softest and sweetest of incantations, but was too far gone to grasp the words because he needed her to move, to fucking move...

And then, she did.

So fucking slowly.

He swallowed his groan, braced himself against the need to thrust, to plunge--

And gripping the sheets by the fistful, he arched against the bed in sweet, silent agony as she slowly...

Exquisitely...

Excruciatingly...

Milked him dry.

XX

She lay in his arms, unable to speak, barely able to breathe as aftershocks of his lovemaking gently quivered through her.

And the tightness that was always in her chest, in her heart, released and bloomed.

So.

This was what it was all about.

This is what all those couples she'd roused out of dark corners when she'd done rounds had been seeking.

She felt wet on her face and realized that silent tears coursed down her cheeks.

Silent because she couldn't say the words, couldn't tell him of her astounding realization, not because she thought he would laugh, but because she knew he would scorn.

But on this night, he'd made love.

He'd created love in her as surely as if he'd truly conjured a potion.

She opened her eyes in the darkness and was surprised not to find herself glowing with it, burning with it, this terrifying and beautiful thing that threatened to devour her from the inside out.

How could this be? How could this man, this horrible man that she'd never thought of with anything but wary respect have become everything to her? *Everything?*

She wanted to take his passion inside of her, keep it for always, and his tenderness, oh, god, his tenderness, who would have guessed that he had such tenderness in him?

She pressed more tightly against his body, reveled in the feel of his arms pulling her even closer, in the feel of his chest rising and falling, slowly easing back to normal as he, too, recovered.

And she was afraid to hear his words, just as she was afraid for him to hear hers.

Maybe they were both afraid.

Maybe that's why this silence spun between them.

Maybe...he felt it, too?

When the silence stretched to the breaking point, his voice finally rumbled in her ear, low and silken. "What were you saying?"

Oh, god, had she said it aloud?

"At the end, the incantation."

The end...she didn't remember saying anything at all...

"Oh," she said softly, surprising herself with a yawn. She stretched against him and nestled in for more of this totally magical yet totally human sensation of skin on skin. "It wasn't an incantation. It was just our vows."

He wasn't nestling. His hand at her back stilled. "What vows?"

"When we married. At the cathedral. You know, the marriage vows." And with that, she tilted her face up to his and found his lips in the darkness and whispered, "The part that came after 'With this ring, I thee wed...' Don't you remember?" And smiled against his lips, and repeated the words, letting them warm her and strengthen her all over again, "With my body, I thee worship...."

She arched into him, giving him her body, heart and soul.

His arms closed around her reflexively, but he pulled away from her kiss. "Vows. What does that mean, vows? That was as much an incantation as I've ever heard."

And then, his voice harsh, he grabbed her by the shoulders and demanded...

"Miss Granger, what have you *done*?"

Miss Granger, What Have You Done?

Chapter 33 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Thanks to JK Rowling for her generous understanding of our attempts to continue exploring her worlds and characters.

And special thanks to lifeasanamazon and junomagic who took time from their holiday weekends to read and comment so I could post quickly. Further thanks to Leigh-Anne and GinnyW for beta-work. It appears that for this chapter, it took a village!

33. MISS GRANGER, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

After performing hasty cleansing charms and pulling on her clothes, she had found Professor Snape buttoned up to the neck and Flooing the Headmaster.

And now, they were about to barge in on the old wizard in the middle of the night to her chagrin.

"No!" She tried to wrench her wrist out of her husband's grip, but any such attempt was futile.

"Bendicks Bittermints."

The gargoyle leapt aside. Even before the walls had totally revealed the staircase, he was dragging her up, taking the moving steps two at a time with no regard to her ankles or limbs as she struggled to keep up with him.

She was raw...raw from the emotional assault of loving and being loved, raw from the emotional assault of being betrayed, raw from the fear of what lay ahead.

She had tried to explain things to him in simple terms. Who would have thought words like "vow" and "sacrament" would have resulted in this?

By the time she was flung through the door of the Headmaster's office, she felt exposed.

The Headmaster rose from his desk, his head cocked in question as he looked from Professor Snape to her and back again. It was as if this were the middle of the afternoon of any normal day and not the middle of the night with him in his purple sleeping robes with a ridiculous orange sleeping cap on his head.

Hermione turned the full force of her cold fury on the man who had only minutes earlier made her feel *everything*. She allowed him to see the one emotion that overwhelmed all others. *Betrayal. You are betraying me. You are betraying us.*

He flinched away from her look.

She lowered her eyes. She refused to look at either of the two wizards.

"Is something wrong?" Professor Dumbledore asked, and then before there could be an answer, added, "What has happened?"

"If I knew what was wrong, I wouldn't be here," Professor Snape snapped crisply. "But it has been brought to my attention," she felt his gaze slide to her but refused to meet it, "that elements have been introduced into my marriage, and thus, the situation we all find ourselves embroiled in, that come from my wildest nightmares."

"Madam Snape, perhaps you would like to sit down."

She sank into a chair and folded her hands in her lap and stared at them. Professor Snape remained standing.

"Perhaps, Severus, you should begin at the beginning."

"If only we knew where the beginning was," he responded sharply. "I can begin with what happened in the Room of Requirement."

"Ah, yes."

"But...I think it best if you direct this line of enquiry." For once the Professor's voice was raw with emotion.

And so it begins, she thought to herself.

"As I'm still at a loss," Professor Dumbledore spoke gently, "perhaps you can help me, Hermione?"

She flinched at the sound of her name from his lips. Kindly, comforting.

She gave a sharp nod, still staring at her hands.

"Professor Snape is ... distressed..." Yes, that was a good word. "Because I mentioned our vows."

"You're speaking of the marriage vows?"

"Yes. I don't even know what vows we exchanged in the wizarding ceremony, but in Anglican marriage ritual we performed... It is a sacrament, sir. It's..."

"Muggle magic," her husband spat. "Do you realize what she's done? She's bound us with some sort of Muggle magic!"

"It's not magic..." she protested fiercely.

"I know it isn't," Professor Dumbledore said. "Forgive Severus for not having the scope of experience to understand.

His voice was so sympathetic...so comforting...without realizing it, she allowed her gaze to rise to meet his, seeking some sort of absolution.

And in his intense blue eyes, she saw understanding and no condemnation, but she also saw fear. In fact, were it anyone but Albus Dumbledore, she might even suspect she saw terror.

Miss Granger, what have you done?

"Tell me what you know of Salazar Slytherin," he said, as if such a digression was normal conversation.

"He hated Muggle-borns and wanted to deprive us of magical education and abilities."

"Your opinion is not totally without grounds although some might debate whether or not he actually hated Muggle-borns," Dumbledore agreed. "But do you know why he had such a strong belief system?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Because he was a bigot? Because when he was tender and vulnerable some Muggle hurt him and he could never trust them again? I can think of many excuses, based on what I know of Slytherins today, but they are only guesses."

"At the time when Hogwarts was founded, Muggles were attempting to burn witches and wizards at the stake. I sincerely doubt Salazar was concerned about hurt feelings and mistrust, Miss...excuse me, Madam Snape."

"His justifications for his prejudices really weren't given much emphasis in *Hogwarts: A History*," she said in her own defense.

"Salazar Slytherin desired to totally eliminate contact between Muggles and wizards. Even today, as you are well aware, we seek to keep Muggles unaware of our

existence. At the time of our Founders, this was even more a matter of life and death, as I'm sure you understand. But I'm certain you're also wondering what this has to do with Severus's concerns?"

Hermione realized she was kneading her own jean-clad thighs in frustration and stilled her fingers and nodded mutely.

"Muggle-borns rarely want to leave the Muggle world behind, but instead tend to want to introduce Muggle concepts into wizarding culture."

"But I didn't! It was the Room of Requirement that..."

"That responded to your specific desires and requirements and provided your wedding."

"But that's ridiculous. It had nothing to do with my desires. If anything, perhaps it recognized the inability of anyone to annul my marriage if it were done officially under the auspices of the cathedral."

"That's possible..." he said thoughtfully, casting a quick glance at Professor Snape who stood stiffly, arms folded across his chest, glaring at nothing. "Every choice made that day, from your Sealing to the wizarding rites used, was certainly made with that in mind."

Professor Snape stifled a low growl.

"But these vows... perhaps they bear some discussion." Professor Dumbledore offered her the dish of sherbet lemons, which she declined with a sharp jerk of her head.

"They're just the standard..." She broke off with a blush. "Well, if I'd been consulted, there are certain things that would not have been in them."

"Such as?" Dumbledore sucked on his candy.

She slid a quick glance at Professor Snape whose glare, fortunately, still wasn't focused in her direction. "I would not have sworn a vow of obedience."

Both wizards looked at her in astonishment.

"The traditional and historic rites call for the wife to love, honor and obey," she said crisply.

"No witch would ever take such a vow," Dumbledore exclaimed. "No wizard would ever ask it."

"Really?" she asked, her voice dripping with acid. "How forward thinking of you. Especially considering you think nothing of enforcing the Marriage Law which essentially does the same thing for the unfortunate Muggle-born bride who marries a wizard who wants to take her wand."

Dumbledore shot a quick look at Professor Snape. "Surely Severus hasn't..."

"Of course not!" Hermione and Professor Snape said in unison.

Professor Dumbledore relaxed. "And what did Severus vow?"

Hermione opened her mouth, and then promptly shut it. Odd how important mere words became when analyzed so brutally. They both waited. She finally spoke the vow aloud. "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health? And forsaking all others keep thee only to her, so long as you both shall live?"

She waited for a reaction and when neither man spoke, finally forced herself to look up, first at the Headmaster, who in turn studied Professor Snape with none of his usual genial artifice. "What is it, Severus?"

Professor Snape looked as if he'd been hexed.

"I thought fidelity was expected in a wizarding marriage, too," she said, hoping to avert attention from the more problematical aspect of the vow.

"You required me to make a vow to love you? And pray tell," Professor Snape asked, his voice dripping with venom, "what is the penalty for breaking that vow?"

She leaped to her feet. "I required nothing! You're both making too much of this."

"Hermione," Professor Dumbledore said softly, "I fear you are making too little of it."

She shook her head helplessly. "It's not that I ever intended to take my vows lightly. If I thought of it at all, I intended them to be the most important words I ever spoke." She raised her face to the Headmaster, pleading for understanding. "But I didn't choose this. Professor Snape asked me if I had any foolish ideas about weddings, and I told him no because I didn't. *I didn't*" She turned to Professor Snape. "I'm sure even the most superficial knowledge of the Muggle world reveals the tragedy that too many people make the vows and then break them, and while that's horrible in the general scheme of things, you must realize I would never...I don't have any delusions about the circumstances of our marriage, nor did I ever require you to love me."

"You seem to be missing a key element of this situation, Miss Granger," he hissed. "In that, it wasn't a man who made that vow. It was a *wizard*."

She blinked in confusion.

"I think what my wife is missing is that we are not mere Muggles, and when we make such vows, they are not mere words to be tossed aside or ignored on a whim," Professor Snape sneered. "Did you not notice the magical bonds? Did you not understand that when you married me, you took a wizarding oath? And that your Muggle vows are now part of it? Tell me, Miss Granger, when was the last time you took a wizarding oath?"

"Never," she whispered.

"Correction. The day we were married."

She stared at him numbly.

"Please," Professor Dumbledore said. "Both of you. Sit down. I'll order tea. I think we're going to be here for awhile."

"Call Dobby," Hermione said automatically. "He can bring Professor Snape's special tea."

If the Headmaster was surprised by the idea that his Potions master had a "special tea," he didn't let it show. Once the order was placed, he settled back in his high-backed upholstered chair.

"I have the vows at home," Hermione said. "I can get them if you think they're important. They were the first English-language vows, translated from the Latin by Thomas Cranmer. And that in itself should prove that I didn't choose them. I studied them out of academic curiosity, but had Father Gadbury actually asked me, I would have chosen..."

"Please spare us the lecture, Miss Granger," Professor Snape sneered.

"I think perhaps what might be more important in this situation," Professor Dumbledore continued smoothly, "would be to examine what was in your mind and heart at the moment you entered the Room of Requirement. And that includes not necessarily the literal meanings of the vows, but what attachment you might have had to them, that the Room of Requirement provided them, and even provided a sacramental marriage rite, at all."

"I was afraid, and I felt..." She swallowed thickly. "I felt stupid."

"How difficult for you," her husband supplied silkily.

"Severus," the Headmaster warned.

She forced herself to continue. "But mostly, I felt horribly guilty for not thinking it through and realizing what an incredibly selfish request I'd made when I asked Professor Snape to... save me." *Marry me.*

"Ah." Professor Dumbledore paused thoughtfully. "There is that. How did you come to this decision since he hadn't even offered?"

"I don't know. I was just upset and fretting over it all and I... I remember..."

Oh, god.

Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god.

She looked up at Professor Dumbledore, unable to look in the direction of the Dark wizard beside her. Surely she needn't tell. Surely it wasn't really what it was beginning to seem like.

"Miss Granger?" the Headmaster prodded, suddenly intent.

"Madam Snape," her husband snapped, but she felt his burning black eyes on her.

"I... I think I might have prayed."

"Merlin's fucking ghost!" Professor Snape hissed.

"It wasn't like that!" she protested. "It wasn't a kneeling, hands-folded prayer! It was just a...I suppose a cry for help, and it might not have been a prayer at all. It was just words..." She took a deep breath and fought for calm. "I had all those offers in front of me, some from Death Eaters, some from friends, some from wizards I didn't even know, and I felt so helpless, and I was upset and frustrated and I said..." She gulped. "I said, 'Dear God, who do I choose?'"

"Are you telling me that the Muggle God appeared in your presence in all his heavenly glory and told you to drag me into your personal hell with you?" Snape demanded, his face paler than usual.

"No! Of course not. I'm just saying in retrospect, maybe it was, well, a prayer. And no sooner had I said it, than I thought, 'Why didn't Professor Snape ask me?'"

"Miss Granger!" he roared. "Did it ever occur to you that that might have been a rhetorical question?"

"It's not as if I thought to myself, 'I think I'll pray about it,' and then considered you the answer to my prayers!" she snapped. "It's just that as soon as I thought...as soon as I thought of you...I simply felt this overwhelming relief, as if you were the answer to all my problems, and that's when I took off for Diagon Alley and asked George to bring me here..."

"Yes, we know the rest of the story," he spat.

Crack!

The tea tray appeared with three mismatched cups and saucers, a huge round pot of tea and all the accompanying tea things.

Hands trembling, Hermione didn't wait. She grabbed a cup for herself and filled it to drink black.

Professor Snape could prepare his own bloody tea.

"Severus, you know how I like mine," Professor Dumbledore said with a very false twinkle, as he studied her closely. She pretended not to care.

She watched Professor Snape stir four spoons of sugar into a cup that was more milk than tea and hand it to his superior. She restrained from wincing.

While Professor Snape prepared his own, Professor Dumbledore sipped and watched Hermione. "And, forgive me, dear, I realize this might be awkward, but you didn't harbor any romantic feelings about Severus prior to that day?"

"Not even on that day!"

"Hmmm." He sipped appreciatively. "This is very good tea, Severus."

"How can you tell?" Professor Snape responded with a decided lack of grace.

Professor Dumbledore returned his attention to Hermione. "You say you had no wedding fantasies dancing in your head, yet we ended up in a very specific place, with a very specific priest, and a very specific result. It's rather puzzling, don't you think?"

"Professor Dumbledore, whether you want to believe me or not, unlike most of the girls of my acquaintance, I find Arithmancy more intriguing than weddings. I haven't given a thought to weddings and marriage since I was a child in confirmation class."

He beamed. "Excellent, my dear. Tell me, what kinds of thoughts did you have then?"

She stared at him and felt anew her anger at one Professor Severus Snape for dragging her up here for this. If he'd only let her explain! If he'd only kept this between the two of them, instead of forcing her to make these embarrassing revelations in front of the Headmaster!

"Miss..." the Headmaster began.

"Madam..." Professor Snape interrupted.

"Madam Snape," the Headmaster corrected himself with a nod to Professor Snape. "There's no reason to be upset. But there's every reason to be open. This is of vital importance to us all."

She stared over his shoulder, refusing to meet either of their gazes. "As I tried to explain to Professor Snape, a sacrament is a rite in which God himself is present. When we studied the sacraments, Father Gadbury explained the sacrament of marriage as vows made between a man and a woman to one another, but in the presence of God and blessed by God. The priest...no matter who he or she is...is pretty much window dressing. The real work is done by those participating in the ritual."

Professor Dumbledore seemed to be following very closely, but also seemed to recognize that there was more, as he waited expectantly for her to continue. She sighed. "He said that history and tradition teach that marriage was offered to us to mimic the bond between Christ and the church." She hesitated. "And it offered an opportunity for a man and a woman to share relations and avoid the carnal sins of the flesh..."

Professor Snape hissed his disapproval.

"...but Father Gadbury said that he rather thought that most people stumble through life, bouncing from one relationship to the next. They are continually looking for more and more varied sexual experiences...for thrills...always looking for something more and only finding temporary satisfaction..."

"You were ten years old and he spoke to you of sex?" Professor Snape demanded.

"Only in the theological sense!" she retorted. And then added, "And yes, I was a little embarrassed, but then, he was accustomed to teaching that class to older students, and...and, will you let me finish!"

He waved a hand at her and glared out the night-dark window.

"Father Gadbury said that those who enter into a sacramental marriage discover *together*, that it is the man and woman themselves and the love and respect and nurturing that they have for one another that provides a sexual satisfaction that transcends all others. That this is what everyone seeks but can't find because they lack the essential foundation of their relationship with one another."

"How sweet."

"Severus," the Headmaster warned. "And at ten years old, your impressions of this were...?"

She winced. "Having just learned what sex actually *was*, I decided promptly that I wanted a sacramental marriage because I wanted it to be right the first time, and not have to go about doing messy things with a series of different men looking for something that wasn't going to be there, anyway."

Professor Dumbledore choked on his sherbet lemon and coughed.

She was quite certain she was blushing from her toenails to the roots of her hair. "I was only ten years old."

"Well." Professor Dumbledore, having recovered, popped another sweet in his mouth. "That would explain a lot."

She became aware of the waves of rage radiating from beside her and warily met Professor Snape's gaze. "Are you telling me that we went through that farce with Merlin only knows what repercussions simply because the Room of Requirement was responding to your ten-year-old's fantasies of what would constitute good *sex*?"

"Severus!" the Headmaster thundered. "That's enough! Might I remind you that it was you who stopped me from entering the Floo first? That if I'd been the one who had entered the Room of Requirement first, it would have provided what was in the best interests of the Order, if not the entire wizarding world?"

"Oh, yes, and because I had one chivalrous moment in my entire fucking life, I'm bringing the wizarding world as we know it to an end!"

"We don't know that," the Headmaster replied, but he was clearly concerned.

"Why do you keep saying these things?" Hermione demanded. "What does all this have to do with the Order or the wizarding world or anything other than Professor Snape and me?"

"My dear girl," the Headmaster replied. "While 'Muggle magic' is certainly too simplistic a term for what happens in Muggle religion, the fact is that by commingling 'Muggle magic' and 'wizarding magic' in your marriage ritual, we have committed a grave error. We don't know what will happen, but when the two meet, the results are rarely benign. And I hope you don't take this the wrong way, dear, but it's not how it might affect you that disturbs me. Over the past two weeks, I've observed marked changes in behaviour in the Order's most valuable resource, our only spy amongst the Death Eaters. Perhaps it's simply the awkwardness of adjusting to your new situation. But if it's not...if he is now acting under some new magical compulsions...I fear for us all."

A vice closed over her heart. Magical compulsions?

"However," he added carefully, "it's possible that we can eliminate at least some of our fears about the vows. You raise an interesting point when you mention... obedience?" He looked at her hopefully. "Surely you haven't found yourself magically bound to obey your husband's every whim?"

"No," she said automatically. "Of course not." But other thoughts whirled through her mind. She would do anything to please him. The desire to refuse him nothing ~~nothing~~. The ache that was almost agony.

"And you, Severus? Have you formed a passionate new love for this young woman you held in utter disdain as little as two weeks ago?"

"Absolutely not!" he spat.

"Then perhaps this really is much ado about nothing," Professor Dumbledore concluded.

Magical compulsions? It wasn't... real?

The very thought of it was enough to rend her heart.

"Thank you," she said, her head spinning. "I mean...well, thank you."

Hermione stood on trembling legs, willing them to be strong enough to support her weight.

Her heart hammering in her chest, she made a very un-Gryffindor exit.

She fled.

XX

Snape jerked to his feet, seething.

"Albus," he said with a jerk of his head. It was the closest to a respectful nod he could muster. He was halfway to the door when Albus's voice stopped him.

"Severus... stay."

He spun back to face the older wizard.

"You will not follow her," Albus said severely. "Not until we are finished."

Swallowing his rage, Snape forced himself back into the chair.

"Whatever situation you are in, remember, you chose it. You walked into it willingly and against my own advice. You have chosen not to seek my help and have chosen not to keep me informed as to your plans and whereabouts. Your actions over the past two weeks are alarming and confusing. Perhaps you've uncovered their cause, but perhaps not. There are other explanations for why you would find yourself so attached to Miss Granger..."

"You're being ridiculous. I no more have feelings for her than I do for Flitwick."

"Severus, you could have brought me your concerns, and we could have proceeded to get this same information without the humiliation you put the girl through tonight."

"Woman," he corrected, feeling his face flush under the old man's scrutiny.

"Perhaps you should give her some time alone to come to terms with what all this might mean for her."

"For her?" Snape gaped at him. "For her? You said it yourself. I'm the one at risk here."

"Of course you are," Albus responded blandly. "But you'll come through, now that you understand what is happening."

"Your concern for me, as always, is a comfort."

"I'm concerned for you, never fear that. Forgive me for being a soft old fool, but tonight, I fear I'm more concerned for Miss Granger." Albus stared into his milky tea. "It was her heart that broke in front of me, after all."

Snape rose stiffly, allowing his cup and saucer to drop to Albus's desk with a clatter.

He left the Headmaster's office with a billow of his cloak.

Shattered

Chapter 34 of 92

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Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

As always, thanks to JKR.

And, as always, thanks to the fabulous betas, Leigh-Anne and GinnyW!

34. SHATTERED

Obey.

His mother had made that fucking Muggle oath to obey.

The wind whipped around him as he braced his hands on the parapet of the Astronomy Tower and stared blindly down at the castle. There were no windows lighted in these dark hours before dawn.

He shoved away and ground his fists into his eyes. So much made sense. So many things from his childhood snapped into place with a sickening click.

Had she known? Had she known when she tempted the Muggle Tobias Snape into matrimony that doing so would end her life as a witch?

Oh, how she'd begged and pleaded her husband to allow her to use her magic. And the bastard had refused.

His anger at being tricked into marrying a pregnant girl was nothing compared to his rage at discovering she was a witch.

Tobias had discovered it when her son had first manifested his magic in the crib, Levitating a toy from the floor so he could reach it.

Severus could even take on *that* guilt, that his mother had kept her magic hidden until he'd made it impossible to hide.

Now, he looked back on his father with pity.

Heaven help the man who puts his heart in the hands of a teenaged witch. And Tobias had done that...unwittingly...and his life turned into hell.

He saw his mother with equal pity. Desperate, she'd taken a coward's way out with Tobias. But she was so young, and the Prince family had disowned her for bringing shame to them.

By the time he got his Hogwarts letter, he was relieved to leave that dismal, loveless home. When he'd been sorted into Slytherin, his mother had been euphoric. The Sorting Hat had recognized the truth. Or, as she would have seen it, The Truth.

Despite his name, he was pureblood.

Oh, the fucking irony that he was now as trapped by Muggle vows as she'd ever been.

And...he felt the ragged pain in his breast...Miss Granger had taken the same oath his mother had.

He wanted to raise his face into the fierce wind and roar his rage.

XX

Hermione sped down the dark corridor, led by instinct rather than thought. Only when she found herself in front of the Fat Lady without a password did she realize where she'd gone.

She backed away silently, not wanting to disturb the Fat Lady's snores.

She whirled and went the other direction, blood pulsing through her body. Yes, *eventhere*, she realized, each step she took pulling a subtle but genuine reaction from her swollen nether regions.

She thrust a fist to her lips and swore she would not cry.

She had no place of her own.

She walked blindly through the dark corridors, no longer speeding, just putting one foot in front of the other, blocking out her thoughts, tamping down her feelings.

Walking was good. It eased the tight place in her heart, just a little....

And so, she walked.

There were worse things, after all.

And eventually there were no tingles between her legs, only numbness. Her feet were cold...she had neglected to put on socks...and her calves cramping.

But one step at a time was easy enough.

If she didn't allow herself to think.

Or feel.

And eventually...it seemed like hours passed but surely not...she found herself outside the Room of Requirement.

How fitting.

She paced back and forth three times, and then the door manifested itself for her.

She paused, almost afraid of what she'd find, and then entered.

Oh, how fitting, indeed.

She'd half expected to find herself at Winchester Cathedral again.

Instead, she was in an eerily reasonable facsimile of the dungeon bedchamber.

But not quite.

It looked the same, only the bed covers weren't tangled.

The air wasn't infused with the heady scents of eucalyptus and spearmint and sex.

He wasn't here.

Instead of giving her what she required, it only reminded her of what it couldn't give her.

Or was that its intent?

She was too confused, almost dizzy with confusion, and didn't even try to understand.

And so, quietly, she entered the actual bedchamber a short time later, to find it dark except for firelight. Quietly, she eased herself forward toward the bed. If only he would be asleep.

But the bed was empty.

Suddenly she found herself flipped against the wall, a wand pressed to her throat.

"It's me," she said hoarsely, and hoped that actually meant something to him.

"Indeed." He dropped the wand but didn't step away.

She felt emotion radiating from him but all she could muster in response was despair. "I'll use a Time-Turner," she blurted. "I'll go back and..."

"How easily that suggestion trips off your tongue, Miss Granger," he hissed. He stepped away from her and she found it easier to breathe, if more difficult to remain standing. She sank into the nearest chair, which happened to be his. The warmth of his body still clung to it, and she pressed more deeply into it seeking his unwitting comfort.

But that was not to be.

He snagged her arm and yanked her to her feet. His face pressed close to hers, his eyes (oh, his eyes) close enough to swallow her whole. He continued through gritted teeth, "There are things you need to understand, Miss Granger. And this is one of them. There will be no Time-Turners. There will be no going back."

"You're hurting me," she whispered.

He immediately relaxed his grip on her arm, and something flickered through his eyes as he rubbed it gently instead, but then, the tension was back, and he pulled her to the fireplace, to the mantle above it.

"*Lumos*." The sconces on either side flared, and she saw...with a clenching of her stomach and an ache in her heart...the photographs she'd lovingly placed there.

Him. Alone. Against the wall. Scowling at something she couldn't see. But still, it was he. She no longer saw the movement, the dancers, the girl in blue and the Quidditch star that held her. She only saw the man who would become her husband, and it made her ache.

And then, the picture of their wedding. She caught her breath. Their kiss. The magical bonds twisting around them.

"Do you see the bonds?" he asked. *"Silver."*

She nodded mutely.

"Silver would never be used at a binding. If we needed evidence, there it is."

She dared to slide a sideways look at him and gulped when she saw the fierce scowl, which, sensing her movement, he quickly forced on her. "Do you realize the danger of an unknown binding, unknown magic, working in us?"

"Of course I do. I'm not stupid! It's why I suggested..."

"Let's go back to that day, shall we? The day you exploded into my classroom and announced to me that I have some responsibility for ~~protecting~~ you. Protecting *you!* You. The princess of Gryffindor. *You.* Minerva's favorite. *You.* The girl who only had to receive a single offer from a Death Eater to have half the Order and most of the Weasleys spring forward for the honor of protecting you!"

She cringed away from him, her heart pounding.

"The entire Order shifting into gear to find a way to protect you, to protect *Potter*," he sneered. And then, he stepped away from her, walked into the shadows, braced his arms against the wall and ground out, "But who was jumping forward to protect my Slytherins?" He whirled and faced her, the anger on his features blazing. "No one."

"I'm sure..." she fumbled, "I'm certain Professor Dumbledore would have..."

"He views them as victims beyond his reach," he hissed. "If their own parents wanted to rush them to the Dark Lord before they had to go, to watch them get their marks...how was he to stop them?"

"But you burst into my classroom with your righteous indignation, your childish panic, and handed me exactly the salvation I was looking for."

How silently he moved. How quickly he had closed the space between them and, not touching, still brushed her with his heat.

And then, almost lovingly, he whispered into her ear, "I didn't marry you to save you, Miss Granger. I married you to save ~~Draco~~."

She clutched the mantle to keep from falling.

His lips curled in a sneer. "Because if I could stop Draco from taking the Dark Mark, I could stop the others. As the Malfoys go, so go Slytherin."

To save his Slytherins.

To save Draco.

Of course.

She burned with humiliation.

How stupid. How selfish. How childish she must have seemed to him.

How stupid, selfish and childish she had *been*.

He'd never wanted her; she knew that, but this...this made it worse.

"You could have told me," she whispered. "I would have done it anyway. It saved both of us."

"And eliminate your guilt?" he asked, his voice satin, teasing the tender skin just below her ear. "Why would I want to do that?"

She turned away from him then, turned her face to the darkness, hid her eyes from him, hid her soul.

"We could still use a Time-Turner. We could go back and have a wizarding marriage and forget..." She couldn't continue. The words broke in her throat and she couldn't find them again.

She squeezed her eyes closed.

"How easy it is for you to speak of eliminating what is inconvenient. *Offorgetting.*"

"But it's worse than inconvenient," she choked. "It's dangerous. If it scares you and Professor Dumbledore, it has to be terrifying!"

"Indeed." He closed his long fingers over her upper arms with firm pressure. He spun her to face him. His black eyes glittered into hers and she knew, if he chose to, he could dive in and see the pain, and the fear, and the anguish that quaked through her. And she knew that she couldn't stop him.

But, he didn't even bother to try.

He was more focused on his own fierce emotion as he leaned over her until her head bent back.

"It would be easy for you, wouldn't it? You, who have a bevy of friends just waiting for you to come to your senses and despise me again. You, who are never alone. You, who live in the golden tower...a tower you never wanted to give up, I might remind you. How easily you talk of erasing the past two weeks, and perhaps I could forgive you that, if I didn't realize that you know full well what you're suggesting. You know that it isn't truly erased. That *we'd remember. We'd know.* Whether you chose to return to Gryffindor or continue this sham of a marriage and lie beside me at night in my cold bed, we'd know what had been. How easily you give this up, my devoted little *wife!*"

He dug his fingers into her hair, bracing her face until they were nose to nose, his eyes now squeezed shut as the heels of his hands pressed in at her temples. "Here is how much you have destroyed me, Miss Granger. *Here* is how far you've driven me, and how little honor I have left."

He dragged her shirt off her shoulder and nipped at the skin there. "Now that I know what I have in my bed every night, you could go back as far as you like and I would do everything in my power to bring you back."

His words sizzled against her skin, moist and heated. The words vibrated with something dark and dangerous. "Had I known, had I tasted..." He broke away from that shoulder and bared the other. "If I had this knowledge on the night you were sorted into Gryffindor, how would I have born it? How many nights could I have suffered with you in my classroom, in these halls, dancing around the edges of my fucking life?"

He peeled the shirt from her skin and bared her breasts to the air and to his hungry black gaze.

She wanted to twist away and out of his arms.

She wanted to arch up, tempt his lips to torment her breasts and set her on fire.

She did neither. She lay frozen under that ebony serpent's gaze.

"How long before I would have seduced you?" he pushed, his voice harsh. "Would I wait until you were of age? Would it have been last year?"

And there it was...the lick across her right nipple, followed by her own hissed intake of air.

"Or would I have plucked you sooner?"

Leaning over her, pinning her to the mattress.

He touched her left nipple.

Plucked it.

Blew across it.

All as tenderly and meticulously as he had before.

Only his voice wasn't tender. His touch trembled with suppressed rage.

She should be terrified of him.

Maybe... she was.

"At what point would the agony have been too much?" he pressed, growling against her throat. "At what point would I have destroyed you for my own relief?"

His hands trembled, his voice shook.

And she slid her fingers into his greasy hair and held his face still, her heart pounding.

"You don't have to," she said. "*I'm here.*"

And she kissed him.

She felt his face freeze beneath her lips, and still she tenderly nipped at his lower lip, bathed it in moisture, and teased.

Hands trembling, she reached for her jeans...

He grabbed her wrists, flung them away. "What are you doing?" And before she could answer, he hissed, "After all that I've told you? After all that I've said?"

She felt the blood singing in her veins, and the pulse was back, the pulse between her legs, the pulse that he had discovered and fanned to flame.

Never breaking his gaze, she flicked her fingers and felt her jeans disappear.

And when she was naked beneath him, when she could no longer stand the pain in his eyes, she slid one arm around his neck, and took one of his hands and pulled it between them, to the pulse that begged for his touch. "Professor, I need you." She kissed the base of his throat, dragged her tongue sweetly along the indentation of bone and sinew.

"And I think you need me."

It was as if something within him broke. One hand climbed her back and raised her head to his in a fierce kiss. The other finally slid down to part her arousal-plumped labia and over her wet clitoris...she gasped with pleasure...to plumb her vaginal core and seek the moisture that waited there.

He groaned, slid his fingers out and then back in. Again she gasped and opened her legs wider to him to give him better access. The next time he withdrew his hand it was to leave her quaking and quivering with need.

She clutched his shoulders and tried to hold him against her, but it was his turn to remove clothes, and there was no art or artifice in the way he jerked them off. Nor was there grace in the way he pushed her farther up onto the bed and spread her legs. But she only needed the weight of his cock against her core, the pressure as he shifted and adjusted until he was at her entrance, and then the blissful agony as he pushed in...imbedding the mushroom head of his penis within her.

She was stretched tight...her nerve-endings tingling and taut with his presence...and when he pulled out she almost cried with dismay. But then he shoved in and filled her to completeness, and all she could do was gasp with the glory of it.

And again, he withdrew, and this time she clenched around him, as if to keep him part of her forever. The very act of that attempt sent sensations coiling more tightly, concentrated at that spot that he was hitting with each stroke...*oh god oh god oh god*...how could he do this, make her feel these things?

The strokes started long and smooth and controlled, but they couldn't stay that way, not with her writhing under him, clutching him with her arms, her legs, anything to give her better traction to hold him in her, to keep him in her, to never let him leave, *oh god oh god oh god*...

His hair fell into his face, shadowing his eyes so she couldn't see them, couldn't see their beautiful black depths. But she could find his mouth and taste his lips and force her tongue between them until she tasted all that was him. And when his tongue followed hers back into her mouth, she suckled it with the rhythm of his strokes, trying to take every bit of him within her.

But his hips plunged so fiercely and her nerve endings swelled so sweetly, she could feel and taste and smell the tension as she gasped and all of her awareness focused on that one small spot, that sweetly anguished spot, and the thick, vein-wrapped cock that stroked it...

Until she cried out with the ecstasy of it, the reaction that went beyond mere pleasure, and jerked with the overload of sensations....

And still he drove into her, losing control, losing rhythm, but never losing his hold on her as he shattered...

And she caught him.

Slowly, so slowly, he continued to stroke, even though they were both spent and quivering. And still, he clung to her, moved within her, as if afraid to stop...as if afraid to let her go...as if afraid to let it end.

But it had to end, and it did end, and he collapsed beside her, rolled away from her, and left her cold in the night.

She stared at his back, his angel white skin stretched taut over shoulders too wide for his thin body. At the scars that could only barely be seen in the shadowy darkness. At the tension still there, despite what they'd just shared.

She closed the distance between them and pressed her lips to his spine, curled her hands over his shoulders, arched into the curve of his back.

And after one long, frozen moment...

He rolled back to face her, to pull her into his arms, to kiss her.

And finally, to curl around her as they slept.

Unreal

Chapter 35 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Thanks to JKR.

And thanks to GinnyW, the fabulous beta, for much handholding!

35. UNREAL

Her scent awakened him first.

Then, her soft whimper.

Curled against him, her body called out to him, even in her sleep.

His cock ached and throbbed, pressed as it was between his belly and the luscious swell of her arse.

They were both naked. It would be so easy...so fucking easy...to pull her even tighter against him, to simply slide between those plump folds, to find her tight and hot and wet and to pull out, then slide back in. To repeat the strokes, so slowly, so slowly, so slowly....

But she was asleep.

Fucking hell.

Was this the way it was between husbands and wives? Was it that easy, to just reach and take in the early hours of the morning?

Was he supposed to wake her up and ask permission?

He could smell her, damn it.

He was moving against her, the ache grown to a full-fledged pain as his body responded to hers.

And again, that soft whimper...

She ground against him in her sleep. *Ground against him!*

If that wasn't a fucking invitation, what was?

He slid his fingers down the silky warmth of her thigh, slipped his hand between her legs and parted them gently....

And got a face full of hair as she arched back into him.

The reaction...the heat that coursed through him...left him dry-mouthed and hard as a teenaged boy.

Again.

After the night they'd spent.

Merlin's fucking ghost.

He squirmed, trying to find the right spot...

She rolled out of range, even as she whimpered again.

He curled his arm around her, braced her body, and...*fuck fuck fuck oh fucking hell, yes!*...found her quim, wet and hot and fuck it all, eager. He pressed in gently and felt her soft flesh part for him and the dark, spongy interior of her vagina accept him, welcome him, so tight, so fucking tight. This time, when she moved, the texture of her vaginal walls around him almost curled his toes. Slowly, he pressed forward and her trembling flesh welcomed him.

So quiet... so quiet and cold and black in the dungeon, as if nothing existed in the entire castle except their coupling, the hot juncture of his flesh and hers, a slow building heat of slow movements and soft sighs. Oh, Merlin, those soft sighs were killing him...soft sleepy sighs...as he pulled almost all the way out, her flesh clutching him with delicious friction, and then slid back in with a groan.

She suddenly clutched his forearms with her hands, and he realized she was awake...tighter, even tighter, now that she was aware and responding with the full focus of

her mind as well as her body.

She turned her face into his shoulder, and her whimper turned into a moan as he increased the rhythm of his thrusts. Gods, he was at the point of losing it, of shooting into her with all the force of his lust when she suddenly stiffened, squeezing him in rippling waves of orgasm that left him unable to breathe, to move. She cried out into the darkness, a long beautiful cry that tore him apart and sent him over the edge. He clutched her like a lifeline, clung to her as he felt life force jetting from him in exquisite spurts of semen, until he quivered with the sheer ecstasy of it all...

This girl, this woman, this witch.

It seemed an eternity before he breathed again.

He was still in her as she shuddered with aftershocks, and each aftershock sent a corresponding tremor through him.

He cupped her breasts and nuzzled through her hair until he found the tender spot where her neck and shoulder joined. He tongued it, tasting the sweet salt of her skin, wanting to absorb her into him, to keep her there, safe and warm and his.

She reached one arm behind his head and stroked his hair, sighing so sweetly, like an angel in the dark....

"How can you stand it?" she whispered against him. "Now that you've made *me feel*. I don't know how I can bear it, knowing that we have to wait an entire week to do it again. But you knew. You knew what we were missing. How did you...how can you stand the waiting?"

I didn't know.

That was the simple truth. He knew what a quick orgasm felt like, and knowing that was difficult enough. But, now. Now. Now that he knew what sex with *her* was like.... Sex with his Miss Granger...

His.

"Would it be easier if we...if we didn't sleep together?"

He clutched her against him convulsively. "No."

She relaxed against him so sweetly, her sigh so compliant. "I'm so glad."

The hollow ache came back.

The fucking vows.

He felt his entire body go rigid with tension.

"Miss Granger, you must know...you could have said no."

"No to what?"

"Just now. When I woke you. You didn't have to let me."

And this time, she was the one who stiffened. "At what point was I supposed to say no? While I was still asleep? Or when I woke up with your penis already..." she caught her breath and then continued, "*moving* in me?"

And then, she melted against him again. "I didn't want to say no."

"If you'd said no, I wouldn't have been angry," he explained weakly. "You can't go around allowing things just because I..."

"It's not evil," she said. She reached for his face, tracing its contours in the darkness, and he let her. And when her fingers drifted to his mouth, he found himself seeking them like a babe sought sustenance, sucking them into him to lave with his tongue.

Her breath caught and her body pressed more tightly against him, soft skin and warmth and scent and sighs....

"Whatever it is that is happening between us," she said urgently, "isn't Dark. It's not evil."

He released her fingers with a gasp as she closed her hand around his cock. He didn't think he could...Merlin, he was only flesh and blood, and it was too soon...

She held him in her hand, and nestled against him and sighed, "It's Saturday. We can go back to sleep, can't we, Professor?"

And somehow, with her hand embracing him most intimately and the comfort of her body in his arms, he did just that.

XX

She came awake suddenly.

Nothing woke her. Crookshanks was asleep by the fireplace; she could hear his purr. Professor Snape was snoring softly in her ear. (Did she snore? How embarrassing to think she might. Lavender did, so it was possible... Oh, she couldn't even think about that or she'd die of mortification.)

His breath warmed her bare shoulder, just as his skin warmed her everywhere they were pressed together. And where they weren't connected, the bed seemed to provide its own warmth, just as it seemed to hold them protectively in its embrace.

Professor Dumbledore had looked at her with pity. With pity.

The humiliation burned through her anew as she recognized the absurdity that she should despise Dumbledore for witnessing it and curled into the arms of the husband who had brought it on her.

She rubbed her cheek against his stubble and the rasps felt like velvet to her. Whatever was happening *couldn't* be a bad thing. It simply couldn't. And it was up to her to prove it.

If only she could keep him here with her in this bed and keep the world while keeping the Dark Lord at bay....

She desperately needed the loo.

And to think.

In that order.

She managed to ease out of his arms without waking him. She grabbed her wand from beneath her pillow and cast a warming charm over his body and then a quieting charm to surround him. She didn't want to wake him up, not before she could return and slip back under the covers again.

She scampered across the cold stone floor to the bathroom and gently shut the door.

"*Lumos.*"

The candles in the sconces lit with flames, and she managed to sit on the toilet...just in time.

And wince.

She was a bit sore.

More than a bit, actually.

Sex seemed to use all sorts of muscles that she hadn't realized she even possessed. Not to mention the obvious muscles.

A wave of the wand and the tub started filling with steaming water. Another wave, and bath salts hit the teaming surface. A final wave, and several towels wafted their way to the side of the deep, claw-footed tub.

She slid into it with a moan.

Oh, god, it felt so good.

It smelled so good.

She reached back and struggled with her hair, finally getting it twisted into a semblance of a controlled wad on the back of head, and jammed her wand through at an angle.

Fuck Bellatrix Lestrange, she thought viciously. Surely she wasn't the only witch who wore her hair this way, *surely*.

She sank back against the tub, closed her eyes and let the water begin to do its work.

And when she could no longer avoid it, she began to think.

About Muggle vows.

About Professor Snape's accusations.

About the hard knot of fear in her own breast.

She felt a war going on within her own body, perhaps even within her soul. It was a war between this blazing, glorious thing that was growing stronger each moment...

And the cold, malicious thought that maybe it wasn't real.

And deep in her traitorous heart she didn't want to know the truth.

What good was magic if it couldn't bring you true love?

Even if it wasn't real....

XX

Bloody hell, the witch was trying to drown herself!

Water splashed over the edges of the tub and onto the floor. It spread under the door and across the room and if the blasted cat hadn't pounced on him he would have slept through the flood.

As it was, he Evanescoded the water, turned off the faucet and stood over the tub, glaring down at her where she slept with foamy water up to her chin.

He emptied the tub with a flick of his fingers.

Even with the cold dimpling her skin and her nipples...Merlin, look at what it did to her nipples!...she still slept.

"*Mobilicorpus*," he said softly and floated her back to the bed where he covered her with a warming spell, followed by the red sheets, green velvet covers and the ridiculous floral bedcover that had belonged to her grandmother, the witch.

She slept through it all.

He heard the Floo fire flare behind him and cast a quick silencing spell around her. He grabbed a robe to cover his own nudity, and turned to see Albus's head.

"Severus, when you and Miss-Madam Snape didn't appear at breakfast or at lunch, I felt I should check and make sure nothing was amiss?"

"We had a busy night," he snapped.

"Well, erm, yes, I'm aware of that."

Not by half. "Did you require anything else?"

"There's no need to be rude."

Snape snapped his fingers at the head in the fire and watched it vanish.

A tub of hot water seemed like a fucking good idea.

He was halfway back to the bathroom when a movement from the bed caught his eye.

She rolled over, her eyebrows wrinkled in discomfort. She shifted her hips under the covers, never waking.

Bloody hell.

They'd treated her vagina like it was a railroad station complete with rails rather than soft, tender tissue unaccustomed to invasion. He paced to the potions cabinet and

rifled through it until he found a pot of healing unguent.

He sat on the side of the bed, raised the covers enough to slide his hand beneath and ease his unguent-coated fingers between her legs. Gingerly, he massaged the cream into her plump folds and as far into her channel as he could reach as he tried to stifle his body's own wretched response to the liberties he was taking.

Her eyelashes...thick, curly and dark against her ivory skin...fluttered open.

He withdrew his hand.

"Professor... " she murmured with a drowsy smile. "Could today be another honeymoon day...?"

"I have business to attend."

Her eyes clouded over and she reached for him. "Don't leave me."

It pierced him.

"Go back to sleep." His voice was hard but he touched his fingertips to her eyelids and let them linger there, holding them closed, as his hand cupped her cheek.

He felt more than a twitch of torment as she did just that.

He closed the unguent and left it on the table beside the bed.

First, a bath, then food, then he needed to take another and less pleasing liberty with Miss Granger's privacy.

XX

He was clothed against the cold wind and making his way from the castle to the Apparation point outside the grounds when an owl found him.

He removed the rolled parchment from its leg and recognized it as Malfoy's.

"... *this afternoon, if convenient...*"

He ground out a curse, pulled an ever-inked quill from an inner pocket of his cloak and scribbled an agreement across the bottom, then gave the owl a dry treat to return it.

But, first things first.

He stepped into a turn and Apparated straight into...

Miss Granger's childhood bedroom.

His arrival was almost silent. He braced himself, ready to pop right back out, but it was empty, as he'd expected. A minute's frozen silence revealed no approaching footsteps or any other indication that anyone was aware a stranger was present.

He knelt beside her bookcase, snagged her prayer book and, after a quick scan of titles, two scholarly looking tomes on Anglican theology. If this weren't enough he'd return for more.

He shrunk them, put them in a pocket, and then gritted his teeth for his next stop.

Lucius.

XX

Hermione carefully wrote her request on a slip of parchment, signed it and tossed it into the Floo.

She'd never sent a message through the Floo before, but if teachers were allowed to do it, why not?

Five minutes later she had a response written in purple...purple!...ink.

My dear Madam Snape,

I am pleased to assist you in any way, including the granting of your request. Dobby will deliver it shortly.

While I have every confidence in your abilities, I do trust that you will not attempt to use it without your husband present.

Yours truly,

Albus Dumbledore

With that taken care of, she beckoned her trunk from under the bed and dug through it until she found the small wooden box she sought. While it was the size of a matchbox, after she reversed the Shrinking Spell it was more the size of a cigar box.

With it clutched securely, she paced the quarters, looking for wall space. She'd never dreamed that she would think the thought, "Too many bookshelves," but now that she needed a bare wall, think it, she did.

She lowered the wards and entered his private laboratory. Shelves and more shelves, only broken up by the occasional cabinet.

The bathroom had walls....

She was halfway through the door when she gave her head a hard shake.

No. There was no way she could do her research in the loo!

With a low mutter, she began her pacing again.

XX

A house-elf escorted Severus into the Malfoy conservatory where Lucius lounged on a wicker chaise, another house-elf busily buffing his master's nails.

"Come in, come in," Lucius beckoned with a languid wave of his free hand toward the low table. "Help yourself, if you'd like."

Only Lucius would decant Old Ogden's into a crystal decanter. Still, the steamy vapors that drifted down its contours did make an alluring sight.

He poured himself a shot and took his seat opposite the indolent blond. "And why do you presume upon my time, Lucius?"

Lucius cuffed the house-elf away from his right hand and gave him a preemptory shove toward the other side of his chaise where his left hand rested. "Just thought I'd check on your progress with your Mudblood bride. You seemed to be having a little trouble getting her to warm to your bed."

"She is my bride, as you say, and as such I needn't point out to you the insult you heap upon me when you insult her." Snape allowed a real frown to mar his features. "And I have no idea what you're nattering about."

Lucius settled back into the cushion and smirked. "Call her what you like. My talent, of course, is knowing just that sort of thing. The girl is as tightly wound and repressed as a nun."

Now it was Snape's turn to smirk, if only to mask his slowly simmering anger. Yes, if one could consider it a talent, a certain type of sexual awareness and deduction was certainly one of Lucius's strengths, as self-serving as it was.

And one of Snape's many strengths was the ability to read one Lucius Malfoy. Beneath the blond's languor was a certain alertness. He seemed to have quite an interest in Miss Granger's so-called repression.

"Kind of you to care, Lucius," he finally said, then took a slow sip of firewhisky.

"You've waited so long for a woman, Severus. I was prepared to offer you advice or ... assistance?" The smirk went full wattage.

Severus slammed the empty shot glass down with controlled force. "I'm sure you would, but actually, the job has already been accomplished."

"Oh, I know. I do know. Even if I hadn't dropped by the Ministry this morning, it's written all over you."

The Ministry? He'd known they were being monitored. He'd known it. Why did this confirmation hit him like a Bludger, then?

Despite the need to put as much distance between Lucius Malfoy and his own need to hex, Snape poured himself another glass. This was indeed information he desired. "You act surprised," he murmured.

Lucius gave him a slight salute. "If you didn't warm her to your bed, you damn well lost patience with her reticence. Either way, congratulations, my dear friend. You should enjoy her while you have her, after all."

While he had her?

"Do you know something I don't?"

"I'm sure I know many things you don't. But we both know whatever tolerance the Dark Lord is exercising in regards to your marriage is just that...tolerance, and sure to be short-lived. I wouldn't be at all surprised to have him summon her to a revel."

"You're delusional. The marriage contract would never allow such a thing."

"Of course it would."

He met Lucius's icy gray gaze.

"Pray tell, illuminate me how one participates in revels while under a fidelity charm."

Lucius tossed his head back and laughed, full-throated and rich. "Oh, poor Sev, surely you didn't think it was a fidelity charm. I thought you of all wizards would appreciate how little need there is for actual fidelity in such a union as yours."

Snape carefully placed his glass on the low table without taking another sip. It steamed and bubbled gently, the only thing moving in the room.

"Severus, all they care about is that the offspring are infused with new blood, however muddy it might be. There is no fidelity charm nor is there monitoring *at* *which* pure blood line is introduced into her body."

"That rather defeats the purpose of the experiment," Severus said stiffly. "If you can't trust the ancestral lines that are recorded with the Ministry, within another generation the problems we're having now could look miniscule..."

"Who gives a flying fuck about the ancestral lines of a Mudblood brat? On the slight possibility that a remarkable child is born...and in Granger's case I grudgingly admit that possibility...it will be snatched up by a pureblood quickly enough. As for the rest, they will not survive to procreate. The Dark Lord has other plans."

His mind raced right along with his blood. None of this should surprise him, but on the heels of the night he'd had, it certainly wasn't easy news. He opened his mouth to ask the question he knew Lucius was waiting for. About the revel. About Miss Granger. About the Dark Lord's plans. He fought for calm, but it seemed just beyond his reach...

When a reflective flash of light hit his eyes from behind Lucius's shoulder. The sun had shifted just enough to reflect straight into his face.

And he laughed.

A small mirror.

A fucking test.

And he'd almost fallen for it.

He rubbed the smile from his face with one hand and smirked at Lucius as he rose to his feet. "When the Dark Lord is ready for his revel, feel free to inform me, Lucius."

He paused, not wanting to move out of the charmed mirror's view. "Although I'm sure I'll know of any plans that affect me and my bride long before you do. My Lord knows he can trust me with any task. He also knows that I don't play well with others and I don't share my toys."

Lucius rose gracefully and followed Severus out of the conservatory and into the drawing room. "It's just a warning between friends," he said in a low voice. "Don't get too attached to the idea of having the girl in your bed. It can't last, you know."

Severus felt the bile in the back of his throat. "On that, we can agree," he replied, accepting it as nothing but the truth.

"And Severus," Lucius added, his voice rich with pleasure, "lest you think I'm lusting after your Mudblood..."

Severus paused outside the Apparation Foyer and forced one last, questioning look at the man he'd love to fell with a two-word curse.

"I just thought I'd point out to you how quickly she turns to Weasleys when she's distressed and how eager they are to soothe away her cares."

Lucius smirked.

"And you'd never know."

Empty

Chapter 36 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

As always, many thanks flung at the divine Ms. Rowling.

And roses and Honeydukes chocolates flung at Leigh-Anne and GinnyW, my fabu betas!

36. EMPTY

His quarters were empty.

He could walk in and immediately know the difference between the silences: silences which might mean she was asleep, she was in the loo, she was buried in a book...

And the empty silence that meant she was simply not there.

Until only days before...just over two weeks...he had always entered empty quarters.

Odd how different "empty" felt now.

Before, "empty" meant blessedly devoid of meddlers, schemers and dunderheads. Refuge. Solitude.

Now, "empty" raised uneasy hackles on the back of his neck and made him need to know *Where is she?*

He still smelled her in the air, a scent that was both his and hers...spearmint and eucalyptus...and faint, tangy remnants of that other scent they shared...sex.

And a new scent.

Something harsh, chemical and...

Muggle.

He followed the scent into his office, and through that open door to his empty classroom...

Where he found her fiercely directing a frenzy of activity.

His blackboard's position of authority at the front of the room had been usurped by some sort of board that was both white and shiny. Four coloured pens were simultaneously writing across it in a swoopy script that was instantly recognizable as hers as she consulted notes and used flicks of her wand to direct each pen. It was like she was juggling plates and keeping them all in motion.

The board had been divided into neat sections by wide, straight lines of black ink, but the sections themselves were colour-coordinated and had headings such as *Love*," and "*Honour*," and "*Obey*," and he continued scanning until his eyes hit, *With my body, I thee worship*..."

And that's where he stopped cold.

At the list of words under that phrase.

Two words in particular.

Fellatio.

Cunnilingus.

She turned around and stared at him, her nose wrinkled. "Surely you haven't spent all this time in the Slytherin common room."

"What the hell are you talking..." he began before overriding her question with one of his own. "What the bloody fucking hell are you doing in my classroom?" A clinical description of their sex life seemed to shout at him from the board. "Anybody could come in here and see... *that!*" He gave an impotent wave, words failing him.

She drew herself up more primly and some part of his rebellious brain noticed she was wearing the white shirt with its neck open and plunging since she hadn't bothered to half-arse button it. Her legs were bare and clearly chilled, and she was writing words like *fellatio* on the board for anyone to come in and see...

"Surely you don't think I'm stupid enough to conduct my research without warding the doors," she snipped, turning her back to him and returning to said research with a flounce of her horrid hair.

"What gave you the right, Miss Granger, to take over my classroom and..."

"I'm trying to do the research you want done to prove to you that your bloody 'Muggle vows' aren't going to doom you to perdition, you big git!"

He froze.

He saw her flinch, and he knew why she did. She anticipated his reaction to her hurling names at him.

But no, that's not what froze him in his tracks and made his blood run cold.

The words just over her shoulder came into focus again. *With my body I thee worship.... Fellatio. Cunnilingus.*

Was she saying this was magical compulsion?

That her joining with him, her fully appreciative participation in sex between them, wasn't from her, but was instead from some perversion of her vows?

He dragged his eyes back to hers. "Perhaps you'd like to explain your research?"

"Oh." She spun back to the board. "Well, I've just barely begun, but I think we can eliminate a few things right off. Things like love... That can't be affected. I know, I know, I know what you said, and I can see why you might feel it's a horrible thing to demand of a wizard's vow, and if vowing it has some magical effects on wizards.... Well, I don't know. That would be for you to decide. But there's no way the love itself could be a magical compulsion simply because of the addition of the Muggle...I mean, the sacramental vows."

She turned back to face him, her eyes large as she strove to make him understand. "Christian theology includes Free Will. There's no way a vow could make somebody love or force them to love. It would go against everything...it denies a person free will, don't you see?"

He gestured impatiently to her to continue.

"Honour... well, that's an action, that's how you treat someone, so I suppose it's possible the sacramental vow might be emphasized by the magical one, or vice versa. But, still, I'm not sure.... And then there's obey. And that's just silly. I'm not obedient."

"Let's come back to that one, shall we?" he said, his voice cool even to his own ears.

She crossed to the other side of the board, and her hand brushed across the words that taunted him. "But this, this might mean something...."

"Indeed? Perhaps you would explain?" He stood stiffly, watching her long, delicate fingers gesture at the red pen so that it circled the word, *fellatio*.

"I, of course, read about oral sex," she said, her voice light and curious and oddly clinical, "but couldn't imagine anybody wanting to actually *do* it."

She looked up at him from beneath her lashes and managed to look almost shy, this brazen minx who had taken him into her mouth and...

"Until I realized I wanted to do it to you." She glanced quickly away.

Wanted? She wanted to? Or felt compelled? He swallowed thickly.

"Before that, the idea of putting a man's penis in my mouth or a man's tongue in my vagina was simply beyond my comprehension," she rattled on blithely. "I couldn't imagine doing it, or letting anybody do it to me."

Nor could I. The words came unbidden into his mind.

"I certainly never thought I would ever perform *fellatio*. In fact, I thought I'd hex the man who thrust himself at my mouth," she blurted indignantly. "But within days of our wedding I was sucking your..."

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, not sure that he could continue this conversation and retain his sanity.

"And I wanted to!"

How could her words be so brazen and her eyes so fucking innocent? Merlin!

"But, it wasn't sudden. It wasn't like I had this sudden raging urge, or like I felt forced against my will. I studied the book, and I realized that it was something I could give you, something I could do for you." Her eyes fluttered around the room, looking for some place to rest their gaze. "And then I decided I wanted to! It was a conscious decision, not a sudden impulse or urge...." The silence spun between them.

"Do you really think that was because of the vows?" she asked fearfully, but rushed on before he could even think to answer, thank Merlin. "And even if it was...why does that have to be a bad thing? I mean, I liked it.... And then, when you did it to me..." This time her cheeks flushed with colour, and she spun away from him to face the board, and he knew a moment's urge to reach out for her...

A loud *crack* split the air.

Dobby appeared lugging a heavy piece of carved stone. Beaming and huffing for breath, he turned to face Miss Granger.

"Headmaster Dumbledore said to wait until Professor Snape is back so..."

"Out!" Snape roared, and the house-elf's pleased expression turned to goggle-eyed terror as he disappeared with another *crack*, hopefully before getting a glimpse of what was written on the board and without hearing anything. *Fucking hell, don't let that blasted house-elf have heard anything...and she was standing there looking so sodding fuckable...*

"How dare you!" She whirled on him, fists on her hips, and all the board pens fell to the stone floor with a clatter. "I've been waiting for that for *hours*!"

She flung her head back and shouted, "Dobby!"

Crack!

Dobby appeared, dropped the heavy stone piece, and cracked out again, his face a mask of dismay.

"Thank you!" she shouted after him, then turned a vicious glare on Snape.

"What in fucking hell..." he demanded, flustered.

"It's a Pensieve," she hissed as she did her best to lift it.

"Out of my way," he snapped and, with a flick of his wrist, Levitated it to his desktop. "And why do you need a fucking Pensieve?"

"To revisit our vows, you bloody..."

"That will be quite enough," he snapped. "I refuse to stand in my own classroom while my wife heaps abuse on my head! And if I catch you even attempting to remove memories by yourself..."

"I had no intention of it!"

"Well. I should hope not." He fought the urge to shove her hair out of her face and, instead, hid behind his own.

She ended her glare by turning her back on him and scooping her pens from the floor.

He stared at her back, at the way the hem of the white shirt skimmed her thighs. His eyes focused on the tiny spot of brown in the tail that could only be a dried remnant of her blood, caught in the tight, narrow fold of the hem.

And he knew an unreasonable urge to kiss her.

He denied that urge.

Her back still to him, she waved her hand in front of her face. "If you insist on spending time in smoky rooms, you could at least use a freshening spell before you return."

She smelled cigarette smoke? Lucius hadn't been smoking.... But he often smoked in the conservatory. Snape gave a surreptitious sniff and realized that, yes, the faint scent clung to him. It wasn't that he didn't smell it; Merlin knew his nose didn't miss anything. It hadn't register because it was simply the way Lucius smelled so much of the time...of tobacco.

As did the seventh-year salon off the Slytherin common room.

Her question when he'd first arrived.

"I had business with Lucius," he said, resentful that he felt the need to explain himself to her. Belatedly, he performed the freshening charm. "Although, how you can complain, considering the stench of those Muggle pens..."

"My grandmother who was not a witch smoked, and she died of lung cancer," she said softly.

"Oh." He drew in a breath. "But of course, you realize that wizards don't..."

She turned on him, her eyes cold. "Yes, I'm very familiar with the fact that pureblood wizards aren't susceptible to cancer."

Fucking hell.

There were two primary reasons smoking was so prevalent amongst Slytherins.

One, cigarettes in the wizarding world were bloody expensive, seeing as they were imported from the outside. It was a symbol of wealth, practically like setting money on fire just because one could.

And, two, because amongst purebloods not only was there no risk of cancer, but amongst certain purebloods...the kind who were sorted into Slytherin, for example...there was often a nasty desire to flaunt their immunity as some sort of proof of physical superiority over half-bloods and Muggle-borns.

"Miss Granger." He took two steps toward her, but she turned her back to him again.

There it was, again. That desire to kiss her. This time, to soothe, to apologize without actually... apologizing.

"I've been remiss. It won't happen again."

She shrugged, and he watched the white cotton ripple over her shoulders. He felt both the soft cotton and the silken texture of her skin in his imagination, and there they were, within his reach....

"I believe it's time to prepare for dinner," he said.

"Do we have to go to dinner? I mean, I've only scratched the surface here." She turned, and her eyes were alight with anticipation. Clearly, she was thrilled to have a *project*, as if she didn't already have a dozen.

"Yes," he said. "It's expected."

She sighed.

He watched as she performed an intricate bit of wandwork to reduce the white board down to the size of her palm and very carefully place it in a wooden box, along with the pens. She finally released the wards on the door, and then he followed her back to their quarters.

He dropped onto the bed to change into his warmer boots; the nights were getting colder and the Great Hall was drafty.

She reached into the wardrobe for the black robes she seemed to prefer. *his*, of course. The ones he'd shrunk to fit her for the Sorting. As she shrugged them on over the white shirt...still not buttoned properly, he noted with a grimace...she gave him a measured look.

"What?" he demanded.

She didn't pretend not to understand. She seemed to brace herself for something, and that itself was enough give him second thoughts, make him want to shut her off before she got started.

"It's about those things you said last night in Professor Dumbledore's office, and... here."

Merlin, did she have to rehash all of that?

"It's just that...I'm not sure whether you said those things because you were trying to push me away, or whether...." Her voice drifted to silence, and she finally raised her lashes, those dark, curly lashes, and looked straight at him with eyes the colour of hot, sweet tea. "I'm not sure whether you realized you were lying, or whether you thought you were telling the truth."

He stiffened.

"If you know you're lying, that's one thing, I don't care, I suppose you have your reasons," she nattered on, twisting her fingers through her hair. "But if you don't know...well, I don't like that you think so poorly of yourself, that's all."

"Poorly? You don't like that I think *poorly* of myself?" He laughed his scorn. "Would you rather I deluded the both of us?"

She shook her head slowly, but her eyes never left his, and he found himself quite unable to break the connection, even as she walked close enough to him to reach out

and touch. "You are a terrible liar," she whispered. "You said that you'd seduce me, even if I was still a child. And I asked myself, does he really think that little of himself? Because even I know that you would do none of those things. You would simply torment me more, and call me worse names, and despise me even more than you do now for being the cause of your distress." She stroked his hair away from his temple and, lips trembling, continued, "But you would cling to your honor because that's who you are."

"Damn it! Stop romanticizing me! I'm not a fucking hero, and the sooner you realize that..." He gave her a vicious glare and tried to wrench himself from her hands.

But she clung to his hair and refused to release him. "Last night, you wouldn't have been afraid, and you wouldn't have dragged me up to Professor Dumbledore's office, if you didn't *feel* something. If you didn't feel something *forme*. If you weren't afraid that what you felt was the result of 'Muggle magic,' you wouldn't have done or said any of those things."

Again, he tried to break away, but she clung to him with all of her power. "You don't have to admit it, and you don't have to believe me, because none of it makes any difference now. You don't have to wonder what would happen if I used a Time-Turner because I won't offer to rip out my heart for you that way again."

And then, with a touch as delicate as butterfly's fluttering wing, she touched his cheek. "You're a better man than you think you are, Professor Snape. And I'm not going to let you pretend otherwise. Not to me."

His breath was trapped in his lungs. He couldn't breathe. She was...she was insane, a stupid little girl with romantic fantasies about the man that cruel fates had sent to her bed, a stupid, stupid girl...

She was the cleverest witch of her age.

And she was peering deeply into his eyes, waiting....*Waiting...* for what? For him to what?

Her expression softened, and she placed the cool palms of her hands on either side of his face and held it still and gently kissed him.

And when...belatedly...his arms reached for her...

She was already backing away, that shy smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she grabbed her hair and twisted it haphazardly on the back of her head, and took his mother's hair comb and secured the mess with a satisfied pat.

Idiot girl, he thought helplessly as she walked to the door, not waiting for him to follow.

It hit him, then, so hot it drew a hiss from his lips.

The burn.

The Dark Mark.

The summons.

He looked up to see her frozen at the door, staring at his right hand, clamped over his left forearm.

She whipped around and took a step back toward him, but he shook his head sharply and pinned her with a cold stare.

"Your good husband is being summoned to his master," he said succinctly.

She ran to him, then. Flung herself into his arms. Buried her face in his neck so that he felt her heart pounding against him.

"Be safe," she said breathlessly. "Come back to me."

He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth and gently pushed her away.

"Tell Albus."

Eyes huge in her face, she nodded, and he left her that way.

Fool, he thought viciously.

But he wasn't certain whether the word was aimed at her or at himself.

He used the all-too-short walk through the icy night to push her out of his mind, leaving it empty.

Because that was the only way to survive.

By embracing the emptiness.

Lies

Chapter 37 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

All gratitude to JK Rowling for the universe and the characters.

All gratitude to Leigh-anne and GinnyW, for patience divine and beta-work extraordinaire.

37. LIES

She carried an Advanced Transfiguration book that she'd uncovered in the back of Professor Snape's bookshelf into the Great Hall, displaying it quite blatantly.

It was heavy and the weight of it kept her hands from trembling.

It was far beyond N.E.W.T. level and, she could tell by the pursing of Professor McGonagall's lips, made its point immediately. If her professor refused to give her challenging assignments, she would find them on her own.

As she passed Professor Dumbledore he arched his eyebrows at her in query.

"Professor Snape was called out," she said crisply without slowing.

She took her seat, all too aware of the empty one beside her, and buried her face in her book.

She was careful not to get any soup on it. She hadn't asked for permission to read it, much less haul it into public. Even though it wasn't Dark, it was his, after all. It was fascinating material. She'd reread the first page twice before she was able to discern that fact, because her insides were quivering with the awareness of where he was and what might be happening, no matter how blasé he was about his meetings with the Dark Lord.

She'd read the first paragraph on the second page three times before she gave up and just stared at the page to avoid whatever sets of eyes might be staring at her.

"So," came Hooch's voice from the other side of his empty chair. "What did you do with the body?"

She looked up to see Madam Hooch's sly grin. "I figured you'd do him in sooner or later. You held out longer than I would have."

She forced a weak smile and then realized she'd never thanked the older witch. "That thing you told me...about breaking something? It worked brilliantly."

Hooch nodded, satisfied. "It was only a temporary release, of course. You need more..." Her glance flickered down the table where none of the other faculty appeared to be paying any attention to their conversation. "You need more," she repeated, without elaborating.

"Perhaps we can work out a schedule," Hermione said.

Hooch nodded again, then turned to respond to a remark from Professor Flitwick.

Hermione stared at her plate. Everything tasted like ashes.

She'd done her duty, reported in to Professor Dumbledore and put in an appearance.

She couldn't sit here any longer.

She picked up her book and headed for a certain fourth-floor window that held the view she desperately needed.

XX

Fuck!

Instead of the comfort of the Malfoy ancestral home, he'd been summoned to the crest of a jagged outcropping of rocks...somewhere in Yorkshire if he didn't miss his guess. The wind whipped and howled, cutting through him like a jagged knife.

He dropped immediately to his knees, took the hem with his fingertips and raised it to his lips...

And a flash of white...with a drop of dried blood...flashed through his mind, unbidden.

The Dark Lord's hand graced the top of his head, the fingers stroking his hair with affection. "Rise."

He rose and met the red eyes, unflinching.

They were alone on the hill, a thin layer of clouds softening the dark sky overhead with only a faint glow indicating where the moon struggled to break through.

"Take me to Spinner's End," the Dark Lord said.

"It's not fit for your presence," he replied.

"I want to be alone with you."

Severus raised the skeletal hand to his lips and, taking the Dark Lord with him, Disapparated.

XX

The stone ledge under the window was almost deep enough for a window seat. Hermione Transfigured a handkerchief into a cushion and climbed up onto the sill.

The view of the front lawn spilled before her, sloping down to the gate and if it had been daylight, the Apparition point beyond.

"A watched pot never boils," she told herself.

Such admonitions had never stopped her from watching pots, however, and now she couldn't leave this window, this view, lest the gnawing in her stomach drive her mad.

She opened the book in her lap, determined to at least attempt to distract herself with it. When she found the text difficult to read, she used her wand to light the page. Immediately, the view from the window vanished, replaced with her own reflection.

She extinguished the wand and, after a few quick blinks, was able to study the landscape below again.

He hadn't even been gone an hour. She truly *would* go mad if she kept this up.

She lit her wand again and bent over the book, determined not to look again until she'd read and understood an entire page.

Five minutes later the book was closed in her lap and her face pressed against the icy glass as she stared down at the gate, willing a figure in billowing black to appear.

XX

"Welcome to my humble abode." He swept a pile of books off a chair with a wave of his hand and stepped back, allowing the Dark Lord to take the seat. The books landed

neatly on the floor by the grate.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"No, thank you. But do get yourself something."

Severus pondered that a moment, deciding to accept it as advice and not just pleasantry. As he poured the firewhisky into a small tumbler, he arched a brow.

"You have me alone, my Lord. Is there a private task you wish to assign me?"

"I hope you don't mind being torn away from the company of your bride?"

"Merlin, no. I'm grateful for the break." He shoved some papers aside and slouched onto the dusty settee.

"Elaborate...."

Severus grimaced. "I'm a solitary man with simple needs and desires, including a strong need for solitude, something that is never granted me with a bloody teenaged witch living in my quarters."

"But there are benefits."

He shrugged. "Indeed."

"Ah, Severusss, to be a man with simple needs you are very complicated."

"Not so very complicated, my Lord."

"Then tell me, what do you want? The time is growing near when the rewards will be given, and I don't even know why you're with me, Severusss. I don't know what you want, what you need...."

Ah, was this the game they were playing?

"And what if I told you all I want when it's over is to walk away?"

"I'll need you."

"And as long as you need me, you have me."

"But... if you were to walk away, would it be alone?"

"My Lord, you know..." He swallowed, and tried again. "You know that the only woman I ever wanted is dead."

A loud hiss, a flare of red eyes, and the Dark Lord rose and towered over him. "You dare remind me of that night? The night that almost cost me everything?"

Severus dropped before him, his head bowed and arms outstretched, opening himself up for retribution.

"Speak to me!"

"My Lord, that night brought about a disaster of unforeseen proportions. The torment you suffered alone because of it overwhelms any pain inflicted on me. I dare not compare our pains and losses."

"No. You dare not."

The silence stretched; his shoulders began to ache, but he didn't relax or change position. He continued to offer up his body in penance, and he attempted to relax, the better to receive the Cruciatius.

"But...that doesn't mean you had no pain, no loss."

Again, the fingers stroked his head, so tender, so gentle.

"And what of the Mudblood, Severusss? Isn't she a worthy substitute?"

He stiffened. "There is no such thing as a worthy substitute."

"You are making this very difficult. It shouldn't be. All I want to know is how to reward you when we have won, and you block me. What has the old man promised you? Tell me that!"

Finally, he rested his hands on the floor and looked up at the looming figure and laughed. "Nothing, my Lord. I am to serve as spy and risk death and betray my Lord simply for the glory of the Light."

"And what does he promise Potter?"

He allowed his lips to curl in disdain. "Peace."

The Dark Lord tossed his head back and cackled, a sound that would be pleasant to those who resided in the bowels of hell, perhaps, but grating in the dismal decay of Spinner's End. "Then we both offer him the same thing. It is my wish to grant him eternal peace."

"You force me to be direct, Severusss. I resent that, but I will humor you," the Dark Lord said from high above him. "Am I to surmise that you want to walk away from the rewards you have earned because you want to take your bride to safety, a bride that will have no place in the future we have dreamed of and worked for and sacrificed for?"

He raised his face and looked up at the cadaverous visage, the boiling red eyes, and tasted fear. "Are you asking if I've betrayed everything you represent, my Lord?"

"Yesss."

XX

"Come along, girl. You're doing yourself no good up here freezing, and I have the same view from my quarters."

Hermione jerked upright, dragging her eyes away from the night and stared at Madam Hooch.

"You heard me. Same view, only warmer."

Hermione glanced back down at the still empty lawn and then stood, her muscles aching.

If it was the same view and warmer, it seemed silly to resist. She followed Madam Hooch to a painting of the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch, complete with players flying. Madam Hooch waited a few minutes, then spotted the snitch and scratched it with one long fingernail.

A door appeared, and Hermione followed her through into her quarters.

They were unexpectedly welcoming. Since Madam Hooch apparently used her bedchambers for an actual bed, there was plenty of room for two squishy chairs and a long sofa arranged around the fireplace.

But it was the window that drew Hermione. She walked straight to it, and yes, it was the same view. In fact, from this angle she had an even better view of the gate. "Thank you," she said, as she placed her book on a nearby table and took up her place to watch.

"You're bloody serious?"

Hermione turned and looked at her, surprised.

"You're going to stand at the window and watch for him?"

Hermione felt her face flush. How much did Madam Hooch know? Or more importantly, what did she not know? Hermione's obsession with watching for Professor Snape's safe return must look bizarre.

The older witch's expression softened. "He's been at this since you were in nappies, girl. He's survived without you; I imagine he'll survive with you."

"So... you know."

Hooch let out a harsh sigh. "I'm not a Death Eater. I'm not a member of the Order of the Phoenix. I am unaligned. I don't intend to get dragged into this mess. My only desire is to survive it intact, is that clear?"

Hermione nodded, somehow relieved.

Madam Hooch whipped out her wand and moved the chairs to the window. "If you insist on watching, we can at least be comfortable." She cut Hermione a measuring look and then said, "*Accio, firewhisky!*"

Hermione's mouth fell open. "I don't drink..."

"Tonight you do, girl." Hooch tipped the bottle and filled two tumblers. "You're a big girl, now." She handed one of them to Hermione and clicked it with the edge of her own. "Absent friends."

Hermione nodded, then took a delicate sip...

And spewed it out. "Water!" she gasped. "Please, water!"

Madam Hooch gave her a dismissive look. "Take another sip and, this time, swallow the damn thing."

Eyes watering, Hermione tried again, and this time the liquid seared all the way down her throat. She bent double, coughing, feeling as if steam was coming out of her bloody eyes!

Then she fell back against the soft chair and took in a deep breath.

"Better?"

Hermione glared at the older witch.

"Tell the truth, now."

"Well, I'm not cold anymore."

"And?"

"And... the aftertaste is actually rather... lovely."

Madam Hooch grinned and raised her own glass. "I knew you had it in you."

Hermione held the smoking tumbler in both hands and let her eyes drift back to the window.

"We need to talk, girl."

"Yes," Hermione agreed absently. "I definitely need to know more about wandless magic."

"That's not the least of it," Madam Hooch said abruptly. "Look at me, girl. I want you to hear what I say."

Hermione sat up straighter and looked at her.

"Severus wanted a report of our session together. Specifically, he wanted to know what tactics I used to upset you. And, Hermione, it's none of his fucking business."

Hermione drew back, startled.

"Yes, he needs to know that you are safe and that you can master your new power. But...the specifics are not his to know, especially when they are specifics about how vulnerable you are to him."

Again, Hermione felt herself blushing, which seemed ludicrous since she would have assumed the heat of the alcohol had already flushed her beyond redemption.

"You aren't helpless, and you aren't dependent upon a man. Any man. And that includes the wizard in your bed. Don't offer up your strength and your power as some sort of gift to him, because he bloody well doesn't need it, and you do. From this point forward if you want me to train you, you will understand that. You'll understand that secrets are power, and the fewer people who know your secrets, the more power you have."

Hermione was stunned at the bitter words, yet they seemed to have no bitterness behind them.

"Who knows about your wandless magic?"

"Professor Snape, of course..."

Madam Hooch's eyebrows shot up at that.

"... and Harry, Ron and Ginny. And you. That's all."

"Too fucking many."

"They won't tell anybody. They promised."

Madam Hooch gave her a frustrated look. "Well, it can't be helped, but you need to stress to them how important it is that they keep this information to themselves."

"I will, but I don't understand why it's so important."

"Because, girl, you are in the middle of a bloody war, and you have a new power that nobody knows about. Use your bloody brain!"

"A secret power." The words sounded silly even as she spoke them, like some Muggle superhero in a comic book. But she realized what Madam Hooch was saying.

"A secret that could end up saving your life."

"I see."

"Your weaknesses should also be a secret. You've got to stop making it so obvious that you worship the ground that damn wizard walks on."

Hermione stared back out the window. She had no retort to that.

"And when in hell are you going to stop calling him 'Professor'? And insist that he stop calling you Miss Granger!"

Hermione snapped her attention back to the older witch. "That," she said crisply, "is none of your concern." She took another drink of the firewhisky, this one deeper, and this one going down more smoothly.

"It sustains an imbalance of power in your relationship..."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Hermione snapped. She gazed out at the dark lawn and added dreamily, "And you don't know how it sounds when he whispers *Miss Granger* in my ear...." Just the memory sent a delicious shiver down her spine. "Or how the word *professor* tastes on my lips and tongue...."

Madam Hooch cleared her throat loudly.

Hermione closed her eyes, and the words spun through her head, words whispered in the dark of night, and she didn't care how it sounded to others, she knew terms of affection when she heard them in his dark, silky voice....

"Well, then." Madam Hooch poured herself another hefty portion of firewhisky and tossed back half of it before she was able to continue. "About your training."

XX

The Dark Lord's entry into his mind was swift and violent, and had he not already crouched on the floor, he would have staggered. The images flew by so quickly he couldn't catalog them, much less control them.

He was at the Dark Lord's mercy.

And then his mind emptied, and he collapsed, panting on the dusty carpet, his mouth filling with the filth that had collected there for decades.

Time passed. Minutes. Hours. He couldn't say.

He was dimly aware that the Dark Lord was seated again, watching him.

He struggled to push upright.... Felt the bony fingers close over his shoulder.... Heard the breathy voice beckon him.

And so, once again, he took up his place at his master's knee, leaning against it, as he felt those fingers stroking his hair, waiting for his confessions.

"*Tell me about her.*"

"She's not beautiful."

"Not like the other one."

"Nothing like...like Lily. But she's clever. Some say the brightest witch of her age...." He closed his eyes and sighed as the fingers found his temple. "She's brilliant."

"And yet you would kill her for me?"

"Her very existence is a threat to you, my Lord."

The hand stiffened; he felt anger pulsate. "You dare think she is powerful enough to..."

He draped his hand around the bony calf and nestled in closer, turning his face into the clenched hand. "She is everything only a pureblood should be."

"Tell me more, Severusss."

Tell me more, Severusss. Give me what no one else shares. Give me slivers of your heart.

"I lied to her about Lucius, you know. I told her that he and Draco would torture her."

"Lucius has never hurt a woman he took to his bed, Severusss. He prefers pleasure to pain, both in the giving and the receiving. Could his son be so different?"

"Draco is his father's son," he admitted.

The fingers stroked through his hair so gently, the voice toying with a puzzle. "You wanted her for yourself?"

"No. I didn't want her. I loathed the thought of her."

"Yet you lied."

"She chose me. She chose me over all the others. She had selfish reasons, of course. But..."

"Ah, so she is a clever witch."

"Not so clever," he laughed mirthlessly. "She believes herself in love with me."

"Perhaps she is."

"She's enthralled with the first cock she's known, with the hands that bring her pleasure, and calls that love," he sneered into the darkness.

The Dark Lord's soft laughter was a rustle of dry leaves scraping on pavement, not unlovely in its own way. "Ah, Severusss. You say that as if it's a bad thing."

"It's a torment. Especially with Ministry spies evidently using my sex life as a source of titillation."

"Poor Severusss, a private man with no privacy."

Severus stiffened. "Yes, well, I do find myself annoyed to be the focus of so much interest."

"Lucius finds it fascinating."

"As he has informed me," he sneered.

"And, of course, his source at the Ministry also seems to be quite fixated on how often you have sexual congress with your bride."

"And that would be?" he said sharply, wondering what new enemy he'd spawned.

"As always where she is concerned... a Weasley."

"Arthur?" He almost barked the name, he was so shocked, and then quickly, on a hiss, corrected himself. *Percy.*

"That family does have a fixation with Mudbloods." The Dark Lord rested his hand on Severus's shoulder and continued, "Although, I can't imagine why you'd care, Severusss. The witch is in your bed and you've wed her. Why wouldn't you take advantage of that situation?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably. "It's unseemly."

The Dark Lord barked a laugh. "Ah, Severusss, as always, you entertain me. I don't think you know how to be happy."

"I've little experience at it. And my current situation doesn't lend itself to happiness unless one is shallow enough to assume that all it takes to be happy is to have a place to stick one's cock."

"Severusss, I don't care if, when or where you stick it. Lucius likes to know things. He pays well for information. Percy Weasley likes money and is eager to keep all his options open. His loyalty is to his job in the Ministry, and he doesn't seem to care who ends up controlling it. These are petty things, Severusss. I hope you don't want me to get involved." The raspy voice that had begun amused ended with warning.

"No, my Lord."

"However, it is true that Percy indicated a particular interest in the Granger girl to Lucius, once it was clear that Lucius hadn't won her for Draco. The Weasley idiot thought they suddenly had a connection between them, a similar longing for Mudblood flesh, and a joint reason to care what happened between you."

"And you wonder why I resent being the focus of so much speculation?"

"And your clever witch? Does she care?"

He closed himself against the memories that assaulted him, memories of her scent, her sighs and her eager flesh.

"I've seen her in your memories, Severusss. She looks at you the way other women look at Lucius."

He flinched away from that idea, from all that it might represent. "I told her that if she married Draco, Lucius would kill her before Christmas."

The silence was dark and heavy, and then the Dark Lord broke it. "She will die."

"Before Christmas?" he asked, hardly daring to breathe.

"By Christmas, this will all be memory. I will defeat Potter on the night when he first attempted to defeat me, only this time, I will be the victor. I will take my rightful place. And you... Severusss, you will be my right hand."

He buried his face in the Dark Lord's palm, then turned it and kissed the back of his hand as jubilation coursed through his body.

"You are too gracious, my Lord."

"You have earned it, again and again. If I'd had a son...."

"He would've been as handsome as the very devil, if such a being existed."

"The Mudblood isn't the only one who will see beneath the surface. Pureblood witches will beg for your attentions. You won't want to walk away."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "If she's to be killed, I must be the one to do it."

"How?"

"Poison, of course."

"Granted, my boy. I will make it clear. She will be safe from all but you."

XX

He took the hill to the castle blindly; if ever he would be vulnerable to attack, it would be on a night like this, a night where he'd stripped his soul open and spilled his secrets to feed the Dark Lord's need to feel human.

So simple, in reality, to gain the Dark Lord's trust.

So simple, yet nobody else had stumbled across the truth.

Feed him pieces of your humanity, deliver him those truths you dare only whisper in confession, and he'll absolve you for it.

He'll love you for it.

Love.

The Dark Lord loved him.

The front doors burst open before him, and a figure was silhouetted in black against the blinding light.

His gut clenched.

She ran toward him...flung herself at him...smelling of liquor. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

And instinct...blind instinct, that's all it was...caused his arms to wrap around her and his face to bury in her hair.

She turned her face up to his, her lips, her sweet, sweet lips...

And he stopped himself short of kissing her. Wrenched himself away from it, from pressing his disgusting lips...lips that had kissed the Dark Lord's hand in supplication...and pushed her away. "I told you," he said harshly, "he never hurts me."

And the stupid girl didn't even show pain or anger at being rejected, just relief.

"Go," he commanded. "I have to see Albus."

"All right." She rushed ahead of him, held open the door for him, her eyes large and luminous and filled with the sight of him. Of *him*.

"I'll fix tea," she said softly.

XX

Albus rose. His visage was sharp lines and deeply etched wrinkles. "You have news?"

"Halloween. He expects to defeat Potter at Halloween."

"So little time," the old wizard said, frowning. "If only we'd had this information sooner..."

"You're welcome," Severus replied icily and whirled to leave him alone with his schemes.

She was waiting for him.

The girl who looked at him with her heart in her eyes.

The woman who thought he had honour.

The wife he had vowed to kill.

She waited for him.

With tea.

Drowning

Chapter 38 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Thanks go to JK Rowling, who graciously allows us to love her characters in ways she never intended.

Thanks go to my fabulous betas, Leigh-Anne and GinnyW.

38. DROWNING

The tea was in the brown Betty, snug in her grandmother's tea cozy.

Dobby had popped in with sandwiches, per her urgent request. Professor Snape hadn't had dinner before he'd been summoned.

She paced in front of the fireplace, her mind whirling.

He'd clutched her to him.

He *needed* her.

He'd shoved her away.

He didn't *want* her.

She wasn't sure what to do...what he needed her to do. Hang back, leave him alone? How, dear God, could she tolerate not holding him, not reassuring herself that he was

uninjured, that he was safe?

She'd seen his eyes. His words, "He never hurts me," were not reflected by the dull black depths of his eyes....

She'd know what to do when she saw him, she decided. She just had to hold back long enough to look at him, really look at him, and she'd know.

Whether he returned to her a Death Eater, or her professor.*Hers.*

She rearranged the teacups on the tray yet again.

At this rate, his tea would be cold.

Maybe she should start another kettle of water, be ready to dump this pot and start afresh.

That's what she'd do. She'd start a fresh pot. She wanted it to be perfect....

She dropped down on the edge of the bed. Their wonderful bed. Where everything always seemed to work out right between them. She picked up his pillow and hugged it to her, burying her face in his scent, and immediately felt calmer.

He'd told her he wasn't hurt. There was no reason for her to be so uneasy, so worried.

He was back and he was safe and...

She leaped to her feet, the pillow falling to the floor.

Something called her. Something urged her. Feeling rather foolish, she walked toward the stone wall and dropped the wards and watched as the stones ruffled aside...

And found him standing there. No, leaning, leaning against the opposite wall, his eyes empty and hollow, just staring at her.

For one frozen moment, she couldn't move.

And then...

"Liar!" she muttered under her breath and rushed to his side and grabbed his hand. "You said you weren't hurt..."

She dragged him back into their quarters, closed the wall behind them, and fluttered about him in a flurry of activity.

She broke off in frustration as she got a better look at him. His face was sickly pale; his fingers in her hands trembled. She reached to touch his cheek and felt it...cold as ice.

"You said he didn't hurt you!" she accused more loudly this time. "Just because there aren't any bruises..."

He shoved past her.

The door to the bathroom slammed shut and bounced back open.

She followed to find him retching on his knees, hanging his head over the toilet.

She snatched a clean flannel from a shelf on the wall and wet it at the sink, then knelt beside him, smoothing his hair back, pressing the flannel to his forehead as he hung over the bowl, shoulders quivering. Soothing nonsense sprang to her lips as she gathered his hair back at the nape of his neck and bathed his face in cool water.

He collapsed to the floor and fell back against the wall and glared into the distance, avoiding her eyes, and she knew he was attempting to gather the strength to snarl at her, to send her away.

"Stupid man!" she muttered and tucked a wet strand of hair behind his ear, the better to see his colour in the glow of candlelight. He jerked his head away and then winced.

A wave of her wand, and the tub began filling.

"Watch this," she commanded, and she saw his eyes flicker to her against his will. She held out her hand and closed it into a fist, as if she were scooping something into it. Smirking, she jerked her head at the pot of bath salts by the tub. A fistful of bath salts floated through the air impossibly, without losing a single grain, and then, when she opened her hand, dropped into the water with a burst of aromatic oils.

She slid him a sly look, quite pleased with herself. And seeing his eyebrows arch, if a bit weakly, she knew she'd distracted him, if only for a moment. "Not bad, eh?"

He closed his eyes without speaking, but she knew his face so well, his lips...oh, yes, his lips...that she recognized the slightest quirk at the corner for what it was: a weak smile drawn from him against his will.

It didn't take much wandwork to divest him of his clothing, and this time he mustered enough energy for a glare, but she ignored it. "Into the tub," she announced. "You need a good soak."

And when he attempted to pull away from her, she tugged him to the tub and placed her hands on his chest, ready to shove him in if he didn't step in.

He stepped.

And sank into the heat with a sensual groan. She cast a cushioning charm against the tub just as he sank back against it, and his eyes squeezed shut in agony. His body was tense, so tense...taut to the point where he seemed ready to snap with it.

"Oh, Professor...." she murmured, kneeling behind him and stroking his hair away from his face, massaging his temples...

His hands snapped up and closed around her fingers with the speed and power of a sprung trap.

"Ssssh," she soothed. "I won't do that again. It's all right." Finally he released them, and she dropped her hands to his shoulders.

A chill shivered through her body.

She sent the door closed with a wave of her hand, sealed the cracks from drafts with an insulating charm and...

After disposing of her own clothes with a quick whispered spell...

Stepped into the tub between his legs.

He jerked upright, but she knelt in front of him, pushing him gently back against the cushioned tub. "I know... the Ministry... we aren't going to do anything...." She leaned over him, bracing her hands on the sides of the deep tub, and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek and then, when his eyelids fluttered closed, another kiss on each one.

And then she saw moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes, and his throat flexed convulsively as he jerked away from her, turning his face to the side.

Oh, professor....

She fought the lump in her own throat, fought the urge to cling to him, and instead slid down his body until she was seated in the cradle of his thighs and draped herself against his chest. "I'm going to leave the water running," she said as matter-of-factly as she could manage, as if this were any normal bath on any normal day. "I like the way it feels when it's churning, and the hot water never runs out. Isn't that lovely?"

She reached behind her and dragged her fingers down the rough texture of his cheek to reassure herself, to reassure him. "You have the loveliest tub. You can't take a nap in the prefects tub. You'd float away...."

At the word "nap," his hands clenched the sides of the tub and he stiffened...

She hushed him again. "It's all right. If you tire of it, just wake me up."

She curled against him, her face nestled in the crook of his neck. She nestled her cheek against the heat of his skin as the steaming, scented water rose until it lapped gently at their shoulders, swirling deliciously around their legs, and she used her toes to remove the stopper from the tub so that it wouldn't overflow as it kept filling.

Then, when she'd despaired of ever feeling it--finally, *finally*, his arms closed around her, held her, and he leaned his head against hers.

Belatedly, she thought of her hair, wild and unruly and billowing around his face. She reached back with one hand to try and pull it away from him...

And he stopped her with a snarl. "Leave your horrid hair alone," he muttered, and she felt him bury his face in it, and she fought back a choked sob.

He was her professor.

Hers.

She mouthed the words silently, tasting the soft, gentle consonants on her lips. *Mine... my professor.* And now her own eyes threatened to leak tears, but she couldn't let them, not now, not when his breathing was slowing and his arms clung to her so....

His hand raised from her shoulder to her cheek... his long fingers skimming across her cheekbone and finally finding her eyelashes and the telltale salty tears that clung there.

He wiped it gently away.

His breathing slowed, and only when she felt and heard his gentle snore did she finally allow herself to drift with him into sleep.

XX

He woke up in bed.

Alone.

And confused.

He rolled over...

And saw her.

Wearing the white shirt.

Fretting with the teapot, stirring and pouring and fussing with a tray.

He relaxed without realizing he'd been tense.

The previous night's activities came back to him like blows, but it all seemed to fade away when he remembered her tenderness, her preposterous insistence on a shared bath, her weight on him as she curled and snuggled and the heat of the water as it eased away his pain....

And now, watching her unawares, he felt a clutch at his throat, a ridiculous but unruly thought that she was simply an angel, nothing short of that, an angel.

He must be fucking drunk.

She turned to him and her eyes hardened. She flounced to the bed and sat heavily on it.

"You're a horrible, miserable liar," she announced.

So much for angels of mercy.

She shoved a mug...a mug? He didn't rate her grandmother's china any more?...into his hands and ordered, "Drink this." Then she handed him a dish of biscuits. "Ginger snaps. Eat them. They'll settle your stomach."

Then jumped to her feet and flounced back to get her own tea.

Her agitation was palpable. She seemed to be in a snit though he couldn't imagine why. Unless... what had he done last night? Had he inadvertently revealed something...?

He found himself swallowing the scalding tea without tasting, unable to bring his eyes up to look at her.

"If she's to be killed, I must be the one to do it."

"How?"

"Poison, of course."

"Granted, my boy. I will make it clear. She will be safe from all but you."

If she had any idea, she wouldn't be in a snit. She'd be gone.

Something cold closed around his windpipe.

If she had the ability to leave.

If her vows allowed it.

His eyes were fixed on her fingers as she pressed more biscuits on him. What would she say if she knew? Would she understand? He reached and grabbed her hand, closed his fingers around hers, pressed his lips to the palm of her hand and felt a tremor go through both of them.

She sank against him, stroking his hair away from his face. "Let me..." she said. "Let me help you."

He jerked his head away. "Last night... I didn't deserve your comfort." He turned his face to hers, carefully cool. "Nor do I deserve it this morning."

He moved to rise, and she stepped back, a gentle frown knitting her brows.

He was almost in the bathroom when her voice caught him.

"Brush your teeth. Your breath smells like vomit."

He winced.

Definitely in a snit.

When he'd finished his ablutions...he even gargled...he opened the bathroom door to find her perched on the side of the bed, watching for him. Her eyes flickered down his naked body, lingered, and jerked back up. He followed her gaze and found himself half-tumescent.

Well, more than half, now that he'd caught her looking and was thinking about...

He bit back a snarl and headed for his wardrobe.

"Professor... "

Her voice was soft, and right behind him. He turned and found her standing, nibbling her lower lip in that way that made him want to nibble it for her. He closed his eyes. "Miss Granger..."

"First of all," she said, taking him by the hand and leading him back to the bed, "I don't know what happened last night, and I don't need to know. It's enough to know that it distressed you. And when you come home distressed, you will receive comfort."

He snatched his hand away from her. "If you had any fucking idea the things I said...the things I..."

"Oh, please, Professor," she snapped back at him, her strange energy bristling between them. "You're a *spy*. You have to *say things*."

He stopped short. That tight, cold fist that made it so difficult to swallow loosened, and he felt almost like he was choking on a sob. He wasn't, of course. But... it felt far too close to a sob for his comfort. He couldn't tear his eyes away from hers, and finally he saw, really saw them.

Glossy and dilated... the pulse at her throat jerked, and her eyes flickered down again, and she caught her breath.

Merlin's beard, he smelled her arousal.

He responded to it.

He opened his mouth, but she gave a sharp, jerky shake of her head. "No. I understand. The Ministry. But..." Her cheeks flushed. "I've been working on ways to...to trick them. Or, shield ourselves from them. And..."

"Miss Granger," he drawled, straining for normalcy. "Always the rule-breaker. And what have you come up with?"

She flushed. "I don't think I've found what I'm looking for yet. But I had something...an experiment for you to try."

"For me to try?"

"For...both of us."

This time, when she pulled him back to the bed, he allowed it.

How could he not?

She climbed in and slid over and held open the covers, waiting for him. "What do you..."

She shushed him with her fingertips on his lips and then leaned closer and...

Kissed him.

This was hardly new, but it was still magic.

Merlin, these kisses...somewhere, constellations were born because of these kisses. Showering, shimmering stanzas of stars pouring out like music from their lips, from their fingertips, from their souls.

He rolled over her, found himself grinding against her thigh...whatever she had in mind, he'd already abandoned. She was here, and she was his, and fuck it all if he wasn't going to lie with his own wife.

She pulled back, and when he dove after her, tried to recapture her mouth, she stopped him with a gentle hand on her cheek and opened her eyes to him. It was several confused, breathless moments before he recognized her action for what it was, an offering of her mind. He shook his head, frustrated. "I told you, you can't just..."

"I want you to look," she whispered. "Let me show you."

Her lips were parted and swollen and moist, and he wanted to do nothing more than reclaim them, but something in her voice reached beyond that desire and beckoned him. Bracing her face between the palms of his hands, he looked into her eyes and saw...

Blackness.

Only blackness.

She'd blocked him? That's what she wanted him to see?

No, not blackness. There was a soft glow of light spilling across...something. Gentle movement. He couldn't focus, couldn't see it, just dim shapes in dim light.

Then he heard the voice. *"I said, eyes closed. Feel it, Miss Granger. We are brewing together, and I can't continue unless I know what the potion needs"*

His voice. And it all snapped into place, the memory she offered him.

He started to pull away in confusion, but her voice found him. *"Don't go..."* It was a soft murmur at the edge of his consciousness. *"Stay with me... come deeper"*

He tensed, resisting, and felt soft fingertips at his temples. *"Deeper..."*

There was no such thing as "deeper" in Legilimency. One observed; one didn't participate. And he was about to tell her just that when...

He felt himself slip into the darkness, into the cold, and with a shocked gasp, he realized he wasn't just observing any more...

He *felt*.

He *felt* it.

He felt hot fingers close gently, stroking soft flesh that was dimpled with the dungeon cold. Moist lips on the soft skin of his...*her*...abdomen. Felt the soft vibration when the voice...*his* voice...repeated, *"Describe the potion.... What does it feel like?"*

Part of him was alert, confused, demanding...what was happening? This couldn't be happening. This had never happened before.

And part of him sank deeper still until sensations overtook thought.

"It tingles."

It did. He felt them, the tingles, the thousands of tiny bubbles popping on the surface of his skin, deep in his abdomen, and deeper still, *"Like champagne,"* she said, awed. And he caught his breath and experienced the awe with her. *"Down there,"* her voice whispered. Oh, yes, Merlin, yes...Merlin, Merlin, Merlin...*down there*.

And *down there* was strange and exotic...hot and melting and simmering, yet tightening into a throbbing centre and then...

He almost came off the bed but arms had him...*her*...pinned down. And fuck! Wet heat stroked across skin...a tongue, his tongue, it was as if his memories assaulted him from all directions as he felt his mouth flood with the memory of the taste of her skin, even as each stroke stoked him to higher heat.

And the voice, the questions, the never-ceasing questions when he wanted, *hereeded* to sink deeper, and deeper still, to a place where he didn't have to think or hear but could simply feel...

Bloody fucking hell...a finger slid across turgid flesh, that button of flesh, and it was all he could do not to cry out at the touch...

"Don't stop."

--of his tongue.

His tongue.

Followed by quivering.

Quivering sensation.

"Sweet..."

"Treacle..."

Gods, yes, slow, warm flowing treacle, and

"Miss Granger, what's wrong?"

Gasping, flaying, fighting...

"Nox."

Dark.

Nobody can see me.

"I'm...I'm going to..."

Yes, yes, yes, he was going to...

"I'm going to shatter," she sobbed.

Shatter. On the brink of...something...shatter, yes, shattering...

"I'll catch you."

And then, hands pressing against quivering flesh, trembling flesh, quaking flesh...as the tongue found its mark...

His memory flooded with the taste of tea and his present, his here, his now--

Never...never had he felt anything like this.

This sweet convulsion that rippled and quaked from a hot, hard core and melted outward, clenching and jerking and shivering...

Oh, Merlin...

Until he couldn't bear it, he would die if it didn't stop...

And it ended.

And he would have felt lost, forlorn, except...

He felt the slow, hot throb of aftershocks....

And lips, gentle lips...

Down there.

And suddenly, his eyes were closed, and he was gasping for air, choking on gulps of air, fighting for air...as was the body under him.

Under him.

She was under him, gasping with him...

He fought back to awareness, raised himself on trembling arms, looked at her...

And saw her head flung back as she choked on laughter...absurd, smug laughter. She caught his face again, pulled his lips down to hers, and as they joined, he felt the hot, sticky evidence of what had happened, what he had done, what he had spilled between them.

He broke away, guilty, stunned that he'd come like a schoolboy. And what about her? Surely she hadn't..."Was that...did you..."

"Yes!" She was practically crowing, the little minx. Merlin, that wasn't Legilimency; he'd never even heard of *this* happening before!

The impertinent little over-achieving minx!

He reached between them, still not quite believing, and found her wet and swollen and at his touch...

She purred.

She fucking purred.

And buried her face in his neck as she gently pulled his hand away. "No, don't...too soon," she choked, and he could only roll onto his back and pull her on top of him. He slid his hand under her shirt and stroked her back as they both fought for air, for control, for a return to sanity.

"The Ministry of Magic can bite my ruddy arse."

Finally, he gathered the energy to growl, "And did somebody actually tell you that the wizarding world *needed* a new magical art?"

She giggled into his shoulder.

He despised giggling.

He wanted her to do it again.

He pulled her to him, then wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Hell, he'd absorb her straight into his skin if he could. She climbed his body until her face was even with his and then bent closer still....

"Professor..."

Her soft voice vibrating against his ear was pure seduction.

"Miss Granger..." That was all he could get out, the only words he could speak, and even they were more groan than speech. But she shuddered in his arms as her lips pressed against his neck, and she trailed soft kisses across his shoulder, and all he could do was cling to her, inhale her, caress her.

Because only by drowning himself in her could he forget what lay in wait for them at Halloween.

Obey

Chapter 39 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Thank you, Jo Rowling, for everything.

Thank you, Leigh-Anne and GinnyW, for being the best betas ever!

39. OBEY

She sensed the change even as it happened. His body went from languid to taut without seeming to change at all because the change wasn't physical, but was, instead, his mental preparation to push her away.

She'd dragged him in too closely, and now he had to distance himself, or worse, prove to her it was a mistake.

No. Not this time.

She spoke a moment before he did. Held up her hand in front of their faces as they lay in the bed and twisted her ring finger this way and that, allowing the emerald to

sparkle. "I think the key to thwarting the Ministry is in this ring," she announced.

She felt his tension increase. He was about to push up, to roll away from her, but she'd caught him off guard and aroused his curiosity, and she pressed home her advantage before he could overcome it and leave the bed.

"It has a power of its own. I'm sure of it. You gave it to me freely and even if..." She stopped the word *seven if it wasn't from love*, before they spilled out. She attempted to recover. "Even though you might not have intended it as a romantic gesture, it was a gift that has meaning far beyond that of a wretched Ministry ring that was forced on us against our will." She tilted her hand again; the wide gold band glimmered. "Which is rather sad because the Ministry rings are pretty, if they didn't include invasive charms."

She cocked her glance up at him and saw his dark eyes were clouded and again sensed that his patience was short. So she sprang her trump card on him. "But the ring by itself isn't enough, and all I could think of at the moment you put it on me was to repeat *with this ring I thee wed* hoping it would give it some sort of equal authority. But I know that in itself wouldn't be enough, so now I can't decide whether to try a charm or a potion to enhance its strength."

"Potion?" he asked, his voice a bit of a grumble, and she knew she'd enticed him against his will. "How would you use a potion on a ring?"

"I'm not sure. Would we both take it and somehow include the ring in a spell at the same time?"

"I can't imagine what kind of potion you think..."

"We'd have to create it, wouldn't we?" She sat up on her knees and looked down at him, suddenly excited by the prospect. "It would need crushed clove buds and bark of slippery elm to halt gossip. I considered chicory and mistletoe for invisibility, but of course there are other ingredients that do the same..."

"Are you so bloody confident in your ability to meet your potential on your N.E.W.T.s that you're taking on all of these...these personal research projects as hobbies?"

His voice dripped scorn, and she flinched, but refused to back down.

"Perhaps these 'personal projects' are as important to me as my N.E.W.T.s," she said with a sniff.

He gripped her wrists in his strong hands, and she caught her breath as his eyes drilled into her. "Perhaps you need to stop playing with romantic fantasies long enough to..."

"They aren't romantic fantasies." She yanked her wrists free.

"Really?" he asked, his voice silky. "And are you so certain of that?"

She didn't answer, but watched, captivated, as he raised one hand to her throat, slid it around to the back of her neck, and drew her nearer. "Perhaps it's time for me to teach you a bit of Legilimency," he whispered. With his free hand, he took her wand from beneath her pillow and placed it in her right hand. "Point it near but not straight at my temple," he ordered. "And then whisper the command. Gently," he cautioned with a sullen twist of his lips. "I'm a willing victim. No need to play rough."

She didn't trust him, nor did she trust what he wanted to show her. It couldn't be good, or he wouldn't be using it to push her away. She hovered on the edge of refusal, bent over his body, their eyes linked.

Legilimency.

He was offering to teach her.

And despite her suspicions, her fears...she wanted it. She wanted to learn, but even more, she wanted the glimpse into his mind. The idea terrified and tantalized her at once.

She lifted her wand smoothly and whispered, *Legilimens*, and prepared to sink into those beautiful black, black depths...

Only to hurtle forward with a speed that both dizzied and sickened her.

She felt his hand on the back of her head, and then both hands cupping her face, supporting her as she plummeted...

--to the crest of a jagged outcropping of rocks.

And...*oh, god*...saw him drop to his knees and kiss the Dark Lord's hem, and nothing had prepared her for this, nothing Harry had told her, nothing she'd imagined...nothing had prepared her for the sight of the monster before her. His face was stretched skin over bone, no cartilage to soften or add beauty. His teeth were yellowed and drawn away from his gums as he smiled a rictus of a smile down at the black head crouching before him.

And his eyes.

Oh, god, his eyes.

Red, glowing nightmare eyes.

Her ears were filled with the sound of her own rough gasps as she choked for air, and she'd have fallen to the ground if she hadn't been only an observer, which left her alone and horrified to watch...to watch those lips she loved press against those bony fingers and then, with a sickening yank...

They were back at Spinner's End.

Only this time, there was no homey scene in the kitchen with the scent of soap and lemons filling the air. This time, she could only watch, stricken, as the scene unfurled itself before her.

"I'm a solitary man with simple needs and desires, including a strong need for solitude, something that is never granted me with a bloody teenaged witch living in my quarters."

"But there are benefits."

He shrugged. "Indeed."

And then, he knelt before the Dark Lord, his arms outflung, offering himself up for punishment...

"And what of the Mudblood, Severuss? Isn't she a worthy substitute?"

"There is no such thing as a worthy substitute."

She watched as words of betrayal slipped from her husband's lips with the ease of silken endearments to this vile master, watched as he bowed before him in penance, and

felt the sobs threatening to overwhelm her. She wanted to reach out to him, to pull him back to her...

She flinched as the Dark Lord grabbed his chin and raised it, and she saw the connection, saw him invade with his own Legilimency, and saw the professor's body tremble and quake, and finally...as the Dark Lord released him...stiffen, and collapse to the floor.

She was dimly aware as the Dark Lord took his seat and waited because she was focused on the man on the floor, on his unnatural stillness, his unnatural pallor, and the streak of tears that cut through the dust he'd picked up from the floor.

She watched the Dark Lord draw him up, watched him sink against the Dark Lord's leg and be stroked like a pet and wanted to scream, wanted to cry...but couldn't, she couldn't let him know how it affected her...couldn't rob him of whatever shreds of dignity he'd have left after this.

Why was he showing her this?

To drive her away.

She closed her eyes to it. Squeezed them shut and fought for air. And then words started seeping back into her consciousness.

"She's not beautiful." It should have hurt more than it did, especially when she was clearly being compared unfavorably to another, and maybe it would later when she wasn't so numb with shock.

"She's brilliant," might have made her heart sing... in other circumstances.

And yet you would kill her for me?

She recoiled. This...this was what he'd carried home with him, what had sent him heaving to his knees until there was nothing left but bile.

I lied to her about Lucius, you know. I told her that he and Draco would torture her.

Meant... what? He lied? Why? But she had no time to think, no time to process...

"No. I didn't want her. I loathed the thought of her."

"Yet you lied."

"She chose me. She chose me over all the others. She had selfish reasons, of course. But..."

How tenderly the Dark Lord pulled these confessions from him. It was as if he wove a spell....

But no, this was not a spell of *his* weaving.

Yet again, the thought was left hanging because...

"She's enthralled with the first cock she's known, with the hands that bring her pleasure, and calls that love."

She clenched her fists impotently.

"And, of course, his source at the Ministry also seems to be quite fixated on how often you have sexual congress with your bride."

She froze.

Percy.

She was beyond thought, beyond reason...her mind whirled with more than she could possibly make sense of, but clearly this was what he wanted her to know, to see, and over it all she felt a red sheen of rage at the two of them being the center of so much malevolence....

By Christmas, this will all be memory. I will defeat Potter on the night when he first attempted to defeat me, only this time, I will be the victor. I will take my rightful place. And you... Severusss, you will be my right hand.

The truth hit her. It hit her square in the body, a hard blow, as she watched those lips she loved twist in jubilation as they pressed themselves against that horrible hand. Her breath quickened. She wanted out...she wanted out...she wanted out *now*!

"If she's to be killed, I must be the one to do it."

"How?"

"Poison, of course."

"Granted, my boy. I will make it clear. She will be safe from all but you."

And then, it was over, and she collapsed on him, gasping for air, tears streaming and nose running and throat choking on sobs, and with a total lack of concern for manners or gentility, she wiped her nose on her sleeve and fought for air and...

He raised on one elbow, his eyes now shuttered, and watched her with great caution, braced against her reaction.

And everything else fled from her mind, every other reaction, as she realized...it was almost over. Weeks, mere weeks, and it would end.

And they would be prepared, they would be ready...

Because her husband was magnificent.

She flung herself against him and curled her fingers into his hair and kissed him.

"You did it," she gasped. And then, this time the tears flowed with relief. "Hallowe'en."

He nodded jerkily.

"Hallowe'en," she repeated and felt unable to make coherent sentences. "He told you. You tricked him into telling you."

He remained frozen, unmoving, but she didn't care. She had to feel him, to taste him...

She stretched out on top of him, felt his hard body fall back onto the bed beneath her, frozen into inaction, and took advantage.

Oh, was she determined to take advantage.

She opened her lips against his and let her tongue stroke his mouth...and felt a jolt of reaction go through him. His lips closed more firmly, but she worked them gently, lips against lips, soft and tender, and when she felt him relaxing, her tongue ventured forward again, and again she felt him react and close off to her. It was a game, a strange game, and she didn't understand it...she just knew that she would win.

Finally, he gasped against her mouth, "How can you...after what you saw...how can..."

"You were bloody brilliant," she whispered. "You appeared to give him everything and gave him nothing." She kissed his sharp cheekbone with a soft press of partially-opened lips. "You seduced him." She nuzzled against the side of his face and felt the heat of his skin and the dampness of her tears and something fierce curled inside her. "Nobody knows what you do, what you go through, what you endure...but me. And I'm so proud. So proud...Severus Snape, I love you."

He stiffened. "How could you? After what I showed you..."

"I love you," she repeated fiercely.

"Stupid girl," he snarled, "you don't, you can't, you just think..."

"I love you," she said, tears clogging her throat that he refused to listen, to believe.

"It's the compulsion, the fucking vows..."

"You think the vows compel me to this? You think I'm bound to love, honor and obey because of some magical mistake?"

His answer was clear in the tension of his body.

"Then give me an order to disobey," she demanded hoarsely and, not leaving it to chance, pulled back to stare straight into his eyes. "Tell me to stop loving you."

"For your own sake," he groaned, and she heard his pain and his fear, "stop loving me."

And she felt the surge of joy that filled her as she buried her face in his neck and said one word.

"No."

XX

She overwhelmed him. Her hair filled his face; her scent filled his lungs; her body filled his arms. He could do nothing but hold her, cling to her, and try to absorb the totality of her reaction.

Which was nothing that he'd expected.

He let his head fall back against the pillow; if that gave her lips easier access to his throat, that was mere happenstance.

He felt a hitch in his breath.

He had to stop her.

He had to stop her from this ridiculous outburst.

He had to stop her before she...they...got swept away with this...this celebratory mood she was suddenly in.

He had to stop her from thinking she loved him.

Now was not the time for things to get complicated by emotions he couldn't deal with, and a woman in his arms who loved him was something he definitely didn't know how to deal with.

So why was he kissing her back?

Why was his heart leaping?

Why was he rolling to cover her with his body?

And why was she welcoming him?

Something was wrong. She hadn't seen...

What was she thinking?

He broke away. "But...but the things you saw..."

Her eyes swam in tears. "What about them?"

"You can't be happy that..."

"That you said I'm not as pretty as some other woman? That you didn't want to marry me? That living with me is driving you mad? Why would I be upset about the truth? It's not as if I didn't know those things already. It's what you do, isn't it? You tell the truth. You tell the truth, over and over and over again, so that when you finally have to hedge the truth or even lie, it feels like another truth. You told him the truth again and again..."

"I'm not talking about whether or not I think you're beautiful," he ground out.

"No, you're talking about, *'If she's to be killed, I must be the one to do it'* and he didn't even notice the 'if.' Why would this upset me? And even then, even when you tricked him, he honored you for it. He promised you nobody else will hurt me, only you...what? Did you expect me to believe you would kill me?"

He gaped at her.

"Oh, please."

He didn't know what to say. She'd seen through it, all of it. The Dark Lord hadn't, but she had.

"And as for Percy Weasley...that pansy-assed wanker?"

"Miss Granger!"

"That's only what Ron calls him. Fred and George call him a cocksucking gobshite!"

He choked on his response, unable to rationalize her primly outraged expression with the words erupting from her delectable lips.

She raised up on her elbows, her hair a wild halo around her head. "And if he's so bent on knowing what goes on between us, I'll send him a Howler to announce it every time we fuck!"

There was nothing else to do but cut off the flow of words the only way he knew how.

He kissed her.

He still reeled from the impact, the onslaught of her reactions.

But kissing her seemed the only sane thing to do.

Until she broke away.

"We don't have to, you know."

"We...we don't have to what?" he managed.

"I mean, you don't want Lucius Malfoy and Percy knowing what you do, and even though the Dark Lord doesn't care, if you do, I totally understand," she rattled on, "only, there's just this one thing, this one thing I needed to ask you...." She ducked her face and he realized she was blushing. "If you want to stick to once a week, this week, could it be Thursday?"

She turned her face up to him, her eyes wide and expectant. She was lightyears ahead of him; he'd lost his ability to speak, and she was still going...

"It's...it's my birthday," she said and began toying with the button of her shirt. "Don't worry, I didn't expect you to know that, and I also won't expect you to remember it because that's something my mother told me long ago about birthdays and anniversaries, that a woman can make a choice to either make every special day a test which the man in her life must pass or fail...knowing that if he forgets, she'll be miserable and her day will be ruined, or she can just remind him, and I'm all about reminding, so Thursday is my birthday and..."

"You want sex for your birthday," he interrupted, hardly able to speak with the tightness in his chest.

She gave a funny little half-shrug. "Well... yes." And ducked her face again.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

The world as they all knew it...most likely his very life...was going to come to an end in mere weeks, and this adorable, ridiculous, bushy-haired marvel of a girl in his arms...his wife...had to treat what other people considered normal marital relations as a fucking special occasion because of the likes of Lucius Malfoy and Percy Weasley?

Her birthday.

"How old will you be?"

"Eighteen."

Fuck.

Still a teenager.

And still watching him and waiting for a response.

And he knew what he had to say. What he resented having to say with an agitation that gnawed at his gut and left him weak with rage. Yet, it was the only thing he could say.

"Miss Granger," he said softly and saw her brace herself...how easily she read him, sometimes. He teased the corner of her mouth with his smallest finger and watched it twitch before curving into a reluctant and sad smile. "You will definitely have sex on your birthday if it is at all within my power to give it to you." At which point, he pressed the most urgent of kisses upon her lips, in case she needed a reminder of exactly what he was promising.... And when it seemed he must either succumb totally to her sweet abandon or break away, he broke away, staring into her heavy-lidded eyes and fighting for breath. And when they had both recovered enough for him to speak and for her to listen, he went on, "I've spent over twenty years denying myself the comforts other men take for granted. And despite the fact that the Dark Lord seemed to encourage me to partake of such pleasures now... I can't help but sense it as yet another test, yet another opportunity to reveal to him those things that he will see as betrayal because they are."

She nodded mutely and stroked his hair out of his eyes, and he found himself leaning into that hand, savoring the texture of her smooth fingertips as they brushed across his skin.

"I want to bombard the Ministry with Howlers night and day." He caught one fingertip between his lips and tasted it, and felt her soft moan curl through his body, and again, felt the agony and the rage....

"But now is not the time to let down my guard."

"I understand," she said and then added with a small grin, "and Thursday is only four days away...."

At which point he slid down her body and between her legs, and the last thing he saw was her eyes flutter closed on a soft gasp as he proceeded to give her the kind of bliss that hitherto had been a mystery to him and now seemed nothing short of a benediction.

Disobey

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

With gratitude to JK Rowling.

With gratitude to my fabulous betas, Leigh-Anne and GinnyW.

And a special nod of thanks to JunoMagic, who provided the extra expertise I needed on this chapter!

And finally, thank you, Whitehorse, for catching some of my American blunders and kindly correcting them with the correct British usage!

40. DISOBEY

They lay facing one another, his face cradled against her bare breasts as she tenderly stroked his hair in wonder. He'd brought her to wild, uninhibited completion, and when she could breathe again, she'd once again explored the mysteries of fellatio with, it seemed, more than adequate success. She felt a very Snape-like smirk curling her lips as she bent her head to press the softest of kisses in his hair.

Completion.

Yes, it was a quite precise expression.

Completion.

Feeling complete.

Being completed.

Complete.

Almost.

Even with a body that was sated and liquid from release, she felt a small ache between her legs, a reminder that she hadn't been *beefilled*. But she shoved that thought away and instead reveled in the languor that included having this man, her husband, first ply his tongue upon her flesh until she cried out for mercy, and then be totally at her mercy as she did the same.

The warm wash of his breath flowed over her skin, steady and delicious, and she found herself leaning forward and whispering, "Professor..." just to taste the word on her lips, and just because she wanted to hear his voice.

He grunted in response and question, and she realized she hadn't actually planned ahead to know what she wanted to say, other than the desire to whisper in his ear. Unfortunately the first thing that sprang to mind was inspired by what she'd been sighing over...the fact that her breasts couldn't be all that satisfying a pillow, and surely he must feel at least a bit cheated over that fact... didn't he?

And thus she found words spilling out before she thought, words that sounded stupid and wildly out of place and worse, words that would bring answers she probably didn't want to hear...

"So... are you a breast man or a leg man or an arse man?" At least her voice was teasing, she hoped.

He stiffened in her arms. "I beg your pardon."

"You know," she said, blushing, "they say..."

"Who says?" His voice was chilly.

"Harry and Ron and the twins and..."

At least he hadn't moved his head.... He sighed against her skin. "You have spent too much time with dunderheads."

"Ah," she said with what she hoped sounded like great wisdom. "You don't want to answer." Breast man, then. And now he was stuck with her inadequate breasts. She wondered sadly if it was too late for them to grow.

He shifted his face and his nose nudged sensuously across her nipple...which promptly tightened to a hard bud. She felt herself flush with colour, part embarrassment and part response.

"Hair," he finally said.

She wilted.

This was worse than breasts.

"It was always the hair...long, silky sheets of it, shiny and glossy and..." He broke off, as if he'd suddenly recognized what he was saying.

She bravely nibbled her lower lip and stroked his fine, limp hair and refused to think resentful thoughts about the nerve of some people.

"Well, the colour didn't matter," he finished, and she realized that's what had stopped him. He'd been about to say what colour hair he was partial to. Her mind filled in the blank with "black" and she was grateful he'd stopped when he did.

Although he'd also confessed a one-time weakness for Narcissa.

And there might have been another girl, one she had no knowledge of, with long sheets of silky, shiny hair.

"But lately, it seems my concept of beauty is being redefined," he continued in his deep, satiny voice as his fingers lifted a strand of her hair.

She needed to stop him. This wasn't necessary. She didn't need pretty lies to make her feel better.

"I've grown a new appreciation for horrid hair that doesn't know its place," he said, coiling the strand around one calloused finger.

So much for *pretty* lies.

"Horrid hair that is unruly and invades my life and refuses to stay properly in its place, and constantly reminds me that it's here by turning up in my face and my eyes and even my mouth when I least expect it, and keeps reminding me that it has a will of its own, if not its own life force, and..."

She stared at his hand as it continued to toy its way into her tangled locks, and when he stopped speaking she lifted her eyes to his to see him watching her.

"It seems that such tenacious, insufferable, horrid hair is proving itself far more worthy of my admiration."

"It can be sleek," she said earnestly. "For the Yule Ball the year of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, it was sleek." She glanced up at the photo on the mantle and reached out with her fingers to beckon it. When it landed in her grasp she raised it to her eyes and gave a wry smile. "I spent five hours getting ready for that night, but I've never felt as pretty in my entire life."

He snatched it from her fingers and studied it. Then he tossed it over his shoulder and she watched it sail to the floor. "How absurd. Your hair was tortured into an unnatural state. I'm surprised you didn't have a headache. You look prettier on any given day of the week than you do in that picture."

She was stunned, almost stunned beyond words, and felt her throat tighten and close, but forced her next words out, anyway. "Even with my horrid hair?"

"Especially with your horrid hair." He scowled up at her. "How many times do I have to tell you, Miss Granger? Are you simply fishing for compliments? I find your horrid hair appealing."

Her heart pounded in her chest and her eyes stung with the ache of odd tears. How silly, to feel so emotional over such a thing. But he...he thought she was pretty? Even her hair? Appealing?

He eased himself higher until their faces were even and he teased her lower lip with a strand of her own horrid hair.

She released it from her teeth, and he leaned closer. "And I've also told you, don't nibble. That's my job."

She melted into her pillow with a gasp followed by a sigh as he dipped his face closer and drew her swollen lip into his hot, wet mouth and replaced her teeth with his own gentle suckling.

The kiss deepened although she couldn't know whether it was his movements or hers that brought them together in a surge of needy abandon...and where did such need come from? They'd been together all night and all morning and quite deliciously so, and here they were kissing as if this need was something bottomless that could never be sated.

Not that she was complaining.

And then they were torn apart by the heavy arrival of twenty-two pounds of orange fur and a squashed-flat face with a sooty envelope gripped in its mouth.

"Crooks," she moaned, "whatever are you doing?"

Professor Snape muttered something distinctly threatening regarding emasculation that would have sent a wiser tomcat flying from the bed, but Crookshanks simply settled his large arse between them and glared.

She reached up and took the envelope and, after reading the name on it, handed it to Professor Snape. "This must have come through the Floo when... when we weren't paying attention."

"Clearly," he responded, ripping it open. "Fuck. What time is it?"

Hermione clamped a hand over her rumbling stomach and blushed. "I'm not sure, but I know we've missed breakfast." She checked the clock and gasped. "And lunch."

"Albus has called an emergency meeting of the Order at two."

She scrambled up from the bed and reached for a pair of jeans on the floor.

He grabbed her by the wrist. "Miss Granger," he announced, brooking no argument. "You have three minutes to bathe. Please do so."

She frowned at him. "We're already late."

"And we shall be later. Bathe thoroughly."

She frowned in confusion and perhaps a bit of resentment if not downright insult, but headed for the loo.

XX

He buried his face in the pillow and counted the minutes. He'd given her three; she'd taken five and was still...

The door swung open, and fragrant steam escaped with her as she emerged. He brushed by her on his way in and inhaled deeply and was relieved to see that all scents of sex were gone.

Lupin would be at the meeting, and the last thing he wanted was a fucking werewolf noticing their scent.

Just before he closed the door, he saw her pull a jumper over her head. He knew that jumper intimately, especially the way it didn't quite meet the low slung waist of her black denim jeans and revealed tantalizing glimpses of her navel as she moved about.

Being married to a teenaged witch was going to be the death of him.

With a wave of his hand he opened his wardrobe and Summoned one of his own black shirts, then tossed it at her. "Wear that," he ordered as he shut the door to the bathroom and began his own quick but thorough ablutions.

As he buttoned the last high button on his collar, he noticed the love bite.

He felt a surge of heat as the mere sight of it brought back the memory of her lips, her teeth, on that very spot.

He'd never had one before. Had never felt the urgent suction on his flesh and had never seen the resulting red-purple evidence on his pallid skin. He raised his wand to heal it and watched it fade away.

He heard her sigh in disappointment and met her eyes in the mirror.

"You'd prefer I left it?" he asked in disbelief. "Why, in Merlin's name, did you want me to enter a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix looking like a lust-driven teenaged boy?"

She avoided his eyes, but held out his mother's comb. That witch could blush for England.

He turned her until she faced away from him and began twisting her hair into submission.

"Because," she said, "it would show them that...that I chose you. That I still choose you."

His hands froze.

"This is the first time we've seen any of them since...well, since we got married."

He secured her hair with the comb and resisted the urge to toy with the tendrils that refused to be subdued. "I'm not a lamp-post and you are not a male dog, and I don't intend to walk around with a love bite so that you can mark your territory," he announced and added, "It's unseemly and unnecessary. As if I give a flying fuck what any of them think about our marriage."

But the thought that she wanted to do such a thing left him feeling oddly moved.

"Wand," he reminded her, and she slipped it from her sleeve and stuck it into her hair at an angle, where it promptly disappeared. "Hidden in plain sight is the best place for it these days."

She nodded and preceded him to the door and suddenly...

Stopped.

Turned.

And faced him.

Her face was drained of colour, and he reached out to catch her, so certain was he that she was about to collapse. But she didn't. She simply stared at him with those huge eyes and finally asked, her voice choked, "What happens when he tells you to kill me and you don't do it?"

All of his years of spying hadn't prepared him for this, for this brutal question that he wasn't prepared to answer.

But that didn't stop him. He stared at her with a veneer of calm that masked what he was feeling and said simply, "It's not a problem you need to worry about."

"Don't patronize me."

"Miss Granger, I am not patronizing you. I am being honest. I will not harm you, and, thus, you don't need to worry about it."

"What happens to *you*?" she asked, her voice rising.

"Nothing I can't handle." He stared into her eyes, willing her to trust him.

Finally, it seemed she did. Her tense shoulders relaxed, and her eyes dropped from his. She rubbed her cheek and nodded jerkily.

He touched her chin and tilted it up until she met his eyes again. "Now. We must go."

This time her nod was firmer, more determined. Again, she preceded him to the door, this time her spine stiff with resolution.

XX

He anticipated a grim meeting at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and arriving a half hour late didn't help.

Molly opened the door and stepped aside. He was rather astounded to see that she aimed none of her glares at him since she apparently felt that Miss Granger deserved them all. He'd expected her to be the first to accuse him of impropriety but evidently feeling slighted on behalf of her sons was still her top priority on this day.

How refreshing. It wasn't often that he escaped Molly Weasley's (often-justified) disdain.

He allowed Miss Granger to enter the Library before he did, but didn't expect her to stop cold in her tracks and block the doorway. He almost collided with her.

The view over her shoulder revealed the source of her surprise.

Never had the Library been so full of people, and it was evident at a glance that almost every Weasley male was present. They'd even called the dragon herder in from Romania or Bosnia or wherever it was that he herded the beasts. It was obvious from first glance that this was a serious and important meeting, which of course he realized, being the source of the information that spawned it.

The only missing redheads were Percy, of course, and the youngest two. Ronald Weasley was noticeably absent, as were his sister and...Potter.

He scowled at that. Surely of all people, Potter needed to understand what was ahead of them.

A slight nudge got Miss Granger moving again, but he felt her energy bristling.

Clearly, they were interrupting a heated discussion.

Which was clearly halted in order for everyone in the room to peruse them, top to bottom, looking for heaven knew what. He was very glad the love bite was gone and that hers were hidden. Although Moody's magical eye seemed to be doing a thorough examination of her body. He drew her closer to him, in direct opposition to his original intention to maintain a dignified distance from her to avoid knowing smirks.

"Mione," one of the twins called out from a back corner. "Come on, we saved you a seat!"

"She will do no such thing," Molly snapped. "Harry and Ron and Ginny are in the kitchen, Hermione. You can..."

"In the kitchen? We are not children! And if anybody deserves to know about this, it's Harry!"

"Severus?" Albus spoke, clearly annoyed. "Surely you didn't tell her what is going on."

She whirled to face him, then, her eyes beseeching. And he saw it in her eyes, in the tremble of her lips, in the way she splayed her fingers--she radiated magical energy. She clenched her hands, then unclenched, staring at them, and he was tempted to let her go, to let her erupt and let Albus pay the consequence.

But, instead, he touched the back of her neck and drew her closer and whispered the softest "Shhhh" in her ear, more air than sound. She tensed at his touch and then relaxed as she sank against him; her eyes closed.

He felt as much as saw the ripple of reaction to what he was certain would be interpreted as an extreme if not unnatural bit of control on his part and submission on hers. Lupin stared at them through narrowed eyes, looking particularly suspicious. He longed to pull her even closer, to stroke her skin... just to watch the fire flare in the

werewolf's eyes.

It was only catching sight of Charlie Weasley that gave him pause. Charlie's gaze seemed more surprised and even curious than concerned as he studied the two them.

Snape decided to put an end to everyone's sport. He glanced up at Albus and sneered silkily, "I haven't survived in the Dark Lord's service for over twenty years by misjudging whom I can trust. In the future I expect you to refrain from questioning my judgment when it concerns my wife."

The mood in the room was electric but now he fixed his stare on Albus.

"Well said..." one of the twins called.

"Professor!" the other one finished.

He sniffed his disdain. As if he needed their support.

"George! Fred!" Molly Weasley's voice was filled with frustration.

Finally, Albus inclined his head in recognition and looked away in withdrawal.

"Miss Granger," Snape said with a firm grasp of her shoulder pulling her away. "Perhaps you should go find the others. I'm sure you realize that any privileged information to which you are privy due to our marriage is not open for discussion if the Headmaster...who is the head of the Order, I remind you...deems it inappropriate."

Her sense of betrayal was as clear on her features as if she'd spoken it, but she simply averted her gaze, her expression mutinous. "If..." He stressed the word and paused until she raised her eyes to his. "If the dunderheads can't put two and two together and come up with four on their own, they don't deserve to know, anyway."

She watched him carefully, and he saw a glimmer of recognition in her eyes. "I'll go," she said crisply. "I don't like it..." This, accompanied with a glare at Albus. "...but I'll go."

Good girl, he wanted to say, but didn't.

The door closed behind her, and a Silencing Charm rippled across it.

"What is being said here tonight cannot be discussed outside of this house," Albus announced. "From this point forward there will be much planning and preparation to be done, but it all must happen on these premises with the proper warding and precautions. And before we go any farther, each person present will have to renew his or her blood oath to the Order. If anyone has any doubts or concerns, this is the time to withdraw. The only penalty you will pay will be selective Obliviation before you leave."

He smiled genially.

"What? No takers? Then, we shall begin with our newest members and work our way through. Mr. George Weasley, I believe that would be you?"

Snape settled in for a long, tedious process but was relieved at the precaution.

It was his neck on the line if word got out, after all.

XX

Hermione burst into the kitchen, her magic prickling over the surface of her skin like goose bumps. Frantic, she looked for something...anything...to break and finally aimed a vicious bolt of magic at a soup tureen on a high shelf.

It exploded but the shards of pottery fell to the floor without harming anyone, as she'd chosen a target on the far side of the room.

Gasping, she finally allowed herself to look at her friends, who all gaped back at her in astonishment.

"And you let them do this to you?" she demanded. "You let them send you to the kitchen like children?"

Only after the words left her lips did she see the impotent rage in their stances, their expressions. Of course they were just as angry as she was. She fought for control and gave her head a hard shake. "I'm sorry. I'm just...I'm just...How could they do this to you?"

"To us?" Harry suddenly looked at her, alert. "And what about you? Does this mean you know what's going on in there?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. They had to know. Harry had to know. But Professor Snape had made it clear: she wasn't allowed to tell.

He'd also made something else clear, as well.

She sought and found Ron's eyes and begged, silently begged, him to come through for her, for all of them.

"Don't ask any stupid questions because I can't answer them. Just use your heads. Listen to me and think, for Merlin's sake, and see if you can add two and two and come up with bloody fucking four," she ended on a snarl.

"Merlin, you're not only starting to dress like him, you're starting to talk like him, too," Ginny breathed.

Hermione ignored her and drew in a deep breath. Starting at the top, she said in a tone that would have been conversational had she not been glaring daggers at the wall, "How delightful to see Charlie. Gee, it's been, how long?"

"Charlie wouldn't be here all the way from Romania if something big weren't happening," Harry said. "Nor would at least a third of the other people in that room. Why do you think we're so upset?"

"Good for you," Hermione said, her heart pounding. She closed her eyes, straining for something, anything that would lead them where they needed to go....

"Thursday is my birthday," she said suddenly. "I had to tell him, of course, because he wouldn't know, would he?"

They all stared at her as if she'd lost her senses, and perhaps she had, but it was the only thing that came to mind. "I'm sure I'll always have to remind him of our anniversary, too," she said and fought back an unexpected gasp, because she was now so afraid that they would never have one....

No, no, no, she thought fiercely. I can't go there.

She heaved in another deep breath. "I doubt if he even knows when our anniversary is. It was hardly a memorable date. You can't choose birthdays, but you can choose anniversaries and important days, and it seems to me that it makes a lot of sense to choose a day that's easy to *remember*."

Oh, this was stupid, *stupid*. They were staring at her now like they pitied her, and she knew she wasn't making sense.

"When is your anniversary?" Ginny asked briskly. "We'll make sure he remembers."

She stifled the urge to scream. That wasn't the point; they were missing her point!

She raised her face to Ginny's and glared. "My anniversary is a very unimportant date to anyone but me. It's August 28." She looked at Ron then, pleading with him to follow her. "It's not a memorable date. It's not an important date. Nothing else important ever happened on that day, which is what makes it so hard to remember...."

Ron looked at the calendar hanging on the wall, frowning.

He looked back at her.

Then she looked at Harry and reached her hand to his forehead and swept the ever-present shock of hair away from his scar.

"Halloween," Ron breathed.

And Hermione was so relieved and so proud of him, she could have kissed him.

"Of course." Harry paled. "Of course it would be. Where?" he demanded of her. "Hogwarts or Godric's Hollow?"

Hermione shook her head mutely.

"Well, then," Ginny said, her eyebrows lowered in a fierce scowl. "I think it's time we joined them in the Library."

Hermione watched the three of them head through the kitchen door, prepared to storm their way into the meeting if necessary.

She followed slowly.

Professor Snape might not survive.

If he refused the Dark Lord's orders to kill her, he might not even survive to provide information to prepare Harry for the final battle.

She pressed her hand to the spot near her heart where it felt as if there was a gaping wound.

She hardly heard the noise as they bombarded the door. She watched as Ginny...oh, of course it would be Ginny...hurled a handful of Weasley Whizzes Exploding Dungbombs at the door, and odiferous sparks went in all directions, accompanied by an almost-sonic *boom*.

But when the door finally opened, and the scolding from the inside of the room met the angry accusations from the hallway, she only had eyes for the lean figure in black, kneeling at Albus Dumbledore's feet.

"So, everybody wouldn't be here if something big weren't about to happen," Harry interrupted Mad-Eye Moody quite calmly, "and it seems to me that if Voldemort's going to do something big, it'll be on a big day, like the anniversary of my parents' death, the anniversary of my foiling his plans, the anniversary of my scar..."

"Halloween," Ron said.

"And don't look at Hermione. She didn't tell us a thing. We figured it out by ourselves." Ginny cast a smug look at her mother, who seemed on the verge of apoplexy.

Hermione rubbed her eyes dry and entered the room last, an ache deep within her as she stared at the rigid black-clad shoulders and the bowed head before the Headmaster. Their interruption was causing him to maintain this subservient posture until the uproar quieted, and she saw his loathing for the situation in the tension radiating from him.

When she realized that the Headmaster was studying her with thinly veiled disapproval, she raised her chin a notch.

"Do you, Severus Snape, solemnly vow to meet the needs and requirements of the Order of the Phoenix and to fight the powers of the Dark?"

"I do."

"Do you willingly offer your blood oath to prove your loyalty?"

"I do."

"Who stands bond for this man?"

Mr. Weasley stepped forward and placed a hand on Professor Snape's shoulder. "On behalf of the Order of the Phoenix, I accept his bond."

Headmaster Dumbledore lifted a silver knife and efficiently sliced open each man's palm and then pressed them together. A shimmer of light surrounded their hands and just as quickly, dissipated.

Professor Snape rose, and Hermione felt a surge of emotion as he stepped away from the front of the room and melted back into the shadows, too far away from her for her comfort.

She watched silently as the remaining Order members each took their place before Dumbledore and made their vows, completed with a blood-binding to another Order member.

When Mad-Eye Moody rose creakily from his knees, the Headmaster turned his narrowed eyes on the back of the room where Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione stood.

"This is not what I had planned but I feel there is nothing to be done except to bring in four new members tonight."

"Four?" Mrs. Weasley gasped. "Not Ginny...she's not even an adult!"

Ginny stiffened and would have spoken if Harry and Ron hadn't each grabbed an arm in warning. All attention was drawn to Professor Dumbledore as he patted Mrs. Weasley on the shoulder. "We must, Molly. She must be bound by the same oaths and vows."

Mr. Weasley took his wife by the arm and drew her aside where he offered her comfort, as best he could.

Ron was the first to go, and as he took his place on his knees, he found himself surrounded by four brothers, each looking startled by the presence of the others.

Dumbledore looked at the group. "Who will it be, Ron?"

Ron flushed red and looked from face to face. Before he could answer, Bill and Charlie each patted him on the shoulder and stepped away, leaving the twins. "Oh, that's dead helpful," Ron said. "Like I trust any blood either of these prats has to offer. Dad?"

A quick burst of laughter...a little too eager, a little too desperate, but laughter all the same...spread through the room as Arthur stepped forward, and each twin gave Ron's head a gentle slap before going to join their mother.

Hermione watched him take his vow and noticed Mr. Weasley's wince as his palm was bloodied once again, but the pride on his face was genuine.

Ginny went next, and her mother joined her quickly with only a surreptitious sniff to indicate that she'd had misgivings. Again, the vows were quick and moving as mother and daughter joined hands and their blood was sealed by magical oath.

Harry gave Hermione a nod, and she walked to the front of the room, meeting the Headmaster's eyes with steady calm. She had done nothing wrong, and she would be damned before she let him intimidate her.

She dropped to her knees and then looked up, startled, as Tonks stood beside her.

"Wotcher, Hermione," Tonks said softly with a grin.

Hermione looked quickly around until she found Professor Snape, still standing in the shadows.

She jerked her gaze back to Dumbledore, and before she could speak, he shook his head gently. "No, Hermione, it's not appropriate," he said gently.

"Why not?" she demanded.

She heard as well as felt the uncomfortable rustling behind her as various members shifted their weight or cleared their throats.

"Because he's my husband?" she asked.

"No, love," Tonks said sympathetically.

"Perhaps now is not the time to discuss it," the Headmaster said.

"I think it is." Hermione rose to her feet. "Why isn't it appropriate?"

Again, she looked over her shoulder for Professor Snape. Still, he remained in the shadows where she couldn't see his face.

She turned sharply back to the Headmaster. Something white-hot surged within her. "His bond isn't good enough for you?" she asked.

"That's not exactly the issue," the Headmaster finally answered.

"Then exactly what is it?"

When the Headmaster didn't respond, Professor Lupin spoke softly. "Hermione, it's simply that you need to be bonded to someone whose allegiance is... without blemish."

The truth was reflected in almost every set of eyes she met. Her determination to remain calm resulted in a cold voice she hardly recognized as her own. "He can risk his life for you, but you don't trust him."

"He might find himself in circumstances where..." the Headmaster began.

But Hermione didn't allow him to finish. "Where he might betray you? Is that what you're saying?" She met the blue eyes and dared them to twinkle. "How dare you?"

"Miss Granger." The velvet words were spoken gently but cut through all other sounds in the room. "Take the vow."

She didn't look back at him, didn't seek his reassurance or approval or comfort this time. He accepted this travesty.

But she didn't.

"I apologize, but I'm going to have to turn down the honour that you have so graciously offered me," she said calmly to the elderly wizard standing before her. "You can Obliviate me at your earliest convenience, and I'll totally understand."

She pushed her way through the startled Order members, shook off Harry's arm as he tried to grab her and slipped from the Library out into the cold hall. She froze, not sure which direction to turn, and finally took the stairs two at a time, looking for the empty room that had been her refuge that summer that seemed an eon ago.

She slipped into the darkness and pushed the door almost closed and wrapped her arms around herself.

Professor Hooch thought he didn't need her strength.

But he did.

Professor Hooch didn't think Hermione should let people see how much she cared about him.

Why not?

He deserved so much more than this. Somebody had to care, and what's more, somebody had to stand up for him, to consider him worthy.

If not her, then who?

Rage and despair warred within her: rage that he would be the one who saved them all and yet they continued to insult him, and despair that she had just cut herself off from help and information she desperately needed if she was going to help him survive.

And Harry. What about Harry? The six weeks between now and Halloween were short enough, but once she was no longer privy to the Order's secrets...

What had she done?

She heard footsteps on the stairs, a stumble, a quick but vigorous curse, and continued footsteps. She stepped aside just as the door swung open with a loud bang.

Tonks stood framed in the dim light.

At the sight of the clumsy witch Hermione felt a surge of panic that she didn't even pretend to hide. "They sent you to Obliviate me?"

"No, don't be a cow. Hurry, you've got to take your vow," Tonks said with a grin. "Don't worry, you didn't hurt my feelings, and besides, Harry let me be his bond," she continued as she grabbed Hermione's arm and jerked her down the hall to the stairs.

"Then who will be mine?" Hermione demanded, bracing herself to pull free.

"Your bloody git of a husband, that's who." Tonks yanked her forward and down the stairs, and only a quick grab of the railing stopped Hermione from tumbling.

The door to the Library was open and light spilled out. Hermione hesitated for only a moment...long enough to see him...standing at the front of the room with his arms folded and his pallid face a rigidly blank mask, and she raised her chin and walked through the room until she took her place beside him and dropped to her knees, her

eyes lowered demurely to hide her triumph.

XX

Where was she?

When he found her, he'd strangle her.

She'd put it all at risk...everything that would keep her safe when he wasn't with her, her ability to help Potter, even her ability to share his life...by her stupid refusal to take the vow unless he performed the role of being her bond.

Later, perhaps he'd allow himself to feel some modicum of warmth toward her misguided sense of justice, but now...with the meeting over and Order members dispersed throughout number twelve, Grimmauld Place...he still felt almost breathless at the thought of what might have been had Albus not suddenly relented.

Bloody stubborn Gryffindor.

A proper Slytherin would have never allowed herself to get in such a position, and once there would have found a graceful exit, not pushed it to a potentially catastrophic conclusion.

He hadn't found her in the kitchen where most of the members had adjourned to grab something to eat before returning to their lives. He hadn't found her in the dining room where Harry, Ginny and Ronald Weasley were quietly discussing something with the twins. He was approaching the study when he heard his own name in the werewolf's voice and, from force of habit, froze outside the door and listened.

"Severus Snape? You've been dodging dragon fire too long, Charlie, if you think that cold bastard is providing the girl any comfort other than a potion or two to keep her warm at night. And it's a potion or spell that has her suddenly defending his honour like he was a bloody virgin and she's a knight of the Round Table."

He scowled, a low-burning anger igniting in his belly.

The second eldest Weasley son just laughed. "And you're seeing them as they were. I'm telling you, after being away for two years and coming back? My first thought was, 'When did my brother's swotty little friend grow up, and why didn't somebody warn me?' I mean, sure, I volunteered to marry her and take her back to Romania with me, and I'm not saying I'm sorry she turned me down, but let's just say if she'd said yes I wouldn't be crying in my beer."

The anger was no longer low burning.

"But that's you. You're a normal, red-blooded wizard."

He heard Weasley snort. "And if you think Severus Snape isn't, you haven't looked at him lately, either. You haven't looked at the two of them together...not really looked."

This is how they responded to the news that they were facing the Final Battle in six weeks? By speculating on his sex life? He'd heard enough. He had one hand on the door, ready to thrust it open when...

His Dark Mark seared into his skin.

With a soft hiss, he grabbed his forearm and backed away.

He had to find her, and now.

He took the stairs and retraced his steps to the Library. Maybe she'd circled back there once it had cleared out. It would be bloody like her to. He winced at the pain in his forearm, but upon opening the door he felt a trickle of relief. She stood, her slender body in black that, and per usual, was half from his own wardrobe, studying a section of books on the back wall. Her back to him, she was alone in the room.

"You, Miss Granger, are an idiot," he announced hoarsely.

She whirled to face him, a book in her hand, her face flushed with guilt.

"If he had called your bluff, do you have any idea what the cost would have been?"

She took a deep breath. "It was not a bluff! But you're right, I was an idiot, and it would have been a disaster...I know that, I knew it as soon as I'd done it, but please, let's not argue about it now, not now that it's over and..."

"I came in here to strangle you."

She crossed the room to him and raised her face, exposing her beautiful throat, its hollows and its tender skin and the pulse beating at its base. "If it would make you feel better," she offered helpfully, "here it is...."

His arm was fucking killing him, he should be gone already, and all he wanted to do was kiss her. Take her in his arms and bury his face in her hair and...

Suddenly, that's exactly what he was doing. He felt something sharp in his rib...the book in her hand...but her other hand was in his hair, pulling him closer as he captured her lips with his and pulled her to him...

And the scent of werewolf and something else even wilder hit him...

He whipped out his wand and spun, aiming over her shoulder at the door...

Seeing that she'd done the same and the angle of her wand mirrored his...

Both were aimed at the stunned group in the doorway: The Weasley twins, with Remus Lupin and Charlie Weasley...dragons, the wild smell was dragons...behind them.

The tableaux the four men made, all startled with mouths agape, would have amused him.

If his arm weren't throbbing.

If he hadn't just been caught in the midst of a heated kiss.

And if he and his warrior of a wife hadn't just narrowly avoided eliminating four of the most magically strong wizards in the Order.

Her wand arm rigid with strength and control, her aggressive stance, and the speed with which she'd responded to his reaction all sent a surge of fierce pride through him.

And clearly had quite the impact on the Weasley twins, who in unison, dropped to their knees.

"Mione," George began.

"Will you marry us?" Fred finished.

Charlie grabbed his brothers by the shirts and yanked them backward, and Remus thrust himself protectively in front of them.

"Merlin," Charlie muttered, "do both of you have a death wish?"

Fred yanked himself free, laughing. "Snape knows we're simply showing respect."

"If he didn't," George added, dusting himself off, "we'd both be wisps of smoke." He shook his head in amazement, his eyes never leaving Miss Granger. "That was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen in my life, Hermione. You do have a way with a wand."

Fred moved across the room to a bookcase, slid a handful of books out and emerged with an unopened bottle of Ogden's. "I told you we had some here. Oh, 'Mione, don't be hard on Mum. If she didn't get herself all worked up about you insulting the fruit of her loins, she'd have to think about the fact that in six weeks' time, we might not all be here for her to fret over." With a wry smile, he held up the bottle. "Care for a drink? Seems as good a thing as any to do on this night."

Severus's arm was in flames. "If you can spare time away from your celebration," he sneered, "I need someone to make sure she gets back to Hogwarts safely," he ground out. "I'm being summoned."

She turned then and stared up at him, distressed. He gave her a warning look. She closed her eyes and nodded and slipped her wand back into her hair where once again it disappeared into the magic of his mother's comb.

Then an all too familiar voice said, "I'd be honored to escort Madam Snape back to the school, if she will allow it." Albus entered the room. "I'll be returning now, as a matter of fact."

"Thank you," Severus said, sensing more relief than he would have thought possible. She'd be safe with Albus.

He gave her hand a chaste squeeze...there would be no more entertainment for the unwashed masses this night...and slipped down the hallway and down the stairs.

Only when he was outside and in the park across the street did he allow himself one last thought of her lips on his before touching his wand to the skull on his arm.

XX

When they arrived at Hogwarts, Hermione assumed she'd be allowed to return to the dungeons alone, but Professor Dumbledore insisted on walking with her.

Worse, he waited genially for her to invite him inside.

She wondered if this counted as "alone with another male" in terms of the Slytherin code of honour.

When the wall shut behind them, the Headmaster finally spoke.

"Do you understand what would have happened if I hadn't succumbed to your insubordination?"

"I'm not certain, sir," she said primly, "but I don't think it could be properly called insubordination since I hadn't yet joined the Order and hadn't taken the vow."

"Miss Granger!"

"Madam Snape," she corrected him, but then continued before he could burst a vein. "Sir, what I did was foolish and wrong, and I'm very grateful that you didn't make an example of me. I was just...just so angry that you were treating Professor Snape that way! He deserves your respect, not your scorn!"

"Ah, child," Professor Dumbledore said on a tired sigh. "Do you really think I don't respect him?"

It didn't seem prudent to answer that question.

"If I didn't know he deserved so much more than any of us are able to give him, I wouldn't have tolerated your actions tonight." He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder, and she knew a hesitant feeling of warmth for the old wizard. "I'm glad you have the... respect for your husband that he deserves. I find I'm happy knowing that he has this...." He gestured at their surroundings, at books scattered and a rumpled bed with red sheets and a tea set waiting for the tea she would be brewing. "Even if it scares me."

"Why would it scare you, sir?" she asked, genuinely perplexed.

"I know what a force he is when he has nothing to live for. I don't know what it will mean, now that he has every reason to live."

She felt her blood freeze in her veins. "Is that all he means to you? A weapon?"

"No, dear. He means more than you can know. I just fear for him, that's all." His expression was weary, and his eyes, usually so bright with energy, seemed washed out with exhaustion as he shook his head. "My intention wasn't to worry you unduly, but was to let you know that I do understand how you feel, and I'm proud of you for caring so much for a man who has had no one to care for him, perhaps ever. He deserves more than his life has given him, and the fault for that life hasn't always been his own."

"He understands the reasons why he has not been used as a bond in the past and he understands the risk you took in your dismay at his treatment. Whether he admits it to you or not, he also understands that his wife forced everyone to acknowledge his worth tonight, and again, whether he admits it to you or not, he can only feel humbled and loved by that action."

To her astonishment, he pressed dry lips against her forehead.

"And that is the reason why I allowed your *insubordination*." There was no missing the stress on the word. "Because I was honouring your defense of your husband, Madam Snape."

She was too stunned to speak as he made his way back to the magical door in the wall. "However," he said, and this time there was a twinkle, "I wouldn't recommend doing it again."

"No, sir," she responded automatically.

"Although seeing you are able to disobey your husband does relieve my misgivings about your Muggle vows, and seeing him be disobeyed so charmingly was not only good for him, it was indeed a welcome distraction on an otherwise difficult night."

He left her with much to think about as she retrieved her warmest cloak and headed to the window on the fourth floor to begin her vigil.

Sinking

Chapter 41 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Where would we be without JK Rowling? Certainly not here with this fabulous world and these wonderful characters.

And where would this chapter be without GinnyW? Well, it wouldn't be here yet, and it certainly wouldn't be what it is. So thanks to Ginny for her fabulous beta-work!

41. SINKING

His Apparation was rough, with a crack that jolted through him as he collapsed onto the filthy carpet.

He should have waited, waited until his body had stopped shuddering, waited until the aftershocks had stopped tearing through him. But he felt too vulnerable, too fucking exposed, and had come to the only place he felt safe.

Another shudder rippled through his body, hitting every pleasure point and some he hadn't realized existed. His cock had spurted at first touch of wand to his forearm, and he was long spent, but still he felt more pleasure, and he heard the moan, the disgusting moan.

The ecstatic, disgusting moan.

His moan.

He ground his face into the carpet, and his eyes burned with grit, with...no, not tears, he wasn't crying, he fucking wasn't crying.

His vow to the Order had been punctuated by a slash of Dumbledore's razor-edged knife across his palm.

His vow to the Dark Lord had been sealed with a touch of his master's wand to his Dark Mark.

Pain and pleasure.

How different, those two bonds.

The other Death Eaters saw that jolt of ultimate pleasure as a promise of untold delights to come.

He saw it as a temptation to which he'd once succumbed and for which he now must suffer the consequences.

Including but not limited to the self-loathing, the disgust, that he'd ever seen evil and embraced it.

And worse, that he should ever have seen purity and embraced it with his loathsome flesh.

He took a slow, quaking breath of dust and grit.

Safe.

Unseen.

Unwitnessed.

In the dark.

In the filth.

Where he belonged.

XX

"Miss Granger."

Hermione jerked to attention, pulling her face from the window to blink up at the Headmaster.

"Madam Snape," she corrected automatically.

"Of course."

His voice was gentle. She didn't trust it.

"Madam Snape, if you'd allow me, I'll escort you to your quarters."

His hand gripped her elbow, and she felt herself pulled to her feet as if she weighed nothing.

"I'm waiting," she protested. "I'm watching for him."

He propelled her quickly down the corridor to the staircase, and her feet moved as if under her own volition. But this wasn't what she wanted. She jerked away from him and glared up at him. "No. Not until he's home safe."

The clear blue eyes that looked down at her held no twinkle, but instead, a depth of understanding that confused and frightened her.

"He's safe. He sent me a message. He won't be home tonight, however, and I would be remiss if I allowed you to spend the night in a cold corridor watching for something that isn't going to happen."

"What did they do to him?" she grated, her throat raw.

He placed his hand on top of her head, almost as if bestowing her with a blessing.

"I know it's difficult, but you must trust me. Trust Severus. He can't come home to you tonight. But he's safe. If he weren't, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you, of that you can be sure. And when he returns, if he finds that I haven't taken proper care of you, I will be the one who needs care. Madam Snape, you need your rest."

She allowed him to accompany her back to the dungeons, and then she entered their quarters where the air smelled of eucalyptus and spearmint and her professor.

Why didn't she *feel* that he was safe? Shouldn't she feel it in her bones if he were safe?

She removed her clothes and slipped between the cold, cold sheets on his side of the bed because to sleep on her own side would be to see the emptiness where he should be.

She buried her face in his pillow and tried to find comfort there.

She did not sleep.

XX

He didn't return.

She stayed in the bed and stared at the wall until it was time for her private Potions lesson. She pulled on the clothes she'd worn the day before, pulled her school robe over them, and entered his office.

It was empty.

She walked through to his storeroom where she'd be brewing if he showed up.

He had to show up. He never missed class. He was safe. He'd be at class.

She realized she was trying to convince herself when she saw her hands tremble as she put her book bag on the worktable.

She looked around. No book opened to a potion recipe awaited her. No cauldron awaited her. No assignment. No preparation.

Terror seized her.

BANG!

She jumped and then gasped with relief. How many times had she heard that same bang when he'd entered the Potions classroom with billowing robes and a door flung open to hit the stone wall with a resounding crash?

She heard his voice as he gave an assignment to the fourth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. She fought to regain control of her breath and waited for him to come and give her an assignment of her own.

With a small *pop*, a book appeared on the worktable. She opened it to the page marked with a braided strip of green leather.

This was it? He was gone all night and showed up for class and didn't even bother to come see her?

She wasn't sure how long she stared blindly at the open book without comprehending a single word on the page.

She simply knew that after standing there for far too long feeling abandoned and...worse...foolish, she decided that perhaps she wouldn't be brewing a potion today, after all.

XX

A half hour into the class, he forced himself to make a circuit of the classroom and cast a quick glance into the storeroom as he passed, only to find it empty.

He stepped inside. She'd been there; he was certain of it.

He felt a sick sense of relief that she'd given him a reason for anger.

What did she think she was doing, skiving out on his assignment? Did she think that just because she didn't sit in his classroom, she could attend at her leisure?

He returned to his chair behind his desk, careful not to strike his left forearm.

He hadn't let anything press against it since Apparating to Spinner's End. He just wanted it to calm, to return to a source of pain, only pain, nothing but pain....

He'd spent too much time the night before kneeling before masters.

He made another circuit of the classroom with the appropriate snarls and insults.

He snapped the order for them to turn in their samples and clean their areas.

He stared blindly at the vials on his desk long after the last student was gone.

XX

She moved her quill fiercely across the parchment, watching inch after inch of notes appear. Somehow the words, the facts, materialized on the page as if she'd not actually processed them through her brain, which was preposterous. But her brain, hand and quill were so trained to take notes from Professor Binns' gray lectures, it seemed to require no other action on her part.

Leaving her with too much ability to think.

"Miss Granger, might I point out that flying, divination and...shall we say, sexual gratification?...have at least three things in common.

"One, they are very rare in that they do not come easily for you.

"Two, they can't be learned from reading books.

"Three, once determining those facts, you quickly determined none of the three to be worth your effort."

Oh, how she'd bristled and protested. She'd pointed out how ridiculously without scholarly merit the subjects of divination and flying were and felt quite justified in her defense.

Until, of course, he'd responded, *"So is History of Magic, at least taught the way it is at Hogwarts, but that didn't stop you from studying it."*

The quill slowed to a stop. The flow of words suddenly seemed a waste of effort as Professor Binns droned on....

A spot of ink spread to a blot before she noticed and lifted her hand.

How easily he'd done that.

How easily he'd slipped beneath the surface and looked at her, truly looked at her, and...noticed.

It had left her feeling as if the earth had vanished from beneath her feet. He had split her open, and then, with the utmost of precision and delicacy, he had exposed something inside her that even she hadn't noticed before.

It had felt terrifying and horrifying and...

Safe.

She always felt so safe with him.

And even as he pointed out this flaw...this humiliating flaw of hers...he'd lifted her above it in such an expert and shuddering completion that it simply didn't matter any longer.

Because he'd noticed, and he'd proven to her that she was wrong, and the earth had fallen away from beneath her, but that had been his touch, his lips, his tongue...and of all things, a dry lecture from Professor Binns was bringing it all back to her, along with a desire to see another professor entirely. Her professor. Hers.

"Hermione!" A hand settled on her shoulder...not his hand, the wrong hand...and gave a little shake. "I never saw Binns put you to sleep before."

She looked up from her parchment, her mouth suffused with moisture. She swallowed hard and avoided Harry's eyes, feeling herself rudely lurched back to reality. "...I didn't get enough sleep."

"If Snape's not at lunch today, you could sit with us. For, you know, old time's sake."

That brought her upright and her eyes snapped to his. "Why wouldn't he be at lunch? Did something happen?"

He stared at her, puzzled. "Of course not. I was just saying..." He shrugged. "Just a thought, that's all."

She hadn't eaten breakfast, and now it was time for lunch and the thought of food twisted her stomach. "I need to take care of some other things first, but maybe...."

She needed to go to the dungeons, to see him, to just reassure herself that he was there.

But he wasn't there.

And he wasn't in the Great Hall.

And she found she had no appetite, after all.

XX

The owl from Narcissa had found him in the staff room. He'd removed the pale green parchment, vanished the scent and taken it to his office to open.

Fuck.

Why did she want him to come for lunch?

What went on in her twisted mind today? Better to find out than leave something festering.

He didn't bother changing robes before leaving the school.

He arrived in the black marble Apparition Foyer and found it empty. No house-elf awaited him with directions. Unusual, but not unheard of.

"Severussss..."

He froze.

That voice.

He'd forgotten it, yet could never truly forget it.

The sibilant "sss" was new, an affectation apparently copied from the Dark Lord.

But the rich alto tone, the seductive curl, belonged to one woman.

"Bella..." he sighed softly.

"How good of Narcissa to send you my way," she purred, stepping forward from the shadows. "Or perhaps that was me, signing her name." Warm, soft fingers slid up his throat to his rigid jaw as she let out a delighted gurgle of laughter. "Enjoying your Mudblood, Sev? Does she make you feel seventeen again?"

"Really, Bella." He pulled away and out of her reach. "Where is your husband?"

"Oh, how I laughed when I heard." Her throaty laugh filled the room as if to demonstrate. "How predictable, another teenaged witch. I suppose taking a real woman never crossed your mind."

"What do you want?" he demanded harshly. "Clearly not me, so... what?" He uttered a soft, *Lumos*. The sconces on the wall filled with the glow of candlelight.

And when he saw her, really saw her, he caught his breath.

He'd seen the photos of her in the Daily Prophet when she'd escaped Azkaban. Her time there had taken a cruel toll. But now her skin shimmered with a magically enhanced glow of health. Her hair gleamed; she'd left a few dramatic white streaks in it, he noted. Her black silk robes clung to curves he was certain she couldn't actually have, including a cleavage that begged for a man's face to bury itself there.

She was everything he might once have thought he'd want, but once she'd grown tired of him, he'd never been insane enough to want to return there.

And now he could only stare and analyze in wonder that she'd be vain enough to squander her energy this way.

She was expending quite a bit of magical energy just to maintain those glamours.

She must know her powers were going to be needed for the Dark Lord's war.

"You like what you see." It was a statement, not a question.

"Not particularly." He realized, unexpectedly, that he spoke the truth as he enjoyed the flicker of anger that showed itself briefly on those perfect features. "I wonder at the waste. Surely you've got better things to do with your magic," he drawled.

"That's where you're wrong." She preened, dragging one blood red fingernail up the hollow between her breasts. "I'm researching long-term glamours for our Lord. He's decided to put on a prettier face for his public, once that nasty little Potter brat is finished off."

One of the most intelligent decisions the Dark Lord had made in years, not that Severus would speak that thought aloud.

"Where are Lucius and Narcissa?"

"Still asleep. Last night took a lot out of them," she oozed with a silken smile, "although they certainly didn't complain."

"I'm sure." He allowed himself a hard sigh. "What do you want, Bella? I have a class to teach, and it appears I won't be getting any lunch."

She circled him slowly, and he swallowed down the acid that rose in his throat.

"Fucking the Mudblood must be good for you, Sevvy. Or, for your sake, let's hope it's simply that fucking is good for you. You'll be happy to know that our Lord has given me a very special assignment, one that he thinks I am particularly qualified to fulfill."

Fucking hell. What could she be qualified for that the Dark Lord would think had anything to do with him, other than... An image flashed before him, an image stolen from Miss Granger's memory, an image of the old photograph. What the fuck did the Dark Lord have in mind?

"You'll definitely be getting lunch today. You know the way to the small dining room. Everything will be clear once you're there."

"What, I'm not to be blessed with your further presence?"

She laughed. "No, I arranged the guest list. I have no desire to do more."

He moved into the manor to find what awaited him, relieved, at least, at that.

XX

"You're early," Madam Hooch said, looking up from a copy of *Quidditch World*.

Hermione entered her office and took her usual seat across the desk from the older witch. "I wasn't hungry."

Madam Hooch stared at her through narrowed eyes. "You look like fresh-squeezed shite."

Hermione shrugged. "I didn't sleep well last night."

"You don't look happy enough to have been shagged into oblivion, so I'm assuming..."

Hermione stood up, knocking the chair over. "If you'll excuse me, I have real studying to do."

But the door slammed shut in front of her face.

"Sit down, girl. I'll keep my observations to myself, but you can't blame me for noticing. You and Severus are the most entertaining thing that has happened at Hogwarts in decades."

"Believe me, being entertaining is not my idea of a good time."

Madam Hooch let out a bark of laughter.

"Sit down. I've got a parchment for you to sign."

Hermione sighed and took her seat again. She saw a blank parchment on the desk and a quill and pot of ink beside it. "I don't sign blank parchments," she said.

"Smart girl. How did you end up in Gryffindor?" Madam Hooch flicked a finger, and the parchment slid closer to Hermione. "Then write anything you want."

Hermione frowned but reached for the quill.

"Without touching it," Madam Hooch added.

Hermione gaped at her. "You mean, write without holding the quill?"

"It's called wandless magic, Madam Snape. I suggest you wrap your mind around the concept and give it a try."

"*Wingardium...*"

"Silently," Madam Hooch added helpfully. "And that's the wrong spell. In fact, no spell needed. Just do it."

"Without a spell?"

"That's what I said, girl. Like you did when you were a child."

Hermione felt her cheeks burn, but didn't illuminate Madam Hooch on her lack of magical experience before Hogwarts. Instead she stared at the quill and tried to lift it with sheer force of will.

Nothing.

Madam Hooch leaned back in her chair and raised *Quidditch World* again. "Let me know when you manage to get it to do something," she said most unhelpfully.

XX

Snape entered the family dining room to find, of all people, Pendragon Parkinson. "Pen," he said and nodded without hiding his surprise. He took the chair opposite, and a bowl of consommé appeared before them.

"Severus," Pendragon replied.

Severus lifted his spoon and began eating. He didn't have time for games and wasn't going to exhibit even a modicum of curiosity at this awkward turn of events. And besides, the Malfoys always served excellent cuisine. If he didn't dawdle, he might get two courses before having to leave.

Pendragon tapped a perfectly manicured finger on the table, making Severus aware of his own calloused and potion-stained hands. Some Slytherins had to work for a living, he thought with a sneer.

"I'd rather be having this meeting elsewhere," Parkinson finally said in a low voice. "While the Malfoys, and of course Bella, know why I'm seeking this meeting, there are certain aspects of any arrangement we make that I'd rather not be made under the Malfoy roof."

"Arrangement?"

"Oh, yes, I have a proposition for you that I think you'll find most... enticing."

Severus raised his eyes and saw an unsettling gleam in his companion's eyes. He remained silent, but lowered his spoon and pushed the bowl aside.

"I'd like to offer Peri to you, as your bride."

He was well-schooled, but even he had difficulty keeping his face clear of emotion as he remarked softly, "I have a bride."

The other wizard scoffed. "For how long? A few more weeks? The marriage law won't be worth the parchment it's written on after Hallowe'en, and your Mudblood won't be in the picture."

"Indeed." His voice was even lower now, but Parkinson had never been an astute judge of risk and danger.

"Peri is a pretty little thing, Severus, if I do say so myself."

"Periwinkle is thirteen years old."

Parkinson gave a negligent shrug. "I can't see as that's a problem, seeing as you like them young."

Young. This is what they thought of him. Young... "You are offering your thirteen-year-old daughter to me to marry."

"She bleeds. She's old enough. Her mother assured me of that."

He lifted his goblet to his lips, but didn't drink, couldn't drink, couldn't do anything but fight to keep his rage in check. Finally, he managed words. Words that felt like they were ground from glass, but managed to sound almost civil. Almost. "Bella put you up to this?"

"The Dark Lord told us you'd be needing a pureblood bride and that Bella would be arranging things. I got to her first," Parkinson replied smugly. "Severus, your position with the Dark Lord is..." He broke off and cast a quick look around. "Well, it's like this, isn't it? You're to be his right hand. And to have a daughter married to you would be a benefit to any family. Such a benefit that..." Again, the quick glance around. "You can have Pansy, if you prefer."

No honor amongst Death Eaters, it seemed. But still, to drive the point home, he said, "She's promised to Draco when the marriage law falls."

Parkinson gave an ingratiating smile. "Things can change."

Severus drained the wine from his goblet, suddenly needing what little strength it gave him. He rose to his feet and stared down at the man as if he were the most disgusting filth he'd ever met, which at this moment, he certainly was. "Your suggestions offend me in more ways than I can elaborate, and I think if you value your life, you'll leave now."

Parkinson leaped up. "I say. There was nothing suggested except a proper betrothal and marriage. It's not as if I were going to send them to your bed for sport!"

A movement in the hallway outside the door indicated someone's presence. He wondered how much had been heard and hoped it would be every fucking word.

He'd let Lucius and Narcissa avenge the insult to their family...under their own roof, even.

He had to leave. To get out of this fucking place, away from these fucking people, these people who looked at him and saw a lecherous, child-fucking pervert...his throat clenched as he choked it down, choked it down...

He Apparated from the Foyer and landed unsteadily at the Apparation Point outside Hogwarts.

He barely made it away from the point and to a dying lilac hedge before he started retching.

XX

The quill hovered over the inkpot, dripping long drops of green ink. Focus unwavering, Hermione drew it toward the parchment and, again, attempted to mentally push it across the page. Even a single straight line would be an accomplishment after the spatters and splats she'd managed so far.

No straight line appeared. Instead, the quill scratched a tear into the surface and stuck, quivering.

"Fuck," she whispered, exhausted.

"Language," Madam Hooch replied, still reading.

Hermione glared across the desk, remembering how easily the words had poured from her quill in History of Magic when she hadn't even been trying. Of course, she'd actually been able to hold the quill in her hand, but the words had flowed, seemingly in through her ears and out through her fingertips without even hesitating long enough in her brain to register.

She closed her eyes and strained...no, that was wrong, she should be relaxed...and tried to recall Professor Binns' deathly dismal lecture. She thought of the sound of other quills scratching, of Ron snoring, or Parvati and Lavender whispering...

And one sound became real.

One quill. Scratching across parchment.

She fought the urge to open her eyes and, instead, just listened....

"The Goblin Wars?" Madam Hooch asked, amused.

Hermione felt a surge of energy and opened her eyes as the quill fell to the desk. Three and a half lines of green script...in her own handwriting...flowed smoothly across the page. She leaned forward to look, and yes, it was most definitely notes from Professor Binns' lecture.

"Well done, Madam Snape."

She grinned. Glanced at the quill and this time watched it lift gracefully, watched its sharp tip move quickly across the bottom of the parchment and watched her name appear. "It's not blank any more," she offered in way of explanation.

Madam Hooch opened a desk drawer and pulled out a small flask. "Care to celebrate?"

Hermione hedged, "Not on an empty stomach. But you go right ahead." Which was a waste of breath as Madam Hooch had taken a nip straight from the flask as soon as she heard the word, "not."

Hermione lifted a hand to sweep a strand of hair out of her eyes and saw it tremble.

"That's enough for today," Madam Hooch remarked, recapping her flask. "Can't drain you of your magic, can we?"

"That almost happened once before," Hermione said. "I hate to think I'm that fragile."

"I'd hardly use the word fragile to describe you."

Hermione stared at her hands, clutched in her lap. "Madam Hooch, may I ask you a question? Without offending you, I mean? I just can't help wondering...."

"Spit it out, girl."

"Well, you say you're unaligned. Does that mean you don't think the Order of the Phoenix is... well, that you think they're no different from Death Eaters?"

Madam Hooch's face smoothed over as if all emotion had been erased. "What house do you think I was sorted into?"

Hermione had never even considered the question before, but she knew as clearly as if she'd been told. "Slytherin."

"It's not easy to be a Slytherin, Hermione. It has taken every ounce of my considerable gift of cunning not to get swept up in these difficulties. Not to be forced to proclaim a loyalty to one side or the other. This doesn't mean I don't have opinions, but it does mean I won't be sharing them with you."

"Thank you for not taking offense." Hermione stood up, thinking the conclusions were pretty obvious. She taught at Hogwarts and Professor Snape trusted her. "Tomorrow, same time?"

Madam Hooch gave a nod and went back to her Quidditch news.

Hermione snatched up her splattered parchment to take with her.

She felt like framing it.

Her brief burst of jubilation faded, however, when she remembered.

She headed into the castle, her heart in her throat.

XX

The bed taunted him.

With its red sheets and its pile of pillows and its memories of gasps and sighs and...his gut twisted again, and he braced himself against another bout of nausea...the awakening of the sexual appetites of an innocent.

He took a long swallow of firewhisky straight from the bottle and waited for the burn to erase the sick.

He couldn't get drunk enough fast enough.

He lit another cigarette and drew in the smoke, holding it deep in his lungs before finally exhaling and sinking back in his chair, his eyes squeezed shut against the pain.

Since when had anyone had the power to flay him open with their opinions of his character?

Since when had shame been anything but a low thrum, constantly present but no longer noticed?

Since when had he fucking cared what anyone thought about him?

Since she'd happened to him.

Since she'd presented herself as some fucking virgin bride with the blithe assurance that he was just one more professor smitten by her intellect and willing to do whatever necessary to protect her. One of the protected Golden Trio, so confident that he would be a tame little pet who lived in the dungeons while she lived with her friends in Gryffindor Tower with only the occasional distasteful bit of coitus between them to satisfy the Ministry.

Which could have worked.

It would have worked had he not been so stung by the insult to his masculinity.

If she lived in Gryffindor Tower, the whispers wouldn't have started, would they? It would be clear that his participation was forced, that he wasn't getting any obscene pleasure from it. But no, he'd allowed that part of him that was a man...that part of him that was too long suppressed behind the role of despised teacher, hated traitor, secret spy...to speak up and say, "Like hell you will, little girl, like hell you will," and put her in her place...in his quarters, on his floor, and finally in his bed.

He hadn't realized he still had a soul until her presence started eating away at it, exposing tender spots that were raw to her touch, quivering in fear and pain and wanting to creep back into the darkness and hide....

He'd had so little dignity left.

Bedding a student had shredded it.

Lusting after her had pulverized it.

Developing an ache that only she could soothe had obliterated it.

There was little doubt as to what left him so vulnerable to Minerva's scorn and the werewolf's anger and Bella's taunts and Parkinson's assumptions.

It was the bloody truth that they were right.

He'd sunk as low as he possibly could.

And had even found comfort there.

Even now, could find comfort there...

He took another drag on his cigarette and let another swallow of alcohol burn its way to his stomach.

No, he couldn't get drunk enough fast enough to suit him.

XX

He didn't know how much time passed.

He knew he'd put a hefty dent in the contents of his bottle and that he'd lit two cigarettes without remembering that a third was resting, half smoked, in the ashtray.

He knew that she'd somehow managed to enter his chambers...his chambers...and was standing there glaring at him and had the gall to wave her hand in front of her face and cough.

"Professor Snape," she announced in her prim, pear-shaped tones. "Are you quite aware that you have a classroom full of students waiting for your lesson?"

"What business is that of yours?" Was that slurred voice really his? He tried to muster a bit of pride in the accomplishment. He hadn't managed to get this drunk in a decade or longer. *Well done, Sevvv*, Bella's voice cooed in his head. He took another drink to chase it away.

"Clearly, none." She whirled away from him, headed back to the door from whence she'd entered. She paused, her spine impossibly stiff and straight. "In the future," she said, facing away from him, "if you'd kindly inform me when you'll be away all night instead of sending the message through Professor Dumbledore? It's humiliating enough to have it happen without learning of it from him."

He reached for his bottle and knocked it over instead. He watched the smoking liquid spread across the tabletop, but couldn't stir himself to spell it away. "My deepest apologies, *Madam Snape*, for any *humiliation* I might have caused you," he sneered. As if she knew anything about humiliation.

"If I'd remembered what a naffing little swot you can be and how...how bloody efficient you can be at deflating a man's spirits..." he began, and then his head lolled against the back of the chair as he no longer had the ability to hold it upright. He fought to finish his thought. "I would've come home and let you knock me right out of my state of bliss instead of staying away where it could take its own sweet time passing."

She whipped back around. "State of bliss?"

Oh, that got her attention, did it? "The Dark Lord is a far more effective master when it comes to securing his servants' loyalties than Dumbledore," he said, his voice at its most silken, and forced his lips to curl into a smirk. "And a good time was had by all."

Her features were indistinct, blessedly blurred by the alcohol in his system. Blurred enough that he wasn't certain whether they were twisted with pain or with disgust as she stood frozen for the longest time....

At least, her image was frozen in his mind.

Because he'd closed his eyes.

And he wasn't really sure how much time had passed, how long she'd stood there, or indeed, whether she'd even replied.

He just knew that when he opened his eyes again she was gone.

It was later still, much later, before he sobered enough to realize that the reaction he'd seen, the expression that was now indelibly etched in his memory, wasn't that of a child or a girl or even a stupid teenaged student.

It was a woman's reaction, the stiff posture and clear tones and intense emotion radiating from her in waves.

Even realizing that, he wasn't sober enough to give it the consideration it deserved. It was an idea that rolled around the edges of his mind, just out of reach, as he stumbled to the bed and fell across it to sleep.

Not until he next stirred...his head pounding and mouth tasting of ash and liquor, his arms empty, and her warm body not within his reach...not until that moment did it enter his mind that he just might have driven Miss Granger away.

Lost, Then Found

Chapter 42 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

As always, thanks to JKR.

As always, thanks to ginnyw and thanks to my wonderful pinch hitter beta, lifeasanamazon.

42. LOST, THEN FOUND

He forced acrid black coffee down his throat and considered it penance. Small penance, but penance, all the same.

She wasn't in the Great Hall, wasn't beside him, and wasn't eating toast with too much jam while reading one of her ubiquitous textbooks.

He'd come here on the slim chance...the very slimmest of chances...that she'd be here. If not at her place beside him, perhaps at the table with the other Gryffindors. But the Gryffindors seemed oblivious to the fact that she wasn't where she was supposed to be, wasn't where she should never have been, which, by an insane twist of fate, was now her place.

Beside him.

His food congealed on the plate while he drained his third cup of coffee in hopes that the combination of caffeine and tannic acid would speed the efficiency of the hangover potion. Not that he deserved such efficiency. But he needed it.

He replaced the mug with trembling fingers, cursing his body for betraying its state so blatantly, and left the Great Hall.

Only to meet Albus coming in the door.

"A word, Severus."

"Only one?"

"Perhaps a few more. You assured me that you were uninjured," the Headmaster stated. "You seemed unharmed in your first class yesterday. At least, you did teach it."

Bloody hell. First-year Slytherins and Gryffindors. He hadn't given them another thought since...since she'd left him in his stupor.

And with that, Albus was gone.

Leaving Severus with a desperate need to find her, but forced to return to the dungeons for N.E.W.T. level Potions and another seat where she should have been but for some insane twist of fate had never been.

He knew in the churning pit of his stomach that she wouldn't be awaiting a private assignment in the storeroom, either.

Which didn't stop his heart from skipping a beat before he opened the door to look.

And didn't stop it from sinking when she wasn't there.

Nothing, however, equaled the quick-boil of his blood when he entered the classroom and found an empty seat where Harry fucking Potter should have been.

How had the significance slipped his attention...the fact that Potter hadn't been with the chattering Gryffindors at breakfast?

He silently swept his wand across the board and revealed the assignment, not trusting himself to speak. He spent the remainder of the class sitting at his desk, not caring whether the bloody brats blew themselves to Hades or not.

XX

His search of the Library had taken twice as long as it should have; he hadn't trusted her not to Disillusion herself and thus had been looking not just for her, but also for any shimmer that might be her. His eyes had ached with a razor-sharp pain since he'd awakened, and the Library search had added acid to the mix.

He'd Disillusioned himself to linger outside the Fat Lady's portrait, straining to hear conversations that might reveal her presence inside, but nobody mentioned her name, though several wondered about Potter's absence.

Which left the Room of Requirement, although if that were her place of refuge, he would have no way of knowing or of getting inside.

Which made it even more likely.

He hadn't expected to find Potter there, however, sitting in the corridor, his head against the opposite wall, staring blindly at the spot where the door would open if she decided to emerge.

Bloody Potter.

He'd known exactly where to go.

And the knowledge that the two of them weren't together wasn't as satisfying as he would have expected.

"Unexcused absence from Potions, Potter? Twenty-five points from Gryffindor and detention with Mr. Filch."

Potter didn't even spare him a glance.

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?" Snape grated.

Still, silence.

"Are you looking to lose more points? Because believe me, I will be delighted to deduct them."

"Excuse me, Professor," the insolent whelp said, still without sparing him a glance, "but not wanting to lose points is exactly why I have nothing to say to you."

"Indeed." Snape whipped in front of him, forcing him to look up to meet his eyes. "And what is it that you are so eager not to say to me that would cost your house points?"

"What did you do to her?"

His stomach lurched. "What do you mean?"

"She's been here all night. Why wasn't she with you? *What did you do to her?*"

"And what makes you so sure my wife has been here and not in our quarters?"

Potter averted his gaze. "I have ways."

"I can assure you that whatever reason she may think she has for being here, it does not concern you," he hissed.

"Indeed," Potter returned with an insolent sneer. "I suppose I'll wait and let her reassure me on that score."

Snape turned to stare at the empty wall, his heart in his throat. What was she doing in there? She had to be safe; he couldn't imagine the Room of Requirement not being a safe refuge, and yet....

What if she needed h...

He couldn't even complete the thought. The thought that ended in the word "him" as if there were any reason on earth that she would need him.

Help, then. What if she needed help?

How long could she stay?

He fought down the thickness in his throat that indicated not bile but a humiliating fear.

What if she'd discovered she didn't need him? He knew she didn't want him. She'd taken leave of her senses to ever think she wanted him, and who could blame her for that? But she'd needed him, needed their marriage to protect her, and had been willing to do the unthinkable to secure it.

What if she'd realised she didn't?

He couldn't stand here in this place and fall apart. He couldn't do this, not with Potter there. Not now. Not ever.

"Leave," he ground out, facing Potter again. "Get out."

Potter leaped to his feet. "You can't make me."

"I'm a teacher, and I can make you do whatever I want, and that means you will leave!" He heard his voice echo down the stone corridor, but couldn't contain it, couldn't contain his anger, which was why it took a moment for the change on Potter's features to register, and why Potter managed to dart around him before he reacted...

And spun to see Potter running toward the door opening in the wall...

And hitting it with a dull thud when it disappeared a split-second before he got there.

Snape took two steps forward, his heart hammering in his chest with fear. What was happening inside? Did she need him?

Merlin only knew he needed her.

And without realising the words had formulated, he heard a desperate voice in his mind, *Please need me. Need me like I need you....*

Potter rose up on one elbow and stared at the wall as the door came into view again. This time, he reached his hand forward tentatively and the door disappeared.

Hating the fear quivering through him, hating Potter for witnessing it, Snape stepped forward and the door opened.

He was inside with the door closed behind him before Potter had even leaped to his feet.

But Potter was no longer on his mind.

The room was an odd yet distinctive refuge, indeed.

A bed he recognised from her childhood room.

A wall of bookcases he recognised from the Library.

A table with books scattered across it.

Her head bent over a parchment, her hand furiously scribbling across it.

This was it?

She was studying.

His own heart was turned inside out in pain, and she blithely studied as if nothing was wrong?

Until she raised her eyes to his and blinked them, squinting, as if slow to realise he was with her.

Her eyes had deep bruises beneath them, bruises that meant lack of sleep and more. Even after his obscene amount of firewhisky, there was no way he could look as ravaged as she did. The quill trembled in her hand, and even from this distance he could see the words on the parchment lacked her usual feminine precision.

As if his presence had finally sunk in, he saw her hand clutch the book in front of her, fumble to close it, turn the spine away from him and flip the cover face down. These were easy movements, if foolish...he was hardly going to exhibit the decency of allowing her to hide her subject matter, not when he found her in this condition. Because even though the simple closing of a book and flipping and turning it was a sequence of movement that she could ordinarily manage with simplicity and grace, now she was fumbling, dropping the quill, smearing her arm across the wet ink.

She was frantic to hide it from him.

She'd been up all night studying...earth magics?

There was no such course of study at Hogwarts or any wizarding school. And there certainly was no connection between the subject matter and any N.E.W.T.s she might be fretting over.

A quick glance showed the bed hadn't been touched.

"When was the last time you ate or slept?" he demanded.

She simply stared at him without answering and then sent a panicked look toward the table and her notes. She crumpled the parchment in her fist and tossed it into the fireplace.

Before he could stop her, she'd tossed the book after it and almost bent double as it went up in flames.

She had destroyed a book? His Miss Granger had been so desperate to hide something from him that she'd actually destroyed a book? He quickly catalogued its appearance from memory while he could--small with a brightly coloured picture on the cover, something with green and orange and red... small children? A child's book, or a book about children...a book about earth magics and children.

He looked quickly at her stomach.

Merlin, fucking hell, bloody hell, it couldn't be that. She'd just had her cycle, and he'd made certain she had her potions and...

She was standing, picking up another book, although whether to hide it, burn it or throw it at him, he had no idea because at that moment she swayed and caught herself,

braced her hands wide on the edge of the table and bent over.

"Forget the fucking books," he snapped. "Have you eaten?"

She finally shook her head, something that looked like fear in her eyes. "Why...why are you here?"

He wanted to close the distance between them, touch her, and hold her. But the rigidity of her shoulders, the tension in the arms supporting her weight stilled his movement.

She didn't want him.

He felt a surge of frustration. "Don't be stupid. You're not hurting me by not eating and sleeping. You're just..." He stopped mid-sentence and found himself speaking words he hadn't realised he meant until they were already spoken and it was too late to take them back. "You...you are hurting me. But please, find another way to do it. Not this."

"You think I'm not eating and sleeping to hurt you?" Her clear voice sliced through him. "Because of you, yes. To hurt you? Surely I could find better ways."

"You could find ways that didn't hurt you, too."

She raised her eyes to him at that. Those eyes, dark like the bitterest of tea, framed by shadows and haunted with pain. "It doesn't work that way."

"I know what it looked like yesterday...what I made it look like," he began. "But it's not..."

"Not Bellatrix Lestrange?" she asked, and he stopped breathing and his heart stopped beating, literally stopped beating, because if she thought that...if she believed that...she'd never forgive him, never, and he'd brought it all on himself. Brought it on them both.

And if this didn't prove he didn't deserve anything as good and pure as his Miss Granger, what would? And what could he say to her, to convince her otherwise?

And how had she known?

"She was at the Department of Mysteries," she said calmly. "She smelled of patchouli, absolutely reeked of it."

"It's not what you think," he repeated. "There was no woman, especially not..."

"I know you didn't touch her. You'd have smelled more strongly of her if you had. Dark Magic positively radiated from you, and I'm sure...almost certain...some of it was hers, but I didn't think you'd actually... I mean, I knew you didn't...you hadn't..."

She let her voice drift, and he realised that she couldn't even finish the thought. He didn't know which caused him more guilt, that the pain she suffered was beyond her ability to voice, or that he was so fucking relieved not to hear it articulated in her precise, prim tones. Her wide-eyed innocence and clinical vocabulary could bring him to his knees at the best of times but would rip him open if she applied it to any act that involved him and Bella.

"Professor Dumbledore didn't see you, did he? He wouldn't have let you near a classroom if he'd seen," she said softly. "Didn't he know what would be required of you?" Her eyes dropped to his forearm, and had it been bare, he couldn't have felt more vulnerable and more exposed.

Again, shame flowed through his veins. Bile rose. He clenched his fists to stop them shaking and squeezed his eyes shut to stop from seeing the pain she suffered because of him. "Miss Granger..." he began, his voice choked.

"You always call me that," she said softly. "And others think it odd. They think it indicates a division between us, an inequity of sorts, and maybe it does, maybe you think it does.... Maybe you call me 'Miss Granger' as an act of self-loathing, to remind yourself of who and what I am, lest you ever relax and think of me just as... me." She stared into the fireplace at the fire, the occasional spark thrown by the last remnants of the magical book cover. "But do you know what I hear when you call me 'Miss Granger'? I hear you demanding that everyone else must call me Madam Snape, as if you want to remind them that I'm yours, that you're proud of me and even, maybe, of us. And when I hear you call me 'Miss Granger,' I like to think it's because it's something special, something nobody else can call me but you. And so I do the same. I know it's hard for them to remember, but I can't bear to hear anyone call me that but you because, when you say it, it sounds so lovely in my ears and it goes straight to my heart and..." She looked as if that heart would break. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what you need me to do. I try so hard, but it's as if there's something lacking in me, something you need me to be that isn't within my ability, and..."

"And you should be with someone who doesn't reek of Dark Magic and doesn't have so many sharp edges and a nasty temper and an even nastier tongue and..."

"But that wouldn't be *you*!"

"My point precisely."

"Oh." It was hardly a word, more a whimper, and she collapsed back onto the bench, her fist to her mouth, her face stricken. "I feel so foolish. I thought...I thought...You aren't supposed to be able to get in here! Don't you understand? And the room let you in, and I thought it was because..."

Her sobs overcame her, and he hated himself for this, for doing this to her, for being the nasty bastard who had reduced her to this state, and he didn't know what to do, didn't fucking know what to do for this creature who was sometimes a woman and sometimes a girl and always exactly what he wanted and needed but could never deserve.

And so he stood there, frozen, absorbing her pain as his own because it was his own, and he deserved it, every word that pummelled him, every sob that melted him, all the guilt that he'd earned time and again just because of who and what he was....

"When I saw you," she whispered, "I understood...I knew you didn't want me there and you were trying to push me away, and I knew why, and even though I just wanted to hold you until it was gone, it was Dark Magic and I knew you and the Headmaster didn't want me around it, and I...I didn't have any other place to go! I don't have a place any more. I don't have a room to go to, or a dorm, or--"

And suddenly, she was rubbing her eyes with her sleeves and fighting the hitch in her breath, and he saw her struggling to regain her composure, and there was nothing he could do or say to help her, he who was on the thin edge of collapse himself.

And he watched her face as it smoothed, and her lips as they formed a brittle smile that never reached her eyes, and her hands as they smoothed her hair out of her face in jerky movements that left strands still clinging to her damp cheeks and eyelashes, and he memorized it all to remind himself of what a bastard he was, what a fucking bastard, and why he didn't deserve her because this was what he'd brought her to.

"I couldn't sleep, couldn't let myself sleep, because I kept hoping...I thought the room would bring you to me, when it was safe."

She swallowed a sob.

"I thought you were here to take me home."

Home.

He didn't even consider the dark quarters in the dungeon a home, yet she did?

Take me home.

And that was it. It was that simple and that horrible and that easy. He couldn't fight that, and instead he closed the distance between them without knowing it, and somehow, he was on his knees, clinging to her, and all he could smell was eucalyptus and spearmint and everything that was good and pure and her....

"Professor," she sighed into his hair, and then she took his hands and pulled him to his feet. "I can't kiss you down there."

And then they were standing and her lips brushed his, tender and gentle. She tucked a strand of hair out of his eyes. "And when was the last time you ate?" she asked, and when he didn't answer, "Aren't we a fine pair?"

She dragged him back to the table and summoned food, and he managed to eat it, every bit she put in front of him, just so she'd eat, as well. But he couldn't remember later what they'd eaten.

He only remembered how fragile she looked, his Miss Granger.

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She pretended not to notice how sunken his eyes were, how haggard his features. She held back from touching him, from stroking him, from holding him, because she simply wasn't sure whether he would allow it, or could allow it, in this uneasy state he was in.

But remembering where they were, she thought, *Pepper-Up*, and two vials appeared on the table.

She pressed her thumb against the cork of the first, popped it open, and leaned close to Professor Snape. "Drink it all," she ordered sternly, "or you'll never make it through your third-year Slytherins and Gryffindors."

He scowled but finally raised it to his lips and swallowed.

She watched his throat move with each swallow and felt something heavy and hot pulse deep inside. It wasn't until she saw his black eyes focused on her lips that she realised she had licked them.

Ducking her head and allowing her hair to fall over her cheeks, she reached for her own dose of tonic, but he closed his hand...warm and heavy and calloused...over hers.

"You need sleep, not potions," he said, his voice rasping with weariness.

"I can't sleep any more than you can. I have to meet with Harry, Ron and Ginny..."

"Absolutely not."

"Absolutely so!" She drained the vial before he could say another word. Now, the pulse she felt was at her temple, and it was not pleasant. She kept her expression and voice calm because to betray even the hint of her coming headache would ignite an argument she didn't have then energy for. "We have so little time and so much to do, and we always meet on Tuesday afternoons."

She looked at the clock over the mantle. "And your class starts in fourteen minutes."

He glared at her but stood without saying another word.

And that's when she remembered. She didn't know. She didn't know for sure...

She swallowed her pride and asked, her voice sounding far more breathy than she intended, "Afterward, should I... come back here?"

He stared at her, as if trying to figure out what exactly she was asking.

"I mean, all right, of course I will, I just wasn't sure if anyone would notice that the Room of Requirement is tied up again all night or if..."

His stare melted into a wince, and then a scowl, and then he held his hand out to her.

Reluctantly, she took it. No sooner did her fingertips brush his hand than he tugged her to him, and held her, and buried his face in her hair...she could feel his breath stirring it all the way to her scalp, and it felt like heaven...and he sighed, "Miss Granger, if you aren't in our bed tonight, I'll tear this castle apart stone by stone until I find you."

Her heart leapt and then calmed. Her eyes stung and then filled. She felt his lips pressed against her temples and fought the urge to angle her face up to his because to do so would expose her damp cheeks to his gaze and heaven forbid he see her crying again.

But he touched her chin with his thumb and most firmly turned her face up until their lips met, and she forgot her tears and her headache and her fears. Oh, god, how he could chase everything else away with the touch of his lips, and the energy that surged through her had nothing to do with potion and everything to do with his kiss. Even her fingertips prickled with it, and she dug them into his hair and pulled him to her not just to get more of him, but to soothe the tingles there.

They broke apart, fighting for breath, and she hated...hated, hated, hated!...that it was Tuesday afternoon and he had class and she had to meet with the others when all she wanted to do was hold this man in her arms and reassure herself that he was there and he was whole and he was hers.

But they would have the night....

He found her robes on the bed and slid them onto her arms, and she ran her fingers through his hair in an attempt to smooth it, and they emerged into the corridor to find...

Harry.

Sullen and fierce, staring at them from under his wild shock of hair as he leaned against the wall on the other side of the hall.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" he asked, his eyes raking down her body as if looking for evidence to the contrary.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" She belatedly attempted to smooth her own hair, but it was too much a mare's nest to respond with any success at all.

"You were here all night and all day." His green eyes narrowed as he looked over her shoulder at the professor. "What did he do to you?"

She felt the professor stiffen, and a movement that could only be him bracing to reach for his wand. She slipped her arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder, partly to reassure him and partly to make it more difficult for him to hex.

At least, more difficult for him to hex with his wand.

"Oh, Harry, it's nothing like that," she sighed. He looked almost as bad as Professor Snape, and she wondered when the last time he'd eaten or rested had been.

And why had he been looking for her to begin with?

"Get some food before our meeting," she finally said. And then, remembering, added, "And don't forget to bring the lists."

His shoulders slumped, and he seemed to relax, but he still didn't look totally convinced. He finally shrugged, however, and rolled his eyes. "Of course, your lists. We couldn't have a meeting without your lists."

She allowed her lips to curl in a slight smirk.

Then she pulled upright and straightened herself because it really wasn't seemly to walk through the halls clinging to Professor Snape like they were fourth-years.

Besides, they would have the night.

XX

His last class over, Snape entered their quarters with no intention other than to grab another headache potion and drink it before dinner.

But when he saw her, still in her clothes but stretched diagonally across the bed, her face slack and oh, so young in sleep, he knew what he needed worse than any potion.

He had her naked and under the covers in just a few flicks of the wand and soon joined her, curled around her, skin to skin. She nestled into him, and he felt her entire body melt as her tension dissipated, and finally, finally she was in his arms with nobody to see, to watch, to judge.

He stroked her hair, his fingers hitting snags and snarls that he pondered and then tentatively tested with a softly-spoken spell. They each teased free in turn, and he soothed himself that way until a great many of them were gone.

She slept so soundly that she didn't even stir.

He smelled them on her, scents of musty Quidditch locker rooms and bright fresh air and a hint of sweet fragrance that must be from the Weasley girl. He vanished the scents as thoroughly as he vanished Cissy Malfoy's scented parchments, and with the same satisfaction.

And he pondered her loyalty to them. Her blasted determination to help them, no matter how ungrateful they acted.

To forgive them, no matter how undeserving.

And he pondered how fortunate the wizarding world was that the Potter brat had found a friend so fierce and intelligent and fucking forgiving to stand by him because without her...

With a punch to his gut, he realized he'd just described her relationship with him.

And couldn't shake the uncomfortable thought that six years of putting up with the most ungrateful and undeserving Potter and Weasley were what he had to thank for the fact that she was here, in his arms, after all that he had said and done to drive her away.

"Miss Granger," he whispered softly into her hair because he simply had to speak the words, to hear them in the darkness and taste them on his lips.

And even in her sleep, she responded with a sigh, *Professor...*

And his body melted into hers, into sleep, into peace.

Compromising Positions

Chapter 43 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

I continue to worship at the Altar of Jo in gratitude that she allows us to continue our exploration of her universe.

Everlasting thanks to lifeasanamazon who once again stepped into the breach and provided fabulous beta work on this chapter!

43. COMPROMISING POSITIONS

"Professor..."

She whispered the word as softly as she possibly could, but unable help herself, she had to add, "Are you awake?"

She lay as still as possible in his arms, not wanting to awaken him if he was asleep, but, well, she certainly hoped he was awake....

"No," he growled, but she could tell he was lying. "What were you dreaming?" His voice, so rich and full and sleep-drugged in her ear, sent a tremor through her.

"Fellatio..." she said, feeling the heat build even higher between her legs. "And cunnilingus..." she sighed, "... at the same time."

When he didn't answer, she added, "I saw it in a book."

"Fucking hell," he muttered into her neck.

"I haven't quite figured it out," she said. "Does it work better with you on top or with me on top? Or side by side? There were pictures but..."

"I have no idea," he ground out.

"You don't?" She rolled to face him, astounded.

"I don't know what you've imagined, Miss Granger, but it's not as if I've been spiriting sex partners in and out of Hogwarts over the past twenty years."

"Of course not! I mean, I never thought of it that way. But you...you..."

"I what?" he snarled.

She pulled her wand from under her pillow. *'Lumos.'*

He winced as the light from her wand stabbed his eyes. "Damn it..." He angled his head away.

"But you're so good at it," she said meekly. "And you've been doing it for such a very long time..."

"Miss Granger!"

"Was that an insult? I can't imagine that it was."

He grabbed the wand out of her hand. "Put that bloody thing out before you blind me."

She snatched it back and released the spell so that they were in darkness again, but not before noticing that he seemed to be blushing. Blushing! "I'm sorry," she said belatedly. Although why a man should be embarrassed at being told he was good at sex, she couldn't imagine. She pressed her cheek against his chest and buried herself deeper under the covers. "I guess that means you don't want to do it."

But certain of his body parts...one in particular...certainly seemed as if it wanted to do *something*.

"It has always seemed to me," he said, his voice choking, "that such an endeavour would require a highly developed sense of focus."

"Oh, I have a highly developed ability to focus. I think that's one reason my charm work is so good, because I'm...I'm very good at focus." She was finding it awkward to speak; she'd actually felt him pulse against her stomach, and that triggered the pulse between her legs to flex in sympathy. "In fact..." she gasped.

But she didn't get to complete her thought. He grabbed the back of her head and closed his fingers in her hair and held her still until his mouth found hers, and all the words that had been tumbling out of her mouth just disappeared. For the longest time, it seemed that the kiss was all that existed, this devouring ache of a kiss....

And then she reached between them and began sliding her hand up and down the length of his cock, and he ground against her until he finally broke away and gasped, "Why don't we try it with you on top, first?"

And as she slid down his body and found his heat with her lips, and as she felt the cold air hit her moist flesh when he spread open her thighs on either side of his face, and then...*oh, god...* he blew on her, simply blew on her, and the sensation was part tickle and part torment and all delight....

And as she reciprocated with first the moistening of her tongue against his flesh and then a soft breath of air....

And as they continued their joint torment and tease, until the sounds of lips and tongues and suction filled the darkness, coupled with choked moans and gasps of agony and pleasure....

As all these things were happening, a thought, a revelation, hovered around the edges of her consciousness, unable to materialise, but there all the same....

And as her mouth almost went slack when his fingers and tongue...oh that talented tongue...sent her over the edge, but...*ah, god, focus, oh, god...* she pulled him in one last deep time and with everything quaking through her, sucked until he pulsed in her mouth. His body jerked under her, and then his hand, trembling, tried to prise her mouth off his flesh but she batted it away and...and...he filled her mouth. She choked, then coughed, and, overwhelmed, fell to the side, holding him snug in her hand as she listened to his gasps and groans as her own pleasure still pumped through her.

Suddenly she laughed, her eyes burning, but she laughed...he was sitting up then, saying in a strangled voice, "Miss Granger!" as he dabbed at her mouth with a corner of the sheet.

She pushed his hand away and fell back against his chest. "That was amazing... I mean, I had no idea...I wasn't ready for...well, when you...but I'm sure with practice..."

His groan shut her up. "What made you think you needed to do that?"

"In the book it said that you would like it."

"I'm...I'm not going to even speak to you about that bloody book."

"I know it wasn't perfect, but I thought we did very well for a first effort!" she huffed. "In fact, you were brilliant." She pulsed just remembering.

Again, he groaned, and this time he didn't speak at all.

Suddenly, she remembered. "How did you know I was dreaming?"

He didn't answer.

"How?" she repeated. "And then, horrified, she asked, "Did I...did I make noises?"

He nuzzled her ear. She arched into the delicious feeling.

"You were... making noises, yes. And moving."

Oh, god, how embarrassing.

"And I could smell you."

She gave a squeak of horror.

"It's not a bad thing," he said, his hand full of her hair as he stroked it away from her neck and ran his thumb down the contour of her cheek. "Arousal has a scent."

"Bloody hell," she whimpered. "Can everyone..."

"No, of course not," he said, his hand now at her waist, exploring the softness of her skin. "Perhaps if the werewolf were still teaching here, he'd..."

"Professor Lupin!" She buried her face in her hands against his chest.

"Don't call him that!" he growled. "He isn't your professor."

"No," she agreed, curling against her professor. "He's certainly not."

And then, the revelation that had danced around her when she was least able to comprehend it gently settled over her, and she caught her breath. She rose up on her elbow and, with a tender ache in her chest, touched her lips gently to his. "This is why they hate us, isn't it? The other professors? This is why...."

For a very long time, the only sound in the cold dungeon room was that of their breathing, but eventually he said, "I think you need to elaborate, Miss Granger." and placed a kiss...rough and raspy from his morning beard...against her throat. It filled her with such joy, that offhand yet tender kiss.

"How many times," she asked, trailing her fingers through his hair, "do they wake up in the night, alone and lonely, and now... they have to lie there and know that you're not. You're not alone. " Overcome with the realisation of it, she breathed, "*We're* not alone."

He froze against her. She eased her hands over his taut shoulders, pressed kisses there, calming him the only way she knew how.

Oh, how she longed to hear him tell her she'd chased away his loneliness, too, but this was her professor and she knew better than to expect such confessions, even in the comfort and safety of their bed.

But he pulled her head onto his shoulder and stroked her hair, and tugged the covers higher over her shoulder, and all in all, his response was adequate.

Adequate, indeed.

XX

"How pleasant to see you both here for breakfast, Severus. You're looking quite refreshed this morning. Yesterday you both looked ready for Pomona's compost heap."

"The rewards of clean living and a clear conscience, I'm sure," Severus replied with a sneer as he sipped his tea...poured from his very own pot, a situation that hadn't gone unnoticed by the rest of the faculty.

Beside him, Miss Granger was putting away sausage and baked beans on toast as if she hadn't eaten in weeks, and she'd already polished off a bowl of porridge with sultanas. She'd woken up with more than one kind of appetite this morning.

His eyes lingered...briefly; he wouldn't want to get caught ogling her for Merlin's bloody sake...on her face. The shadows etched beneath her eyes the night before were gone. The drawn quality, the tension, all gone. Instead, she looked not only refreshed, but also renewed, ready to take on the world.

A Miss Granger ready to take on the world was not something he contemplated with equanimity.

She was capable of enough trouble without the bit of fire he sensed in her on this particular morning, and he couldn't help but be annoyed by it, even if it was at least partially responsible for the kind of fire that had awakened her in the early hours. His fingers twitched around his mug of tea in a spasm of memory.

He was about to question her about her day's activities when Minerva strode the length of the table to stop behind them.

"Madam Snape? I'll be ready for you in, say, fifteen minutes?"

His wife nodded, swallowed a forkful of beans and then said, "I'll be there."

When Minerva was gone, he muttered, "What the fucking hell is that about? Why are you meeting with her?"

"She's my Head of House," Miss Granger replied, dabbing her lips with her serviette. "Why wouldn't I meet with her?"

"What is the subject of the meeting," he ground out, immediately more suspicious simply because of her attempt to avoid answering what was a very direct and reasonable question.

"My curriculum." She rose and dipped slightly toward him, then caught herself as he stiffened.

She'd been about to kiss him. It was in the flare of recognition that sparked between them, that she'd been about to bestow a casual wifely kiss, and for a split-second it had felt like such a normal event he'd almost leaned the side of his face toward her...the most infinitesimal movement, nothing so overt as to appear to be out and out cooperation, much less encouragement. But he'd anticipated that brush of warm lips against his skin and had leaned into it, and that certainty terrified him.

His sneer startled her back to awareness, and she quirked the slightest of sheepish smiles at him and gave a quick and embarrassed nod before whisking out of the Great Hall, her school robes billowing behind her.

He returned to his tea, drained the cup and poured another before allowing himself to observe the Slytherin table and see who might be watching, and with what level of attention.

Draco was holding court with his usual sycophants. There was a tussle amongst the first-years, which Severus squelched with a glare. A quick scan of the table showed no undue attention paid to him, and he allowed himself a small exhalation of relief.

But that had been a close call. It was unacceptable for word to get back to Slytherin parents that he and his wife were even friendly, much less affectionate.

He rose stiffly and followed Miss Granger's path out of the Great Hall, wondering what the bloody fuck Minerva wanted to say to her about her curriculum, and cursing the fact that he couldn't follow because he had a class to teach.

XX

"Have a seat, Madam..."

"Please call me Hermione."

"Of course," Professor McGonagall said, seeming relieved. "And you can call me Minerva," she said carefully, as though it took a lot of effort.

"Do I have to? I'd really rather not. I don't think my psyche could take that right now," Hermione sighed. "My life is already upside down without going to extremes."

"I can imagine it feels that way," Professor McGonagall said tactfully and cleared some parchment rolls from her desk. "Now, what did you want to discuss this morning?"

"Several things," Hermione said, taking a quick look at the list in her hand. "First of all I'm here to formally withdraw from Transfiguration."

She watched the tension ease from Professor McGonagall's thin shoulders. "Might I ask why you came to this decision?"

"It's a waste of my time and only seems to result in lost points for Gryffindor," Hermione announced pointedly. Professor McGonagall's cheeks flushed pink, but Hermione continued. "I've concluded that my time would be better spent revising on my own."

Professor McGonagall nodded. "I think you're making a wise decision."

So. That was it? Not even pretence of regret? Hermione felt the twist of the knife but was determined not to let it show as she checked her list and moved to the next item. "Second, I hope that you'll explain to me why your attitude towards my marriage to Professor Snape changed."

"It has hardly changed, my dear. I've been against it from the beginning."

"Yes, but in the beginning, you were against it because you said Professor Snape was already too weighted down with responsibility. You were angry at me for what I was doing to him and...well, I understand that now. You could hardly hold me more at fault than I do myself. But now you seem angry at both of us, and I...I suppose I just want to know why."

Professor McGonagall met her gaze without flinching. "Severus had his own reasons for going along with the travesty that is a marriage between a teacher and a student, or I assume he must have, but the fact is that he of all people should have known the impact it would have on this institution. The backlash has the potential to be catastrophic and in some cases actually is."

"Catastrophic? Professor McGonagall," Hermione replied, her stomach clenching and her tone icy, "I'd prefer you not refer to my marriage as a travesty to my face, no matter what you may think of it. And as for this *institution*, it appears to me that it is still standing and classes are still being taught, and I find your attitude prudish and lacking relevancy in the current times." Professor McGonagall's eyes iced over but Hermione refused to back down. "There are other married students besides me, and if anybody is to blame for all this, it's the Ministry of Magic!"

Without glancing away or breaking eye contact, the Deputy Headmistress waved her wand and a multicoloured stack of leather folders floated from a nearby shelf and landed in the middle of her desk. She opened the top one...a dark yellow with the Hufflepuff crest on it. She lifted the top sheet. "As of yesterday, in our third week of this term, these are the letters we've received from Hufflepuff parents whose attitudes range from merely concerned to absolutely outraged that a Hogwarts teacher has married a student. Many are sympathetic to the outrageous situation the Marriage Law has created but do not accept in any terms a solution that involves a teacher and a student. And I must tell you, there are many who have implied if not stated that we have masked a lascivious situation between a teacher and student by covering it up with a forced marriage."

"But...but that's ridiculous! Nothing could be farther from the truth!"

"I believe you, Miss Granger, because I was present at the event and saw how distressed Professor Snape was. I witnessed with my own eyes the series of events. However, the majority of parents have no idea what kind of relationship you might have had with Severus, and in many cases are all too willing to believe the worst of him..."

Hermione stiffened. "I'm sure they are," she snapped.

"...or of a Muggle-born student."

Hermione gasped. "You dare..."

"Of course I don't!" She lifted the folder and the thick stack of parchments in it. "But these do." She dropped them back to the desk. "But true to the loyal House of Hufflepuff, all but two were eager to be reassured that their trust in us was still well-founded and they have at least agreed to leave their children here, for now."

Hermione felt a ball of lead growing in her stomach as Professor McGonagall set that folder aside and lifted the red one. Oh, god. Her friends. Or those that she thought had been friends....

"A similar number of letters from Gryffindor families. You will be happy to know that many supported you, mostly those from students in your year. It seems their parents have heard enough tales of you and your friendship with Harry Potter to gain you the benefit of the doubt, not to mention enough tales about Professor Snape to accept that this inconvenient marriage is not necessarily one that was entered into with expectations of a state of matrimonial bliss. They *for the most part* seem to accept that whatever brought about your marriage, the Ministry are more to blame than the school. Most, if not directly supporting you, at least support Hogwarts. It appears that the Gryffindor reluctance to submit to bullying and the more sinister influences in the Ministry has stood you in good stead." Again, she added, "For the most part."

"For the most part? Who doesn't believe..."

"It is not your place to know which families may have problems with your marriage, Hermione. That is confidential. Just take what comfort you can in the fact that the House of Gryffindor have fewer than any other House."

She moved the red folder aside and lifted the green one. Hermione braced herself.

"The House of Slytherin is intriguing in that we can certainly imagine that impropriety with a student is possibly second to the fact that you are Muggle-born, though they are too cunning to state so. However, there has not been a single threat to actually pull their children out of Hogwarts. It seems that your marriage stirred the viper's nest, but the Dark Lord still prefers the children of Slytherin families to remain here."

"Why?" she asked, astonished.

"Perhaps you should ask your husband that question, Hermione," Professor McGonagall replied sharply, peering over her narrow, rectangular glasses. "I can hardly pretend to have an answer."

She placed her hands alongside the thickest folder, the navy blue Ravenclaw folder stuffed with the thickest stack of parchments. "Which brings us to the House of Ravenclaw. At last count, three students are transferring to Beauxbatons, and one to The Salem Witches' Institute, and I don't have the current count on the number of students who will be pursuing their studies under private tutors in their own homes."

Hermione stared at the folder, dumbfounded and distressed. "But...but why?"

"The families of Ravenclaw put learning above all else when it comes to their children, and many of them quickly came to the conclusion that certificates from Hogwarts will be tarnished for some years to come. Thus, this quick action to distance themselves from this school."

"But...but...how could they be tarnished? How could what happens between me and Professor Snape..."

"Hermione! Think about it! You've had the top grades in the school since you've been here. Not a few Ravenclaws have had their noses out of joint over that. You will leave this school with some of the highest O.W.L. scores, and, we must assume, N.E.W.T. scores, in fifty years if not longer. And your marriage to Severus has put a very serious question mark beside your name. Perhaps in a few decades, when and if you've achieved the notable status in the wizarding world that we all expect of you, it will become clear that your success at this school was earned. But the fact is, you are known to the wizarding world at large as Harry Potter's friend, and, I regret to say, a young woman whose previous dalliance was the subject of gossip in the *Daily Prophet* for six months." She held up a hand to stop Hermione's outcry. "I'm not saying any of this is fair, Hermione. But these are the facts."

"I didn't know. I had no idea," Hermione stammered. "Why didn't somebody tell me?"

And at that, Professor McGonagall's face softened. "And what would it have accomplished after the fact, except to hurt and humiliate you?"

"But if I'd withdrawn from the school..."

"It would have helped, but it wouldn't have eliminated the problem." Professor McGonagall looked away then and sighed. "Severus fought fiercely for your ability to stay in classes and continue your studies all the way through your N.E.W.T.s. He feels very strongly about your need to complete your educational career at the level that we assumed you would."

Because that's what I wanted She felt ill, physically ill. She clutched her little list, her silly little list, until it was a crumpled ball. She took in a deep, shuddering breath and exhaled quickly. Then took another, this time, keeping it steady, steady as her eyes as they met her Head of House across the wide desk. "So they tolerate the Marriage Law that made me prey for Death Eaters but condemn us for finding a way around it? Hypocrites!"

"While I understand your point, Hermione, I also think your grasp of the situation was impaired because you weren't raised in our world and don't understand how seriously we take certain things. Young Muggles are much freer to experiment sexually and, from what I'm told, much more likely to have children out of wedlock without any societal shame. I'm not condemning them, simply stating facts. It's not surprising that coming from that culture, you find it difficult the impact your marriage had on families that look to this school to set a high moral standard, and that includes not implying in any way an acceptance of sexual fraternisation between faculty and students."

Hermione's hands were clenched so tightly in her lap, she felt her fingernails cutting into her palms and half-expected to bring blood. "If I withdraw from all my classes, will it help?"

"It might stem the flow, and will at least make people feel like their concerns were heard."

"It will make them feel like they succeeded in running me off," she said bitterly.

"I don't think this story ends here. If you leave school and do as well in your N.E.W.T.s as we know you will, you will have gone far in proving them wrong. However, I must repeat, Severus will not be happy about this."

"Then I'm afraid I will have to disappoint him, because under these circumstances I must do what's best for Hogwarts and withdraw from all my classes."

And because she was staring forthrightly at the woman who had once been her favourite professor, she saw the glimmer of tears in the older witch's eyes, the slight twitch of nose and sharp sniffle. "Hermione, this is not what any of us wanted."

Hermione nodded.

Professor McGonagall rose sharply to her feet and circled the desk until she could stand before Hermione and take her hand, and looked earnestly into her eyes. "There isn't a professor here who wouldn't consider it an honour to tutor you for your N.E.W.T.s. I want to be the first to offer."

Hermione's fist flew to her lips as she fought tears. "He's going to be so unhappy, isn't he?"

Professor McGonagall tilted her head. "Severus? I suppose he will, but... this isn't about him. It's about you and your future."

"Yes, but..." Hermione broke off, choosing not to continue aloud what was filling her with dismay. By withdrawing from classes she was negating his sacrifice for her. She tried to remind herself that he had other, more important reasons for their marriage, but she also remembered how he'd defended her to her mother, and how he'd assured everyone that she would excel in her education, and now....

She stood up. "I think I need to..." To what? She didn't have another class to attend. She felt lost. But...but this left her more time to research. To research for Harry. For the professor. For the Order.

She tried to form a smile. "Thank you for your kind offer. I'd be honoured to accept your tutelage, Professor McGonagall."

Professor McGonagall dabbed her eyes with a soft tartan hankie and checked the watch pinned on her sleeve. "We have just enough time then for a bit of a surprise."

Hermione tried not to let her desperation show. She needed to get away, to think, to adjust...and of course, to plan just exactly how she was going to break this all to Professor Snape.

What kind of surprise could Professor McGonagall have in store for her?

She followed the older witch down two corridors and up one floor to the wing of Gryffindor guest suites. Her nighttime patrols as Prefect had always included this area, as it had several large statues that did an all-too efficient job of hiding snoggers after hours.

Professor McGonagall swept into the last one and gestured Hermione in behind her.

The room glowed with the morning sun lighting the rich crimson carpet and the four-poster bed with golden brocade covers and drapes, complete with red trim. A red-and-gold brocade pattern covered the small, overstuffed chairs near the fireplace and bookcases spanned three walls...many filled, yet just as many empty and waiting for more books.

Hermione stood and stared, her insides going cold. She looked at Professor McGonagall, unable to form the questions that begged to be asked.

"Severus wanted me to find you safe chambers away from the dungeon..."

No. Hermione shook her head. What were they thinking? What was he thinking? No.

She grabbed the doorframe to hold herself up.

"My dear," Professor McGonagall cried, reaching to support her.

Hermione jerked herself upright and waved Professor McGonagall off. But her heart thudded in a painful rhythm. "How pretty," she said numbly, pretending to look, moving her head to look, but seeing nothing.

"I chose it particularly for you because of the view..."

XX

Severus found the door to Minerva's office locked and warded. He hesitated.

Ginevra Weasley passed hurriedly, evidently attempting to get to her next class without being late. "Are you looking for Hermione? She and Professor McGonagall left a few minutes ago and went toward the west staircase."

He nodded a curt thanks and headed in that direction. If he went down, he'd be on the fourth floor near Rolanda's chambers. If he went up...

The Gryffindor guest wing.

He climbed the stairs, relieved and satisfied.

On the sixth floor he saw light spilling from an open door at the end of the hall. Something inside he couldn't quite define urged him to increase his pace, and upon arriving at the door it only took one glance to see something was wrong.

Minerva stood at the window, pointing out the view.

Miss Granger stood across the room, her face pale, her hands stiff at her sides.

"Aren't you going to be late to your next class, Minerva?" he asked, cocking his head and leaning against the doorframe.

She looked at her watch and jerked to attention. "Oh dear, I let time get away from me." She walked to Miss Granger and...what in Merlin's name?...pressed a dry kiss to her forehead.

Miss Granger smiled stiffly and nodded, but now her eyes were on his, wide and pleading.

He stepped aside, and as Minerva passed he said, "Notify me when you and Albus will be available so that we can set the wards."

"Of course, Severus," she replied as she moved sedately but quickly down the hall. "But do ward the door when you leave."

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Miss Granger?" he said tentatively.

"Isn't it pretty?" she asked, and her tone would have been termed almost bright, if he hadn't known her so well.

"There's nothing wrong with it that a simple transformation spell couldn't turn green," he suggested carefully.

"But, why?" Her voice was soft, hollow.

"Minerva didn't explain?"

"She said that you asked her to find these rooms for me."

He gently took her hand and led her to the window. She looked out, but he could see by the sheen in her eyes that she most likely couldn't see. He sighed and tugged a white linen handkerchief from a pocket and handed it to her.

"I don't need that," she protested and rubbed her eyes. "They itch, that's all."

"Miss Granger." He tucked the handkerchief into her hand. "It helps with itchy eyes, too."

She blotted her eyes and, finally, looked down.

He waited.

She blinked. Then frowned in confusion.

He waited.

"This is the same view that Madam Hooch has," she said.

"Exactly."

She caught her breath.

"Albus and Madam Hooch have both found you alone in a secluded hallway watching for my return on more than one occasion. On three different nights, you've wandered the castle alone because...because I was indisposed, or just being a wretched bastard."

She didn't meet his eyes.

"I would prefer that you never have reason to be out of our chambers at night without me, but it's clear that..."

She inhaled in a gasp, and then seemed to struggle and finally said only, "Oh..." followed by a second and softer, "oh."

"Miss Granger, please tell me you didn't think I was evicting you."

"My...my mind told me you weren't. And my...my heart told me you weren't. But some other part of me was very afraid that you might be."

She continued watching the ground far below them, the gate, the Apparation point, and the Forbidden Forest beyond. By avoiding his eyes she instead left him free to study her profile. Odd how he'd never really noticed her profile before: how her lips were a little too wide, the line of her nose...well, who was he to criticise her nose?...the high curve of her cheek, the smooth forehead and...and the riot of horrid, horrid hair framing it all.

All in all it was a totally unremarkable profile but for the simple fact that it was hers. It was his Miss Granger's, and that in itself made it remarkable in ways he refused to contemplate.

"You can promise me never to leave our quarters alone at night, and then you never need come here at all, you know."

She jerked her face up at that and glared at him. "I think not."

"Then I suppose you owe me a debt of gratitude for securing you this suite," he said placidly, "for those occasions in which you are either so desperate to see me that you must camp out in on a windowsill to watch, or are so desperate to escape me that you will seek refuge in any desolate place."

Her eyes still narrowed, she huffed a breath of disgust.

He arched a brow at her.

"Well, if you put it that way," she said resentfully, and reached up to place a kiss on his lips.

Which he promptly deepened with a possessive surge of emotion and a need to hold her, only...

She pulled away from him, her eyes cloudy and her expression stubborn. "Professor," she said, "I've got something to tell you and I don't know how, because it's going to upset you, but I had to do it, I had no choice, really..."

He drew in a sharp breath. "I believe we should take this to the privacy of our quarters."

"Somehow I think I'd be better off if we had witnesses," she muttered, and he felt the tightness in his chest loosen in relief, because this truly was his Miss Granger, indeed.

Just before he closed the door behind them, she stopped him with a hand on his arm and stepped back inside. After a sensuous bit of wandwork...he had to agree with the Weasley twins; she did have a wicked way with a wand...the carpets and brocade were a satisfying green and she was ready to leave.

He couldn't wait to see Minerva's face.

Hogwarts: A History

Chapter 44 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

If you recognize it, it's not mine but is JK Rowling's.

Thank you to the fabulous and patient betas, GinnyW and Lifeasanamazon!

And a special thanks to Juno Magic for the name of the Latin magical rite!

44. HOGWARTS: A HISTORY

She walked beside him, her strides a little too long to keep up with his pace, her heart fluttering wildly. She'd been so strained, worrying about his reaction to her decision to withdraw as a student, but now, oh god, now, well, she must be losing her mind, that was all.

The moment of terror...and wasn't that ridiculous, after all, as if he'd send her off when he'd told her he'd tear the castle apart stone by stone to find her if she didn't return to their bed...yet still, for a moment it had seemed so real, so heartbreaking...

Stop it.

The moment of *ridiculous* terror had passed only to be replaced by a need to reassure herself that he was really there, and really hers. And now they were going to the dungeon together, not to caress and nibble and reassure, but for her to drive a wedge, and she didn't think she could stand it, and yet...

The mere act of walking tantalized her, as each movement of her thighs seemed to brush a subtle ache to life. And it was worse because he was beside her, and she couldn't allow herself to look at his face, but if she let him draw a little ahead, his shoulders filled her vision and she remembered those shoulders, remembered their lean grace as muscle and sinew moved beneath angel white skin and

She caught her lower lip with her teeth and stifled a moan.

They were crossing the Entrance Hall now, and he seemed to have lost track of her all together as he slipped into his usual mode and glided across the marble floor with his robes billowing...god how she loved that billow...and now they were in the dungeons, and he suddenly realized she'd fallen behind because he paused briefly for her to catch up, and he was scowling.

Scowling!

He'd worked himself into a snit just knowing she had something to tell him that he wasn't going to like. Just wait until he actually heard!

His long, strong fingers closed over her upper arm. They passed three doorways and then, finally, the shallow alcove where a shimmering, silvery-white marble snake twined itself around a woman's body as she appeared to writhe in pain, and the wall opened and they were inside their quarters alone.

Oh, god.

Now she had to tell him.

She opened her mouth not even knowing what words would come out and...

Suddenly.

She knew. Something inside her kicked into gear, and it was just as if she were speaking to Harry and Ron. She stood straighter and said, "It's ~~the~~ *Hogwarts: A History*, you see. The thing I need to talk to you about."

She watched hopefully for his eyes to glaze over as theirs always did, but instead, his narrowed. "Indeed?"

"Yes, well... yes. Indeed." She gathered her wits and plunged forward. "You recall that when we first discussed our, erm, marriage, I referred to the precedent set on page 734, the second footnote, to explain why we could..."

His eyes were even narrower, if that was possible.

"Get married," she finished lamely. This wasn't going well. Perhaps it had been a mistake to approach him the way she would Harry and Ron. She fought not to wither under his gaze and finally said, "The thing about using *Hogwarts: A History* in an argument is you can use it to prove anything. Anything at all."

"Rather like the Bible?" he asked with the slightest of sneers.

"Exactly! Because first, it's so long just about anything you can imagine ever happening was recorded in it, and second, because..." She felt the corner of her mouth curling into a smirk and decided to allow that bit of cheek to show. "Because nobody ever bothers to check and see if you're telling the truth or making it all up."

"My dear Miss Granger," he murmured thoughtfully, "how positively Slytherin of you."

"Well, if you insist." She smoothed her robes, avoiding his eyes, then glanced up at him from beneath her lashes. "The thing is, the precedent didn't ~~precisely~~ allow

marriage between a teacher and student."

"What precisely did it do?"

"Well, it's rather complicated. In 1543 a certain Professor Gwynvard...who taught Potions, as a matter of fact, isn't that interesting?...was smitten with one of his students. This was in the first decade after coeducational classes were allowed, by the way. Initially Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were female and Gryffindor and Slytherin were..."

"I know that, Miss Granger. Please continue with your tale, and see if you can speed it up to the point where it actually becomes relevant?"

"Well, Professor Gwynvard was smitten with one of his female students, not realizing, of course, that she had brewed and slipped him a love potion." She paused and shot him a look intended to flatter. "Clearly the standard for Potions professors hasn't always been as high as it is now, or he never would have been tricked into..."

"Miss Granger. Continue."

"Yes, of course, where was I? Well, the potion worked well, a bit too well, as he ended up holding her captive in his quarters for thirty-seven days. For some reason...and some blame some sort of Confundus Charm...nobody noticed she was missing, and if the Headmaster at the time hadn't grown suspicious when Professor Gwynvard stopped showing up to meals, who knows how it might have ended?"

"Who knows how it *did* end, is more the question," he snapped.

"Oh, I do, of course. It seems he was unable to tear himself away from her for longer than a few hours at a time. Time to teach classes, perhaps, but even then he frequently disappeared into his quarters between classes and didn't emerge again until his students were gathered for the following class. He'd always emerge from his office as if nothing were wrong, but it became more and more obvious that the man was hiding something in his rooms and..."

"This was all in a single footnote?"

"Cross-referenced, of course. So, as I was saying, he simply kept her captive so that she was at his mercy, night and day..."

"Miss Granger, are you blushing?"

"Am I?"

"Indeed."

"Well, yes, then. It was discovered that he was holding a student captive in his quarters and they were forced to marry to save her reputation and his life. Um, she had seven brothers." She held very still, stood very straight, raised her chin very high, and waited.

"Go on," he said, exasperated.

"That's it."

"That's it? That's what you had to tell me that was going to upset me?" And before she could answer, he glared at her, "And what exactly did that have to do with us getting married?"

"I told you. It was a precedent."

"I think you made the whole thing up."

"Oh, no. This was all in *Hogwarts: A History*. In this case I made nothing up."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "And why, other than the prolonged tedium of actually listening to this story, was it supposed to upset me?"

"Today when I met with Professor McGonagall, I withdrew from my remaining classes."

He raised his face from his hand and stared at her.

"I'm going to have to set up in your private lab for my research and private studies, but as long as you give me notice I can have it cleared out for your brewing and you'll never know I've been there, and I'll be revising for my N.E.W.T.s with faculty members giving me private tutelage, and... I suppose that's it." She realized her breathing was shallow and her pulse ragged as she waited for his reaction.

"And how much fucking notice am I supposed to give you before I can use my own personal fucking potions lab?" he snarled. "Anything else you want to spring on me, other than the fact that you just negated any reason you had for entering this ridiculous marriage? And what about me? You owed me, Miss Granger. You at least owed me to finish the year as planned so that the sacrifice I made wasn't for nothing!"

"Get out."

"What did you say?"

"Get out!" She pointed to the wall where the door would open, her hand trembling with rage, until she clenched her fist to stop the tingles, to stop the magic that threatened to erupt.

"Don't you dare tell me to get out of my own..."

"Then I will," she spat, sweeping around him and almost made it...almost made it to the door, but he grabbed her arm and yanked her back. She whirled at him and hissed, "Let go of me, Severus Snape, before I hex your bollocks off!"

He released her arm as if it had stung him, and his eyes jerked between her face and her arm, between rage and embarrassment. "I shouldn't have..."

"What? You shouldn't have grabbed me? You shouldn't have called our marriage ridiculous? You shouldn't have turned my loss into yours? Tell me, Professor Snape, which of those things you shouldn't have done, and after you say, 'all of them,' let me give you another list!" She blinked back tears and drew on her rage to burn them away. "You think I don't know what I did? You think I don't know that I let them win? That they stopped teaching me so that I'd finally tire of it and stop coming to class? That I let all those people sending owls win? And for what? For a 'travesty' of a marriage..."

"I didn't say..."

"...that even you say is ridiculous? How stupid do you think I feel, being the only one for whom...for whom..." She couldn't say the words, couldn't finish.

"For whom *what*?" he demanded.

For whom it's real, she couldn't say, couldn't let herself say, but the words threatened to tumble from her lips, anyway.

"If you know all this, then why in fucking hell did you do it?" he growled.

She finally turned her face up to his and said, "I can't fight everyone. I can't fight that many fights."

"I would have helped you," he ground out.

"But this fight isn't worth it, it isn't worth the pain and it isn't worth the hours sitting in classrooms where I'm learning nothing when I could be studying something real and important on my own, and researching for the Order, and for Harry, and be here for you...and..."

She thought her legs were going to give out on her. She dropped into the small chintz reading chair, the only piece of furniture that was hers, but it felt alien to her, the vestige of another Hermione, another lifetime. She gripped the arms until her knuckles shone white through her skin. She stared at them, at the faded cabbage roses and soft green leaves and tried to bring back the comforting image of her old room, her window seat, her own bed.... And felt cold, and empty, because the memory brought her no comfort.

She realized she was biting her knuckle only a half-moment before he pulled it away from her mouth. She was surprised to see blood, to see that the knuckle that had been white was now smeared with blood, because she didn't feel it, didn't even feel a twinge of pain.

He pulled her to her feet and led her into the bathroom where he held her hand under the icy running water and then, with a soft incantation, healed it. He touched his fingertip to hers as if testing, then closed his hand around her fist.

"It's my loss because I wasn't able to stop it from happening," he finally said. "It was your primary reason for this marriage..."

"I suppose protecting me doesn't count?" she snapped. "I prefer to think my desire to survive to the ripe age of nineteen might not take second place to attending classes."

"But there were others who could keep you safe if you hadn't wanted to stay in school."

It was as if a fist squeezed closed around her heart, this truth of his. If she hadn't been so determined she could have...could have gone to Romania, maybe? The fist clenched and twisted and the ache in her heart brought a gasp to her lips. "And you...you wouldn't have even more to hide from the Dark Lord."

"Fucking hell, that's not what this is about."

"Then it should be!" She jerked away from him and tossed her head, trying to toss her hair out of her face. "Whether or not I'm in classes means ~~nothing~~*nothing!* We have six weeks, less than that, and you're angry because I won't be spending hour upon hour sitting in a classroom where I no longer belong, just to prove I can?"

"Stand still," he snapped, and she did despite her desire to move away...just to prove she could. But at the first touch of his hands on her hair, at the tug on her scalp when he twisted it, at the demand for her wand...which she handed him as obediently as a stupid girl...she felt relief course through her. All she truly wanted to do was sink back against him until the tension eased from her body.

But she didn't. She stood stiff and straight and...

"And you told me that preposterous story from *Hogwarts: A History*, because?"

She ducked her face, her cheeks burning. "I don't remember."

"You're an abysmal liar."

"I don't remember why I thought it would make things better!" Now all she wanted to do was yank her wand free and hide behind her hair again.

He stood near the door, his eyes sullen as he studied her, and now all she wanted to do was smooth his hair out of his eyes and...

What was wrong with her?

"Because he... kept her in his rooms, close by, and...."

"Don't tell me that you thought I'd be so overcome by your constant presence, I'd be glad you left your classes?"

And that was when she felt the small lurch in her chest, a small ache that swelled and threatened to consume her from the inside. "I was looking for a silver lining for me, not you! And yes, being here in our quarters with you only a few steps away...it suddenly made me feel light inside, and relieved and..." She stormed past him and through the door, her hands clenched to still their trembling, their tingling, and could only manage to hurl a vicious, "Oh, sod off!" at him as she passed.

This time, he didn't grab her arm...he lunged in front of her and blocked her way, and she froze.

"Move," she said.

"Please," he said, and for some reason he seemed almost uneasy. "Just... please?"

He reached for her hand and she wanted to pull it away, but something about the way he was moving so carefully, his eyes linked with hers in such a strange way, and so she allowed him to take her hand, and to stroke her fingertips with his. The surge almost knocked her off her feet.

She gasped.

His indrawn breath was a loud hiss.

"What is happening?" she breathed.

"You're controlling it," he answered and raised her fingertips to his lips, and the jolt went to her core.

"This...this is control?" she whimpered. "I don't feel it."

"Your emotions are all over the place, but your magic is..." again, he brushed his lips, across her fingertips, and this time she saw the flicker of response in his eyes as he held her tight against his body, "...controlled, for now. But you need to release it, and there's nothing around here I desire to see broken...."

"What do I do?" She hated her voice, the way it quavered, but it was as if his voicing what was happening to her made it all the more real and more difficult to handle.

"You can absorb it..."

"How?"

"...by remaining still, by deep breathing, by clearing your mind...."

She pushed her hand to his mouth. "Do it again."

"No," he said. "I can't. I'm going to release you, and you're going to..."

"I don't want you to release me."

"Miss Granger! This is important!" He dropped her hand and stepped away from her.

She felt the surge of frustration and rage and wanted him back, damn him, not five feet away watching her as if she were a teakettle coming to boil.

His voice calm and deep and velvet, he said, "Deep breaths now..."

She turned her back on him. Took a deep breath, and then another. Thought about Professor Binns and a quill scratching and... felt the wicked smile curving her lips into a smirk.

She gave him a glance over her shoulder, still smirking. "All right. You can touch me now."

He let out a deep sigh. "No, Miss Granger, I cannot."

"Oh, really?" She turned slowly and offered her hands. "Do it."

Eyes narrowed, he drew closer and then took one in his hands and touched her fingertips.

Nothing.

He arched an eyebrow, clearly surprised. "Well done."

She tossed her head.

He reached with his other hand, cupped the back of her neck and drew her close to press his lips against her temple. "And when did you get so good at control?"

"When I realized that not controlling meant you wouldn't touch me," she said. "Now, sit down and reward me."

She pushed him down into his chair, and with only the slightest of scowls, he pulled her into his lap. He stroked the nape of her neck, his fingers toying with wisps of hair that refused to be contained, and she arched her neck and drew in a sharp breath in response. "So you're taking over my private laboratory," he accused.

"Only when you're not using it."

"If you're in it, I won't be using it, so that's handled very neatly, isn't it?"

She glared at him, but it didn't stop her from nestling more comfortably into his arms. "I need you to help me with the Pensieve." And when his body tensed as if he were about to do it right that moment, she added quickly, "After lunch," and settled herself more firmly in his lap as if her weight alone would pin him there.

He sighed as if mildly put out, but as his cheek caressed her temple with a soft rasp, she felt it safe to assume he didn't really mind staying put a while longer. "And what happened to Potions Professor Gwynvard and his scheming bride?"

"It's not recorded. They were forced to marry, but beyond that, nothing. It's rather sad, really. I don't know if they were a great love match and filled the dungeons with the sounds of their shagging all hours of the day and night..."

He snorted, and the hot breath danced down her ear and neck and made her shiver.

"Or if he'd spent thirty-seven days torturing her, and their marriage gave him leave to punish her for the rest of their lives."

His hand stopped on her neck.

"It seems wrong, somehow, that the only time a teacher and student are recorded as marrying, it was left open ended, as if it isn't important enough to merit telling the rest of their story."

"Perhaps it's better that way, if the truth is anywhere near your more dire suggestion."

She looked at him and her lips parted, and her breath quickened the way it did when something she didn't understand suddenly clicked into place. She remembered the painful meeting with Professor McGonagall and the older witch's brusque reassurance, and felt its correlation flare to life deep within her. "It is, isn't it? It's truly better this way, because this means..." She angled her face so that their lips almost...but not quite...met.

Finally he asked, "Better because...?"

"Because our story will be the one people remember." She felt him tense in her arms. "Because our story will have a happy ending," she continued firmly. "Because years from now, perhaps decades from now, when people look back at us they'll realize that all the things they thought and said were wrong. Because we are writing our own story, Professor. And I won't allow it to end any other way."

"You believe this." It was a statement, a strained statement, but a statement.

"Yes."

"It's romantic nonsense."

"Yes."

"I never thought you to be the kind of witch who believed in nonsense. Next you'll be asking Sybill to read your tea leaves."

She drew back and glared at him. "Take that back."

He angled his face away from her, but she took his chin and pulled it back.

She wasn't smiling any more, and she couldn't let this pass. "Do you think I like having people feel free to tell me to my face that my marriage is a travesty and inconvenient and ridiculous? Perhaps it's all of those things, but it's the only one I have, and..."

This time she was the one to turn her face away.

"I happen to like it." She forced the sadness down and drew deep to find the determination to bring strength to her voice so she could continue. "And if I happen to have been stuck with the biggest horse's arse in the wizarding world, I'll just have to make do, won't I? It's not like I haven't had to deal with horse's arses before. I mean," and now she smirked directly into his astounded face, "look at Ron and Harry."

His eyes narrowed and her heart pounded. He gave a tendril of hair on her nape a sharp tug and said, "You'll pay for that, Miss Granger."

But this time, when she kissed him, it lasted a very long time, and he didn't seem to mind, not at all.

XX

"Merlin's fucking ghost, block me out, Miss Granger!" he snapped, as her eyes widened and threatened to swallow him whole. "Do you realize what a delicate manoeuvre this is?"

She blinked rapidly and finally her eyes occluded him. "Sorry," she muttered, embarrassed.

"All right, let's try this again. Which memory do you want to retrieve?"

"I think I should start with when we were here, right before we entered the Floo and..."

"Don't tell me. Just pull it forward."

She nodded. "All right. I've got it, I think..."

He murmured the brief incantation and with a touch of his wand to her temple, drew out the long, quivering silver thread. A quick flick of the wrist and it flowed into the Pensieve.

"Have you ever used one before?" he asked. At the shake of her head, he said, "Then bend forward, put your head in the dish. Before we go further I want to make sure we pulled the memory you intended."

She looked at him, her eyebrows knitted in a frown, but finally did as ordered. It only took her two minutes, maybe three, but it gave him ample time to stare at her cheek, her ear, and her neck....

She raised her head and glared at him. "I forgot you were pissed."

"I was overjoyed and in a celebratory spirit, as I recall."

"Indeed."

"I take it that was the correct memory?" At her curt nod, he continued, "Then pull up the next one."

She closed her eyes and finally nodded again. Again, the incantation. Again, the silvery thread, much longer this time. Again, the flick into the Pensieve, which now had a shimmering surface that flowed from edge to edge.

Alarmed, she clutched his hand. "I don't like this."

"What?"

"They're gone...where my memories were, I now just have... fuzziness. As if once upon a time a long time ago I was married, but the details are gone." Her hand tightened on his. "I don't like it."

"After you use the Pensieve we'll return them. They won't be harmed. In fact, they'll be sharper once you've viewed them again."

Her smile was tremulous. "I'm sure I'll be fine." She adjusted her quill, ink and parchment on the lab table in front of her. The whiteboard floated beside her, ready for new notes. Ever the efficient researcher, she suddenly appeared all business.

Except for her wretched, horrid hair tumbling this way and that. He wondered at the effect of hair and Pensieves and allowed himself the perverse pleasure of twisting it back into a severe knot on the back of her neck. "Accio hair comb," he said, and waited until the comb flew through the door and slapped into the palm of his free hand.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were attempting to control me through controlling my hair," she said primly. "It won't work, even if you do eventually tame my hair to your submission."

"Ah, but it never hurts to keep trying," he replied silkily into her ear and enjoyed her small frisson of pleasure. "And now," he said, straightening to his full height, "fifth-year Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff await my shining presence."

But as he began to turn away, he caught the slightest tremble of her hand, which she quickly stilled by clutching the edge of the table. Fuck, what was she thinking? What was he missing? "Miss Granger, are you quite all right?"

"Yes," she said resolutely. "Just gathering my thoughts."

"I'm beginning to think you've given defending our...situation...a higher priority than preparing for Hallowe'en." There, he'd said it. He examined her face for guilt, for anger, or for, possibly, hurt.

The eyes she turned on him were hard. "I am not a romantic ninny, Professor, and I can assure you that my interest in our vows has everything to do with Hallowe'en."

He drew back. He should be reassured. And he was. To an extent. "What are you withholding from me?"

She gave him a dismissive wave. "Nothing. I have various hypotheses. If something comes of any of them, you'll be the first to know."

Then before he could recognize her intent, she leaned up and kissed him full on the lips. Fully, sumptuously and...

She pulled away and her smile was...it was almost coquettish. His Miss Granger, a coquette?

"If you wanted me to kiss you before you left the room, you needn't have hovered. You should have just said." And with another of those saucy kinds of smiles, she once again waved him on. "You have Ravenclaws to humiliate and Hufflepuffs to bring to tears. Stop acting like a lovesick schoolboy and go do your job."

He felt his cheeks burn but refused to rise to her bait.

"Indeed," he snapped, and whirled away from her with a billow of robes that he certainly hoped she appreciated.

XX

A few steps away, she'd said, as if he could simply stroll from his classroom, through his office and through their quarters all the way to the laboratory. But to do so he'd be forced to leave a room full of idiots behind to melt cauldrons, if he was lucky, and blow up the dungeons if he was not.

When she'd been in the storeroom, it had been a simple enough matter to check in, but not in his...his...private lab.

It was an interminable two hours later before he could return.

The whiteboard was now covered with writing, and the parchment displayed almost two feet of precisely formed notes.

Miss Granger, however, was slumped across the table, asleep and threatening to slide from the lab stool. Upon his entering the lab, however, she sat up quickly, almost

falling backward. He lunged forward, but she grabbed the edge of the table and averted disaster.

She rubbed her forehead. "That thing needs a pause button."

"I have no idea what you mean."

"A way to pause it in mid-memory so that after I pull out to make a note, I can return at the same place I left," she grumbled. "I must admit that as much as I enjoyed seeing you yank Professor Dumbledore out of the Floo by the robes...it grew tiresome seeing you shove me through. You seemed to take great satisfaction from *both* acts, by the way."

He leaned over her shoulder to see what she'd written on the parchment, but she turned it over.

She was certainly writing a lot of things down that she didn't want him to see.

He realized she was staring up at him, and her expression was difficult to read.

"I take it you've learned something?"

"I think so." She was staring at him. Definitely staring. "Several things, actually."

"For example?"

She tapped a book he recognized from his own library. "I used a translation charm to see what our wizarding vows involved."

"The wizarding vows were never in question."

"Yes, well, clearly you and Professor Dumbledore didn't think they were."

"And you found...?"

"They were strangely devoid of anything at all... well, about marriage. Nothing about hearts, souls or fidelity. They sounded almost like a business arrangement, for all that they were pretty enough at the time when I didn't understand the words."

"Chant is like that. He must have used the *Matrimonium Salutis Rei Publicae Causa*. It would be a marriage union entered into for political purposes or sometimes for purposes of combining magics for the betterment of the community."

"I see."

"Albus was performing damage control to the best of his ability. You can hardly expect him to have chosen a more traditional vow for us."

She shook her head. "Please, I understand your point." She raised her hand. "So the only sinister aspect of our marriage from the wizarding side is the magic in our rings."

"It would seem so. You're saying you found a sinister aspect of the Muggle vows?"

"No. Not that." Now she was avoiding his eyes, and he was fucking tempted to use Legilimens to get to the bottom of it all without further nonsense.

But she seemed to gather her wits and raised her chin. "First off," and with this she shot him a defiant look, "I took no vow to obey."

His legs threatened to buckle under him, but he managed, barely, to maintain his stance with merely a steadying hand on the table. The relief...such relief coursing through him....

A soft smile quirked the corners of her lips. "Even when compelled by magic...and he was obviously Confused...Father Gadbury knew not to have me take vows I couldn't keep. His eyes positively twinkled when he got to that word, and substituted 'cherish' instead."

"So Albus wasn't the only pragmatist presiding that night?"

She gave a wry shrug. "Evidently not. I vowed to love, honour and cherish you, much as you did me. And even that...you were concerned that you vowed to love me, Professor, but whatever it is between us, it predates our vows." She broke off and to his amazement, hid her face behind her hands. "This is going to be so embarrassing."

"Fucking hell, Miss Granger, after all that's happened between us you've actually managed to find something fresh to embarrass you?"

She studied her ink stained fingertips. "Professor, have you noticed anything special...well, unusual...I mean..."

She was mortified, absolutely mortified, and he found the entire spectacle of a mortified Miss Granger quite fascinating to observe.

"When we kiss?" she finally blurted.

The kisses. Fuck. They had to actually discuss this? He cleared his throat.

"You have," she said, clearly relieved.

How could he not?

"I think I've discovered why, though it's really rather silly. No, silly is too silly a word," she babbled on. "Preposterous is more like it. Something that Lavender would come up with, or Parvati or..."

"What exactly are you nattering on about?"

"In my confirmation classes Father Gadbury..."

He didn't even bother to stifle his disdain.

"You needn't scoff," she said with a glare. "I'm just attempting to explain what he said."

"Pray, do continue."

"In the Early Church it was believed that when you kissed during the exchange of the Peace, it was a Holy Kiss."

"No wonder you're such a romantic," he sneered. "Even your Muggle religion is filled with foolish romanticism."

"The Holy Kiss as Father Gadbury expressed it means," she continued resolutely, "that souls are kissing."

"Oh fucking bloody hell, you aren't trying to tell me..."

"The picture Colin took of us...the silver strands. When we kissed. Silver is the colour of the Spirit. Our souls...our spirits...somehow connected, possibly even joined, at that moment."

She clenched her hands shut, and he realized how much dignity it was costing her, this ludicrous discussion. He bit back a half dozen retorts and instead waited for her to continue.

"But it clearly started before then. I can't explain why such a thing would happen, but it did happen, and it happened before we married." She raised her eyes to his and it felt as if his heart stumbled. "I felt it the very first time we kissed, didn't you?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You claim that by Sealing me, you caused our souls..."

"No, I don't think so. I don't think it could have anything to do with human vows...Muggle or wizard. This is something more elemental. I don't believe anything we did or said caused it to happen. I believe...oh, god, I'm saying I believe as if I really and truly believe it, when it's preposterous, totally preposterous..."

She broke off and dug her hands into her hair, bringing it all tumbling down. The hair comb hit the stone floor with a clatter.

"But, I believe..." she said slowly, resolutely, "that what happened between us was always going to happen between us.

"Our souls were waiting for us to kiss."

Soul Mates?

Chapter 45 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

Anything you recognize belongs to the fabulous J.K. Rowling.

My endless thanks to my beta, GinnyW, for her patience and insight.

45. SOUL MATES?

Watching the expressions cross his face was like watching a train wreck in progress. She couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Miss Granger, if you are in any way expecting me to believe that we are ~~are~~ *soul mates*...." The words dripped with icicles.

"It's an insipid idea," she agreed hurriedly and defiantly. "The very word is saccharine and asinine and..."

"Then what are you telling me?" he demanded.

She winced. "Just what I said. That when we kiss, our souls kiss. When we took our vows, our souls... connected. Or bonded. Or something." She took a deep breath. "And I believe that in an ordinary life under ordinary circumstances..."

"You mean, somebody else's life, because I can assure you mine has never been blessed enough to be ordinary," he spat.

"In a life without the Marriage Law," she stated firmly, "we would have eventually..." She buried her face in her hands. "Oh, god. This is so embarrassing. I feel like a fourteen-year-old ninny even spouting out this nonsense!"

"But that doesn't stop you from believing it?"

"No."

He stared at her. Simply stared at her. The silence between them grew unbearable. Finally, when she was about to speak, to say anything, just to break the silence, he let out a soft snort.

"Well," he drawled, "as long as you acknowledge that it's preposterous, romantic claptrap, I suppose I will have to accustom myself to the fact that I'm married to the kind of witch who believes such nonsense."

"Oh, no, you don't," she said, leaping from the stool and closing the distance between them. "You're not getting off that easily. Tell me, tell me you can't...in the most secret part of your being...entertain the notion that something beyond logical explanation has been happening between us, and that this is a possible if illogical explanation!"

He glared down his nose at her.

"Or is it always this way with you? Maybe it's your soul doing all the dirty work. Tell me," she demanded, glaring back at him, "Do you spark this kind of response in every witch you kiss? Do they all feel what I feel at just the brush of your lips against theirs?" And then, before she could think better of it, "Do you feel the same when you kiss them?"

"Perhaps you suggest that my soul is so desperate it attempts to latch onto any woman I come into contact with?" he sneered.

"You twist my point," she snapped. "What I suggested...what I believe...is that we are just fucking goddamn lucky we had no occasion to kiss when I was eleven!"

"Miss Granger!" he roared, but she'd had enough. She reduced her research parchment to the size of a postage stamp, tucked it in her pocket and sailed out of the lab, leaving him to stew in his own juices while she recovered from exposing her...yes, exposing her *soul* to his ridicule.

She flung herself on the bed and buried her face in the pile of pillows.

She'd barely had time to assimilate the information herself. She actually hadn't assimilated it at all, for that matter. She simply recognized its validity with a click as distinct as a penny dropping and had made the mistake of blurting it out to him without due consideration.

And of course, there was the consideration that whatever he felt wasn't as distressingly powerful as what she felt when they kissed....

A consideration that distressed her more than she was able to contemplate without an empty ache.

"Are you seeking to hibernate for the winter?"

She squeaked her outrage as she sat up and sent pillows tumbling around her. He looked entirely too calm and unimpressed by her revelation. "I... just made a fool of myself, didn't I?"

"It would seem so, yes."

"Am I wrong?" she asked in a small voice, wanting it to be stronger but finding it impossible to bring more power to it. "Is it because I'm inexperienced? That what I think is... earth shattering...now, there's another insipid cliché you can scoff at...but am I just too naïve to know that it's not special at all? Is this what it's like for everyone? I don't see how it could be, or the other wives wouldn't have been crying about having to have sex so often..."

Before she could complete that thought, she was hit with another devastating idea. "Or is it because you...you're so good at it..."

He winced, but that didn't stop her.

"...that maybe I'm just mistaking something physical for something... metaphysical?"

"Miss Granger..."

"Or, oh, god..." She scrambled backward on the bed until her back was pressed against the headboard. She clutched a soft pillow to her chest as if to protect her from the final humiliation. "It's just not that special for you? And I'm an idiot and a fool and a..."

"Miss Granger! If you'd please stop exposing your myriad insecurities to the cold light of day and take a breath, I could answer you!"

"Here," she said quickly, shifting some pillows aside. "Come sit down. It's easier to talk that way."

He looked at his spot on the bed and back at her, his eyes narrowed. But he finally did ease down beside her. He stretched his long legs out beside hers and crossed them at the ankles, leaning against the headboard. "I hope you realize that I find this entire discussion irregular, and I'm only participating because the only way to come to any lucid conclusions about... your current direction of enquiry... is to look at it from both our perspectives."

"Do you need me to repeat my questions?"

"No," he snapped, "I do not." He took a deep breath. "To begin, no, it's not always as..."

"Earth shattering?"

"I'll use my own words if you don't mind."

She bit her lower lip to keep herself from speaking.

"Satisfying."

She nodded.

"It's not always as satisfying as it has been between us."

She let out her breath, relieved.

"As for your next question, suffice it to say that I find it awkward if not almost unbelievable that I am repeatedly referred to as 'good at sex.'"

"I don't believe you."

"Please. This is difficult enough without your interruptions. The point is, I have never been considered... inept, by any means. But I admit I've not devoted myself to the exploration of that aspect of... oh fucking hell."

"That's all right," she said encouragingly. "You're doing really well."

"Miss Granger, silence." He heaved in a deep breath, his tension palpable. "I think that if anything about our... physical relationship... might be influenced by our vows, this might be it. I simply have never been tempted nor have I been inspired to put quite so much effort into the aspects of sexual intercourse that might be considered 'worshipping one's body'."

"Why not?" She immediately regretted her question as she could actually feel his glare before she turned her face to see it. "Sorry."

"At first," he continued with an audible strain, "I thought it was simply due to the constant proximity of...a female in my quarters and my life. But then I realized that my thoughts and desires were totally focused on you. That if I'd somehow ended up forced to marry some other... woman, I couldn't imagine having the same reaction."

"Really? You mean, even if...even if you'd married someone sexy and beautiful... somebody like Lavender or Parvati or...or even Fleur Delacour? And had her here with you day and night it wouldn't have tempted you to..."

"Miss Granger!" he thundered. "I'm finding this entire conversation difficult enough in the hypothetical. If you insist upon thrusting real faces into the mix, I'm going to lose my fucking lunch!" He seemed to gather his defences and continued more calmly, "Which brings us back to the questions at hand. I fear that whatever is happening between us is a compulsion brought about by the reckless mixing of Muggle and magical vows. You maintain it predates our vows and thus can't be caused by them, and furthermore, that this proves we are some kind of fucking soul ma..."

"Don't say that word!" she broke in.

"You know, Miss Granger," he said, and suddenly chuckled. "It's your reluctance to use the word, your belief that the very idea is ludicrous, that makes me most inclined to wonder if perhaps it might even be true."

She stayed so still she held her breath.

"Perhaps," he repeated.

She let it out in a whoosh and took a deep steadying gulp of air. "You're...you're not serious."

"Let's just say I'm feeling forced to entertain the possibility until a more plausible explanation presents itself, if you can give me three reasonable examples of how we might have made such a connection on our own, without the interference of the Marriage Law, and I remind you that me bedding a student is not an option I would have ever entertained."

She closed her eyes. "Perhaps... perhaps after the war, I would have come back to Hogwarts to teach. And perhaps if I did, you would somehow forget that I'd been an insufferable thorn in your side..."

"Unlikely. Though for the sake of argument, perhaps I would overlook the fact that you were an insufferable thorn in my side."

"Or perhaps... we'd be in Flourish and Blotts, and we'd be reaching for the same book at the same moment, and our hands would touch, and we'd feel the spark before we even noticed each other, and we'd turn to apologize and I'd get lost in your eyes... because I do get lost in your eyes, you know."

"Of course both of those require actually surviving the final battle," he remarked, reopening the ever-present wound in her chest.

Of course they'd survive the final battle. They simply had to. It would be too unfair to lose him now, before they'd even had a chance.

But not as unfair as if they'd never found each other at all....

She studied his profile, easy enough to do when he glared resolutely at empty air.

To have never known him, to have never known this....

She shook herself free of the terror, but not of the melancholy. "Or perhaps it would have happened on the battlefield," she said softly. "And you would have saved my life, and I would owe you a life debt, and..."

"I'd take it out in trade?" he asked, sliding her a sideways glance.

"You are a wretch," she announced with a huff.

"Is that an improvement over a horse's arse? Or am I losing ground?"

She scowled at him. "I could make up scenarios all day, and it wouldn't change a thing. It makes no difference what might have been because we have what we have, and we are what we are, and all we can do is move forward."

"And this influences Hallowe'en in what way?"

"I haven't quite worked that out yet, but I'm sure it does." And then, because she couldn't resist, and because it was true, she added, "And, Professor, I wouldn't have performed fellatio on anyone else, either."

"Fucking hell."

"Are you blushing?"

"No," he growled.

"Yes," she purred. And with that she climbed ungracefully out of bed and headed to the loo, aware that he was probably watching every twitch of her hips, which she made sure twitched quite admirably.

She paused at the door and glanced back over her shoulder.

"And Thursday is my birthday."

XX

Fucking hell.

At least she'd reminded him again.

Dinner had been uneventful. She'd kept her nose buried in a book and he'd ignored Hooch and despite a few glares from the Gryffindor gits it had been a pleasant enough interlude.

But now, standing in his office, he touched his wand gently to his Dark Mark to request an audience.

He slouched into his desk chair and toyed with his quill. There was nothing to do but wait.

XX

It was the correct bookcase. Identical in every way.

Except for the narrow space on the bottom shelf where the book was supposed to be wedged.

The book she'd burned in the Room of Requirement.

She felt a wave of horror sweep over her.

She'd never dreamed that tossing the book into the fire would result in the library's book disappearing, too.

Fretting, she coiled a strand of hair around her finger.

"Madam Snape."

She flinched at Madam Pince's voice. Could she know? Hermione thought she might die of mortification if Madam Pince realized she had burned a book.

"Are you by any chance looking for *Raising the Magical Child, Vol II, Element-ary Magics from Birth to Four Year&*"

Oh, god. She wasn't sure whether to admit it or not. "Yes," she finally said, deciding to fake ignorance. "Has someone checked it out?"

"Indeed, earlier today." Madam Pince gave her a calculating look which lingered a little too long on the abdomen. "In fact, you'll be pleased to know it was Professor Snape who checked it out."

Hermione felt the colour drain from her face. "Oh," she said lamely. "Thank you."

"Are we to expect an announcement soon, my dear?"

Hermione raised her chin a notch. "I have no idea what you could possibly mean."

Madam Pince just gave a short sniff.

Hermione left the library.

This was a disaster.

XX

Severus was crossing the Entrance Hall when he saw Miss Granger freeze on the staircase. He gave her a sharp nod, and she resumed descending and met up with him in the middle of the mosaic Hogwarts Seal.

"I'll be out for a bit," he announced stiffly.

Her eyes did not flicker to his left forearm, yet he felt her attention longing to go there.

"Yes," he said in answer to her unasked question. "I'll be back shortly."

He whisked through the door, ever aware of large brown eyes watching him leave.

XX

He'd no sooner arrived in the Malfoy's Apparition Foyer than Narcissa greeted him with a curt nod and brushed past to lead him into the public wing of the manor.

"Good evening," he said, placidly testing the water.

Her response was a polite-sounding, "Severus," but no more. Interesting.

As he followed behind her, he glanced at the cream-coloured silk robes that clung enticingly to her still-slender body. Women liked such things, yet other than when she'd worn her mother's frock, he'd never seen Miss Granger wearing anything other than her jeans. Perhaps this is what she'd want for...he cringed...her birthday.

"Cissy, your robes are always..." he sought a word, "nice," he finally managed. "Do you shop at Madam Malkin's?"

"Oh, good heavens, no. Not for my good things. I always go to Monsieur Worth's in Paris. But if you're thinking of buying something for your bride...though I can't imagine that you'd waste the money, all things considered...don't even consider Monsieur. I'm afraid he's quite beyond your means."

At that point they entered Lucius's study where several of the higher-ranking Death Eaters were gathered. Notably absent was Pendragon Parkinson. Such a pity.

"In fact," Narcissa continued sweetly, "I took your financial situation under consideration when I gave your dear Hermione her little bride-gift. I was careful not to purchase something that would be beyond your means to duplicate, should you decide you liked its effect."

What fucking bride-gift?

"I hope you've enjoyed it," she said, sliding him a suggestive glance, clearly enjoying putting him on the spot in front of the other wizards.

Of course. The hideous red thing she'd given as a humiliation.

"I'm sure it was well-intended, but as a bride-gift, perhaps not the wisest choice. It's not as if she would be spending much time in it."

"Surely you don't mean..." Cissy stared at him in horror. "Surely she sleeps in nightclothes. Even your little Mudblood would not be so déclassé..." She broke off, unnerved by his arched brow.

"Cissy, you know not to use that language around Severus." Lucius said, but his cold tone and his narrowed eyes were clearly aimed at Severus, not his wife.

As were all eyes in the room, and though Severus idly gazed at his own fingernails, he had little doubt that his other observers didn't share Narcissa's horror and disdain at the thought that a naked witch shared his bed every night.

"Narcissa," Severus finally said, "as my wife is not aware of all pureblood conventions, surely you're not surprised that I haven't seen fit to illuminate her."

That brought a chorus of male laughter.

"Severusss."

All present turned to the doorway as the Dark Lord entered, followed by Bellatrix. They dropped in deep bows of obeisance. Only Severus was near enough to go full out and kiss his hem. He reached one bony hand down and touched Severus's shoulder, indicating to him that he should rise.

"You must forgive Narcissa for her lapse in deportment. It seems she's chafing at the thought that once you marry an appropriate wife she'll be relinquishing her role as my official hostess."

Ah.

He'd known that the cards were all on the table regarding the Dark Lord's plans for the future when Parkinson had made his offer. But to have it spoken of so openly, and in front of Lucius and Narcissa...well, that must chafe them raw.

Indeed, from the icy heat of Lucius's stare, it did.

Bellatrix, on the other hand, seemed unconcerned by this revelation. Had she no desire to be the Dark Lord's 'official hostess'? Rodolphus had best watch his back, because as she stood there dripping with Dark glammers and devouring the Dark Lord with her hot eyes, Severus had little doubt she had aspirations that would necessitate an end to her marriage. And Bellatrix had never been the sort to seek her goals via the legal system.

"The gardens, perhaps?" the Dark Lord queried directly to Severus, ignoring the others. "A stroll seems in order."

Severus nodded and followed him, feeling the heat of a dozen pairs of eyes on his back.

XX

The late roses were in full bloom, as were a multitude of cannas and dahlias. Floating lanterns lit their way, more than even Hogwarts felt the need to display.

The Dark Lord had chosen the South Garden, the one with the most exuberant display of colour. He plucked a rose from one of the nearest bushes and held it to his almost nonexistent nose. "Too sweet," he said, and tossed it onto the gravel path. "I'd hoped it might have more tang, being as its colour was so hot. Ah, well."

Severus watched the Dark Lord grind the sunset-hued bloom under his heel with a loud crunching of gravel, then resume his stroll.

"You requested an audience, Severus. How can I help my most loyal servant?"

"These coming weeks will be intense, my Lord. I'm being pulled in many directions."

"Are you complaining?"

"My Lord," Severus said directly. "Is it your desire that Bella find me a wife, or did she offer out of her own ill will to do so? I find her efforts so far to be intrusive if not insulting."

"Mincing no words, I see."

They continued their stroll in silence.

Finally, the Dark Lord flicked a hand dismissively. "I'll tell her to hold off on her efforts for a time, if that is more comfortable for you. I merely assumed that as you anticipate losing your present bed warmer, you might be distracted most pleasantly by anticipating the next."

"My Lord, you are a romantic at heart," Severus said with a smirk.

The Dark Lord chuckled and plucked another rose, sniffed, and cast it aside. "Narcissa's gardens are as overwhelming as her choice in scents."

"You have a preference for patchouli?"

The Dark Lord turned a sharp glance on him. "Jealous?"

"Of whom?" Severus countered.

"That would be the question, wouldn't it? Are you jealous of Bellatrix and her supposed position in my affections? Surely you of all people realize how little my interests lie in that direction since my return. Or do you seek to have Bella return to your own bed?"

"Neither, my Lord," Severus snorted. "Just ascertaining where I stand in the new order of things."

The Dark Lord stopped in the middle of the path and placed a gentle hand on Severus's shoulder. "Don't vex yourself, my boy. Your position is safe."

"I'm not vexed," Severus responded wryly. "Just practical."

"You've been a spy too long. How will you manage when the need for secrecy and manoeuvring is past?"

That brought an outright laugh from Severus's lips. "My Lord, you are talking about Slytherins."

The hand on his shoulder gave an affectionate squeeze, and then released him. "As always, your point is well made. So tell me, was there another reason you sought my company today?"

"Perhaps," Severus said idly, "just a breath of cleansing air before diving into the next few days of insufferable classes and the more insufferable wife I've had foisted upon me."

"You know I can tell when you're lying, Severus. You are not finding her insufferable."

"Having a wife with an upcoming birthday is insufferable indeed," Severus said. "Make that wife a teenaged witch and the situation is compounded."

"Poor Severus. When is the special day?"

"The day after tomorrow, as she keeps reminding me. Merlin only knows what the chit thinks I intend to do with that information."

"Oh, how perfectly delightful. Does this mean you have diversions to share?"

Severus opened his eyes and mind, and endured the shuffling through images he'd carefully prepared. Miss Granger, falling quite pitifully apart in the Room of Requirement, interspersed with images of a hostile Harry Potter. Order members glaring as Miss Granger nestled against him in their midst, seeking solace. A heated kiss interrupted by the arrival of three Weasleys and one werewolf, and their shocked faces.

And again, an emotional Miss Granger as she stood in the Gryffindor guest suite, her heart breaking at the thought he was sending her away.

"Severus, you are a cruel man. If it weren't that it suits our purposes so beautifully to keep your bride distraught, Harry Potter frustrated and the rest of Albus's pitiful assortment of supporters off balance, I'd wonder if you weren't quite the sadist at heart."

"You wound me, my Lord." But he said it with a laugh.

"If I were in the mood for a wager, I'd put money on the fact that you are here hoping I'll call you away from your duties on Thursday."

Severus smirked.

"However, I think that would not serve my greater purpose, so alas, dear boy, I must return you to your bride with the knowledge that this too shall pass, and sooner than you might anticipate...."

Severus sighed. "I shall endeavour to endure."

"I'm sure you will." The Dark Lord's chuckle filled the air. "And the poison? Have you chosen her poison?"

"I'm working on it," he responded. "There are a few ingredients I have yet to locate. But all will be as planned."

Again, the bony hand squeezed his shoulder in approval. "You will be greatly rewarded for your loyalty." Then the hand hovered before his face.

Severus pressed it to his lips. "My Lord."

XX

He entered Madam Malkin's intent upon finding something quickly, hopefully without being spotted by gossip-mongering fishwives. Before the door had closed behind him, he was overwhelmed by odour...an assault of warring scents, none of which could be even charitably described as pleasant, though his nose detected familiar tones that he recognized from some of his female students.

Fucking hell.

He lifted a handkerchief to his nose and dove deeper into the shop.

Robes of all shades, fabrics and styles were displayed on invisible mannequins so that they seemed to float above the wooden racks of more robes in more shades, fabrics and styles.

A witch who had to have been Madam Malkin sailed up to him.

"Shopping for your wife or daughter or...?" she asked helpfully.

He graced her with a barely-restrained snarl and reached into his robe. When he pulled out the topaz-hued cashmere dress, her eyebrows met her hairline.

"Muggle."

He agreed with a mere nod.

Her lip curled.

"She likes the colour, I believe," he said. "Can you match it?"

"I'm sure I can," she replied, and then with a scowl, "You can put it away. I won't need to look at it again. Now, what style are you looking for?"

She ascertained quickly that he had no answer to that question, and then asked, "How old is she?"

"She's a young woman," he responded crisply with a glare that dared her to inquire further.

"Has she shopped here before? Perhaps I might have a better idea if I knew her size and previous purchases."

Fucking hell. He hadn't wanted to get this involved in this ridiculous process...certainly not down to revealing whom he shopped for.

Why not? She was his wife, after all.

But he felt as if he was part of a spectacle, as if prying eyes were on him. He finally said, "I'm not certain. Her name, if she did, would have been Miss Hermione Granger at the time."

She withdrew behind a brocade curtain, and he waited impatiently as the loud sound of rustling fabrics and a few ill-concealed grunts revealed her search for something appropriate.

She emerged with several robes of varying shades ranging from golden toffee to orange. "You're certain of the colour?" she asked.

"Did I seem confused, Madam?" he sneered.

She sniffed and with a wave of her wand, all the robes became the precise shade of topaz he'd requested.

Another wave, and they rose into the air...seven of them, it turned out...and revolved at eye level, giving him a clear view of plunging necklines, frilled hems, ruffled sleeves, layered silks, heavy brocades and...

He couldn't envision a single one of them on Miss Granger.

Apparently reading his reaction, Madam Malkin sighed, but her voice was kindly as she said, "If wizards would pay more attention to their witches, they wouldn't have so much trouble shopping for them."

"Indeed," he snapped.

"I'm sure I'll find..." she began.

What she found was herself speaking into thin air as he Apparated out of the shop with a soft pop.

XX

Hermione stared at her schedule, suddenly filled with blank places where classes had been. She'd received a few messages through the Floo and had been able to add back tutorials in Arithmancy, Charms, History of Magic and Transfiguration. But everyone had agreed that one hour of private tutorials per subject per week would be more than enough to keep her working throughout the fall, with a readjustment in the new year as N.E.W.T.s grew closer.

They had great faith in her ability to stay focused and accomplish much without constant supervision, which was a relief and a temptation.

Because now, staring at the schedule, she was more inclined to make a quick trip to Flourish and Blotts to track down a copy of *Elementary Magics from Birth to Four Years* than open her Arithmancy textbook.

She sighed and pushed that thought to the back of her mind. She wouldn't be flitting down to Diagon Alley alone, and it wasn't as if she could ask the professor to go with her. She'd already searched as carefully as she could through the books in his office to find the library copy, to no avail. Was he reading it himself, trying to discern her interest? Or was he waiting for her to come out and ask him for the book and then have to explain why before getting it?

Neither scenario pleased her.

Nor did remembering how he'd returned the night before, smugly satisfied but refusing to reveal why. Smelling of Dark Magic and a whiff of patchouli. Fully appreciative of her tea and her caresses, yet a little detached, as well.

This morning his mood had been surly, yet not unusually so. This was Professor Snape, after all. He'd disappeared after breakfast and returned in a snarling mood with an assortment of packages from Slug & Jiggers Apothecary, though he threatened her with hexing if she dared touch them.

She ignored his mood and his threats and continued mulling over her schedule, her lists, and her priorities. Finally it was lunchtime. She peeked into his office and found it empty. Then into his classroom, and again, found it empty.

She was walking down the dungeon corridor toward the staircase when she saw Ginny.

"There you are," Ginny announced, and then tossed a glare at a group of Slytherins who passed and gave her hard looks.

The smallest, first-year Peregrine Burns, had slowed as if he intended to speak, but seeing Ginny, he sped up. Hermione wondered if he'd truly wanted to say something to her. None of the other Slytherins ever did. She thought of her jade serpent drowsily blinking on the mantle and felt a smile quirk the corner of her lips. She'd seek him out later, just in case.

"Hermione," Ginny said more loudly. "Are you or are you not coming to lunch?"

"I am, of course," Hermione responded. "But why are you here?"

"I need to talk to you, and I thought maybe we could grab sandwiches and go out to the greenhouses."

Hermione felt a sinking in her stomach. She'd spent the morning thinking of lunch with Professor Snape, even if it only meant sitting beside him and occasionally rubbing her calf along his, or giving him an 'accidental' nudge of the elbow as she turned a page.

But upon entering the Great Hall she saw his seat empty, and it felt a little easier to take a sandwich from one of the trays on the Gryffindor tables along with a mug of pumpkin juice and follow Ginny outside.

"All right," she said, settling onto the cool grass beside Ginny after they'd surrounded themselves with silencing spells. "What do you need, and why are you suddenly wanting to eat lunch with me when you've been doing nothing but giving me poison looks since before school started?"

"Now that you mention it, maybe you should check that sandwich before you eat it," Ginny said with a smirk.

"I'm sure it's quite safe. You wouldn't risk annoying Professor Snape by killing me," Hermione said smugly, though she was moving the food around her mouth more carefully, probing for any flavour or texture that rang false. The power of suggestion was an annoying thing.

"Why did you ditch classes? Not that I blame you."

"A million reasons. First of all, I'd rather not be the reason people are pulling their children out of Hogwarts..."

"Ravenclaws," Ginny sniffed dismissively between bites.

"And...well, you know we can't discuss it here, but I have special projects I'm researching."

Ginny nodded. "I say you're a lucky cow, but Ron and Harry are worked up and blaming Snape."

"They would."

"All right, and it's like this," Ginny said, leaning closer and dropping her voice as if they might be overheard. "All anybody can talk about is you and Snape, and what's going on, and it's got Harry in a dither."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Ginny stared unabashedly into her eyes, probing. "Are you sure he doesn't have some sort of spell on you? You're acting all too cosy with him, and unless he really is a brilliant tosser in bed..."

"Ginny!"

"Whoa, Hermione. You're red as roses." Ginny put her sandwich down and stared in awe. "He is? He really is a brilliant shag?"

Hermione willed her cheeks to calm down, willed her breathing to stay even, willed her fingers not to overflow with her desire to hex Ginevra Weasley into silence. When she trusted herself, she said, "What do you need to know that will help Harry? And it had better not be about my sex life."

Ginny was clearly annoyed that she wasn't going to get any salacious details, but she shrugged and took another bite of her sandwich. After chewing and swallowing she reached across and pulled a strand of hair out of Hermione's eyes. "Harry thinks the Dark Lord wanted you to marry Snape to upset him, and you're a victim of some nefarious scheme."

Hermione bit back a few choice words. Calm. She needed to keep herself calm. Isn't that what Professor Snape had to do time and again, when god knows what was being said in front of him or done with him present?

"I understand why he'd think that. I mean, if anyone had said to me even the day before, that I was going to marry Professor Snape and that it would even be my idea...well, I would have assumed there was Dark Magic involved, too. If I had time to assume anything before I killed myself, that is."

She took another bite of her sandwich and watched Ginny choke on pumpkin juice.

"But it was my idea, and if I had the choice to make again, I'd choose him again. I can't explain more than that because it defies logic, but there it is." Clearly, honesty was a bloody powerful thing when a person wanted to avoid telling the truth.

"And it has nothing to do with mad, passionate shagging?" Ginny asked, disappointed.

Damn.

She took a deep breath and tried again. "Ginny," she said, allowing a certain low resonance colour her tone, "I never told you about any of the things I got up to with Viktor, did I?"

"No..." Ginny breathed, leaning closer.

"Then what makes you think I'd discuss what I do with my husband?" She finished off her sandwich, pleased with Ginny's frustration. "Is there anything else?"

"What can I tell Harry to calm him down?"

Well, this was one case where the truth definitely wasn't going to do the trick. Not when the truth did involve things like brilliant shagging and souls kissing and....

"Just remind him that I'm doing it for the Order," she snapped, out of patience. "That if he can face down Voldemort again, I can marry Snape."

Ginny nodded, disappointed, but clearly not hearing anything different than she'd actually expected. "That's what you said before, but that's before you...well, before you were hanging all over him at the Order meeting, and of course George and Fred said you were snogging fit to shag in the Library, and it's just kind of hard to accept that you're doing that of your own free will..."

Hermione glared at her.

"I can't decide whether I'm more comfortable thinking you're under a spell or that Snape is really shagging you senseless," Ginny sighed, gathering their trash. "We've got to head back in. Some of us still have classes, you know."

Hermione followed her into the castle torn between wanting to hex her and feeling a small twinge of jealousy that the redhead actually got to go to class.

She sighed, then mentally slapped herself and headed back down to the dungeons.

XX

"I need my laboratory," he announced to her at dinner.

She carefully avoided showing any dismay at having to clean up her things. "I can have it cleared for you in twenty minutes. What are we brewing?" The thought of brewing with him made the idea of cleaning a lot more palatable.

"We are not brewing anything," he said. "You will stay out while I'm brewing."

And that had been that.

She hadn't even bothered to rub her calf against his.

And now her things were reduced in size and on a side table, and he was locked in his lab.

She stretched out on the bed feeling oddly bereft.

She'd thought that being in their quarters would make their days more intimate, but instead, the professor seemed more distant. And without the distraction of classes...even annoying ones...she was feeling lonelier than she'd felt since first year.

Finally, she went and knocked on the laboratory door.

He opened it to a narrow crack and blocked her view inside.

"Will you be coming to bed soon?" she asked hopefully.

"I won't be coming to bed until I complete this potion, and I won't be completing it at all if you insist upon interrupting me."

She recoiled. "I won't bother you again."

She walked stiffly away, determined not to let him detect her hurt feelings.

Of course he sometimes would need to do things without her. What kind of idiot was she to expect otherwise?

But knowing it and feeling it were two different things, and as she lay in the dark waiting for him to come to her, it got harder to bear....

She didn't know how long she'd slept when she was suddenly aware of him leaning heavily over her, raising her up from her pillow and holding a vial to her lips.

It was thick and warm and disgusting...she would have spit it out if he hadn't held her lips closed and murmured to her to swallow, and so she did....

And hoped whatever it was hadn't counteracted with the taste potion, because now her mouth tasted horrid.

But when he pulled her into his arms and whispered words she couldn't quite hear into her ear as she drifted off to sleep, that was, after all, the only thing that mattered.

The last thing she knew was a brush of lips and a kiss that felt like home.

Birthday

Chapter 46 of 92

Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

My thanks, as always, to JK Rowling.

And kudos and kisses to the fabulous GinnyW!

46. BIRTHDAY

And so it had come to this.

After serving two masters for almost twenty years, he lay staring into the darkness weighted down by a heaviness that left him ill at ease and uncertain. Nothing had prepared him for this. His tasks for both sides had been both onerous and dangerous and he had followed through with deliberation.

But this, this left him feeling...

Inadequate.

Lacking.

Deficient.

Incapable.

And desperately unworthy.

She'd nestled in his arms and offered it up to him like a gift.

"Thursday is my birthday."

She'd flounced away and tossed it over her shoulder with a saucy flip of her hair.

"Thursday is my birthday."

And beneath it all...*expectations*.

Expectations.

And he was supposed to fulfil them.

She hadn't had enough birthdays to get jaded. In fact, she'd clearly had the kinds of birthdays that led someone to expect some pleasant surprise, some gift of delight, something thoughtful or lovely or...

Something beyond his ken.

And now he listened to her deep, steady breathing...felt her hot breath fan across his chest...and waited for her to awaken and look at him with those eyes, those warm brown eyes filled with expectation.

He'd done his best to assure that the Dark Lord would leave them undisturbed on this day and night by pretending he wanted the opposite.

Now he wished he'd done the reverse.

But wasn't this day simply a compression of every day? Wasn't this yet another fucking day when she looked at him with such longing, such affection, that it was clear she looked at him for her happiness?

He'd served two masters for almost twenty years, but this was the weight of responsibility that staggered him.

This insufferable yet precious weight in his arms.

And all he had to offer her was a dubious potion and an even more dubious set of robes and...

His lips twisted in a wince.

Sex with penetration.

As if it were a bloody fucking gift to be parcelled out like a child's sweet instead of her due.

Maybe he was wrong to let doubts guide his judgment. Maybe he should accept the Dark Lord's stated blessing and forget about the Ministry watchdog and Lucius fucking Malfoy.

Maybe he should drop every fucking instinct that had kept him alive for twenty years?

Not bloody likely.

Tension climbed up his spine, through his shoulders, up his neck and over the top of his head to dig into the sockets of his eyes.

Suddenly he couldn't wait any longer, couldn't wait for her to invite him but needed to taste her...

He buried his face in her neck and began a slow assault of licking, suckling, nipping from the tender hollow at the base of her throat up to the smooth line of her jaw.

She rolled in his arms, immediately responsive. *"Professor..."* She opened her mouth to his and sought him, matched him, arching her body against his and rubbing his erection with her pelvis. "Today..."

He shut her up with his fingers across her lips and growled, "Is your birthday, yes," and then slid his hand down her abdomen to find the tight curls, the moist folds...

"Now," she said. "I want you in me now."

He probed with one long finger, testing, but she wrenched away and grabbed his hand. *Now,* she insisted. *"Now."* She closed her hand around him...her hot, smooth palm sparking a reaction that shot up his spine...and pulled, and he could do nothing but go with her, let her direct him until the head of his cock rested at her slit, and he hesitated...

"Now."

She opened her thighs wider and dug her fingers into the muscles of his arse, and he did it, he drove in...the sweet, moist friction as he slid into a quim that wasn't quite ready, that wasn't quite wet enough...the lush tug of skin against skin accompanied by her choked gasp, and he froze, he froze in her and tried to slow but again, those fingers dug into his flesh and she demanded, "Now, let me feel you, let me feel you *in* me."

He tried to go slowly, tried to give her a chance to catch up with him but she jerked beneath him, drove herself up to meet him, and he was barely aware of moisture going wet, of her soft whimpers as he followed her lead...no, wrenched the lead from her, wrenched control from her and drove into her again and again until there was no control, there was no measured response but only a driving need to move, to move faster, to move harder...

To capture her lips with his and invade her mouth the way he invaded her body. To enter her and possess her and be captured by her and trapped within her until there was no her, no him, only them, two become one.

And then, he was swallowing her cries, and she was grinding against his cock, quivering and clutching, and still he drove into her, stroke after stroke, until nothing existed but the burning incandescence of their sex, and he arched into her with a sound that was half-shout, half-groan. With arms and legs and mouth and quim, she clung to him, she clung to him and he clung back, willing her to take him in, to swallow him alive, to never let him go.

XX

"Too fast..." he muttered into her hair, her neck, her breast, finally lingering at her nipple. "Too fast," he muttered again, lipping it with only the occasional touch of his tongue to remind him of the sweet salty taste of her skin and the slow, measured assault he'd planned.

"No," she whispered, "not too fast. I was starving for you. I needed you in me. For today... I just want to pretend."

"Pretend?"

"Pretend that there's no one watching. That we're like real marriages, the ones where..." She sighed against him. "The ones where nobody is watching."

He was startled by her sniff, by the realization that she wept, and he pulled her down with him and tried to wipe away her tears, to kiss them away, to find the cause and drive it away, to bring back the saucy smile, the impudence. "Don't," he said. "Don't cry."

And he was reminded of his first inadequate gift and sighed. "Maybe," he said carefully, "maybe they aren't watching."

"Why wouldn't they be?" she asked, rubbing her cheek against his.

"It depends on the thoroughness of your research, on the conclusions you've drawn and assumptions you've made, which I admit after careful study I'm inclined to think might be tolerably sound," he said, using his thumb to stroke her cheek. "And of course, it depends on my brewing skills, which I'm inclined to think are not the weak link in this experiment."

She suddenly was alert and he knew she remembered. "What was that noxious stuff, anyway? A more vile, more nasty concoction I've never had the misfortune to drink."

"It was your cloaking potion."

"I have no..." She broke off with a gasp and grabbed his left hand. "Our rings? To cloak us from the Ministry?"

"It was, of course, the first attempt, and we have no way of knowing that it worked, yet..."

But she was on top of him, pressing kisses across his face, into his hair, even on the bridge of his nose.

"I drank it, too, by the way, and if it's noxious, you have only yourself to blame." But he revelled in the enthusiasm of her gratitude for what was, at best, a dubious potion.

Yet, if a mere attempt to please her was sufficient to bring this effusion of affection, what in Merlin's name could he expect if he ever managed to find her an appropriate gift?

"What did you say?" she stopped in mid-kiss and asked. "The incantation."

He simply glared at her.

"What?" she insisted. "I know you said something. I heard you."

"Incantations not being my area of expertise, I went with what seemed most relevant at the moment." He rolled his eyes up and had he not been flat on his back, he would have (ironically enough) been looking heavenward. Despite his clenched jaw he managed to say, "I merely repeated your Muggle vows."

"You didn't."

He refused to look at her, to see that pleased-with-herself, know-it-all smile on her face, but he felt it.

When she slid her hand down his body and began stroking his cock as she purred against his chest, he groaned. "Miss Granger, if you truly wanted to spend your days rutting, you knew you were supposed to choose an 18-year-old boy and not a wizard too old to..."

She cut him off with a kiss, and it became quickly obvious that at least some part of him still considered itself up to the challenge of satiating a teenaged witch who in her youthful ignorance claimed to be starving for him, thought she needed him, and for some absurd reason believed that having his cock in her body somehow made them more real.

And despite her youthful ignorance and her absurd thinking, she made it easier for him to breathe. The tension that constricted him earlier was gone like morning mist burnt away by the sun. And this time it was a slow, sweet heat that consumed him.

XX

She had dragged him into the scented tub with her and forced him to wash her back, her front, and, as she'd put it, "everything between."

In fact, she hadn't allowed him more than a few moments privacy since awakening. It didn't seem enough for her to be within a few meters of him.

They had to be touching.

She'd even leaned against him and watched him apply wizarding shaving cream to his face, running her fingers down his chest, around his nipples and through his hair, distracting him in every way possible. He was bloody lucky he didn't use a razor.

And now she was shrugging into her class robes in preparation to go to breakfast that she insisted they take in the Great Hall. That surprised him. She usually welcomed any opportunity to eat in their quarters, and he'd offered, but no, this morning she wanted to dine in the Great Hall.

She grabbed his hand and pressed his fingers to her lips, and then pressed another kiss on his jaw. "I have to get my fill before we go into public," she said. "We wouldn't want the children to see what goes on between the wicked old bat and his wicked, wicked wife, now, would we?"

Fucking hell, if she wasn't making her bloody birthday feel more like his own, though if warned in advance he would have insisted that her non-stop caresses and kisses and teasing glances would have driven him to distraction.

But they weren't driving him to distraction, not unless the desire to reciprocate in full measure could be deemed "distraction."

She pulled him toward the door. "My stomach is growling," she said. "Surely you've heard it."

"I couldn't miss it, could I?" he retorted, but then gave a carefully dismissive shrug and said, "I have something else for you, if you want it before breakfast."

"Something else?" She seemed astonished. "But you've already given me..."

"A potion that may not work and..." he broke off, finding it difficult to verbalize his other "gift."

"Splendid sex." Her grin was radiant. "What else could I possibly want?"

"I'll remember that next time," he said dryly. He flicked his wand at the bed and a package wrapped in silver and black pinstriped paper slid from under it.

"Gift wrapped! I'm impressed." She plopped down on the edge of the bed to open it.

He braced himself, watching every flicker of her face for the disappointment he knew was coming.

She lifted aside the tissue paper to find the expanse of dark green silk. She drew in her breath in a soft gasp. She stroked the silk, then finally lifted it free and let it unfold.

"Robes," she breathed.

"You said you like green," he offered lamely, wincing as he watched her examine them more closely, her brows meeting in a frown. Then she slipped them on her shoulders and smoothed them, looking down at them. Finally she rushed into the bathroom and the mirror there, which was too small and too high...

Ah, well, she knew how to handle that. Transfixed by her every movement, her every expression, he watched the elegant swish of her wand that created a cheval mirror out of the wall hung one. Slowly, with her lips gently parted, she turned in a circle, her head snapping to the other side when she could no longer see herself, and then

continuing the intense study until she'd completed the circuit. The robes hung straight down her body, their lines crisp and severe without a hint of ruffle or lace. But they didn't need any of the folderol, he told himself. Just look at her, with her horrid hair and her delicate features...by contrast they made her seem even more feminine, more delicate. In fact, they seemed to frame her perfectly....

Or at least, that's what he thought. But what did he know?

Fuck it all. He should have never left Madam Malkin's. He should have known better than to buy her clothes, of all things. He should have stuck to bloody potions and sex and not pushed his luck.

She raised her eyes to his. "They're beautiful!"

"I hardly think beautiful is the word," he snapped, knowing now that she had to be lying. Even he had known they weren't beautiful when he'd left instruction for their form.

"I've never seen any like them." She twirled and they billowed around her. She twirled again, and billowed again, and laughter...crystal clear and bubbling...spilled out of her. She flew across the room and flung herself into his arms. Her kiss was fast and full and he wrapped his arms around her to steady them both, and he returned her kiss because how could he not?

And then she pulled away, her eyes bright, and said, "I billow!"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he insisted placidly.

"I billow." She twirled again, then stopped, struck by something else. She took off for the wardrobe and pulled it open, and curse it all, headed unerringly to his own green robe. She pulled it out and held it up to herself. "It's the same silk!"

"Indeed," he agreed. "You said you liked green, and if I hadn't gotten you your own I'm sure I would have found mine transfigured to fit you before long." He gave a long-suffering sniff.

She stood in front of the cheval mirror holding his robe high beside her for comparison. "No wonder I haven't seen one like it. It's...it's tailored. It's like yours, almost identical."

"That's what tailors do. They tailor."

"This didn't come from Madam Malkin's, did it?"

"I believe we've already covered that. I had my tailor create it for you."

Again, she flung herself into his arms, which he decided to tolerate despite the fact that his own robe was being crushed between them as she ran her fingers up the back of his head and pulled him down to meet her kiss.

If wizards would pay more attention to their witches.. the old harpy had said.

Which was exactly what he'd done.

She stole his clothes whenever she got the chance.

She fretted over silly potions of doubtful merit.

She wanted, though it still astonished him, non-stop sex.

It wasn't as if giving Miss Granger gifts was that complicated at all.

XX

"You're not wearing that to breakfast," he said.

"Of course I am." She stroked her hands down her sides, luxuriating in the feel of silk against her palms.

"Don't you think they're a bit much?"

"It's my birthday," she retorted with a grin. But then it hit her. "Unless we can't let the Slytherins know you bought me something so nice." She forced herself to slip the robes from her shoulders, but felt his hands close over hers and raise them back in place.

"I think my Slytherins will fully appreciate...in a way that even you did not, I might add...the fact that I found a way to get my Gryffindor wife out of her house robes and into Slytherin green.

She smirked up at him. "Arse."

"Would that be a plain arse or a horse's arse?"

Her stomach growled, and that ended all discussion.

XX

She swept into the Great Hall ahead of him and it took the utmost control not to give a twirl and billow as she crossed in front of the House tables to find her own seat.

Upon taking her place she waited for her breakfast to appear before her, and let out a happy little sigh of surprise when the plate of hot, steaming croissants, the small cup of espresso and the goblet of fresh squeezed orange juice materialized.

She sipped the orange juice, and couldn't stifle her grin. She cast aside caution and drank deeply.

This was the best birthday breakfast she'd ever had.

Professor Snape scowled and without apology, lifted her goblet and sniffed.

"Yes, it's Bucks Fizz," Madam Hooch smirked from his other side. "A woman deserves pampering on her birthday."

Hermione grinned at her. "Thank you...it's perfect!"

"Enjoy it, my dear," Madam Hooch replied. "I figured you for the croissant and espresso type.

"This is why you had to eat breakfast in the madhouse?" he demanded. "So Hooch could ply you with spirits?"

"Champagne," Hermione corrected happily. "And you can give it back now. It's not your birthday."

Quite aware that Professor Snape's mood had shifted to surly, Hermione nibbled her croissant and scanned her schedule for the day. She shifted her shoulder to give him a clearer view when she realized he was checking it out, as well.

"It would appear," he said, "that you have an open window between eleven and two."

"How interesting," she replied. "If I'm not mistaken, you do, as well."

"Lunch in our quarters?" he asked placidly.

"That could be arranged," she replied, with a leisurely rub of her calf against his.

She realized when she glanced at him from the corner of her eye that they were sporting matching smirks.

XX

She lingered in the hallway outside Professor Flitwick's classroom, waiting for the room to empty so she could enter for her first Charms tutorial. It was odd watching her former classmates file out, busily gossiping and complaining about their Charms homework.

Last out the door were Lavender and Parvati.

Hermione gave them a brisk nod and was prepared to enter when Lavender grabbed her elbow.

"Wait...let me see your robes. They're new, right?"

Hermione stiffened. She didn't think she could bear it if they mocked her, or worse, mocked her robes, this wonderful gift that made her feel so special.

Parvati fingered the silk. "Chinese," she said, clearly impressed. "Hermione, this is a very expensive robe. And you wear it to classes?"

"It's my birthday," she replied defensively, remembering Professor Snape's questioning the same fact. She hadn't thought about them being expensive, just lovely.

"Oh, a gift!" Lavender backed away and scanned her top to bottom with a critical eye. "They're certainly different. Not from Madam Malkin's, I'm sure."

Hermione shook her head.

Parvati's eyes widened. "Not Monsieur Worth's!"

"I don't think so," Hermione responded, but not having heard of Monsieur Worth's, she couldn't be sure that he wasn't the professor's tailor.

"They're rather odd, you know," Lavender said critically, "but in a sort of flattering way. They're quite androgynous which isn't a look you find in wizarding robes. Gender specific fashion is the norm, but..."

"They suit you beautifully," Parvati said, seeming to have come to a conclusion that surprised her. "They're really quite stunning."

Hermione's cheeks suffused with warmth. "Thank you," she managed to mumble. "I'm going to be late to my tutorial."

As she ducked through the door, Lavender called, "But you didn't tell me where you got them!"

She stopped, turned back, and said with all the wide-eyed innocence she could muster, "You'll have to ask Professor Snape."

She beamed at their horrified expressions and turned back into the classroom, quite cognizant that in doing so, she graced them with a full billow.

XX

The Charms tutorial did not go well.

Professor Flitwick hadn't met her gaze in class since she'd married, and now he seemed determined to teach her one-on-one without making eye contact, as well. Not to mention, he seemed as nervous as if Professor Snape were standing there glaring over his shoulder at him. Was it that he was afraid of Professor Snape? There was that ridiculous Slytherin honour thing.

But getting out of the tutorial early could only be viewed as a good thing on this particular day.

Alone in their quarters, she undressed down to her knickers, transformed them into the much-hated but long-promised thong, and slipped her robe back on.

She thought it would be a nice surprise if her professor had a gift to unwrap at lunch.

XX

Severus entered their quarters to find her humming.

Humming!

He didn't recall ever hearing her hum before.

It was a bit off-key, if one considered "a bit" to include "impossible to determine tune of ditty being hummed."

But he paused in his office doorway to simply watch her humming as she lay on her stomach, propped up on pillows, scratching away with her quill and parchment, with one bare foot and leg waving back and forth in the air.

Birthdays became her.

And in an action so totally out of character that it made him question his own mental wellbeing, he silently closed the distance between them, took hold of her foot and before her squeal was even half-formed, had slipped one of her delectable toes into his mouth. Not a toe fresh from the bath, but a toe that beckoned him with its sheen of pearl varnish anyway, and the suckling of which brought forth a sumptuous moan from her equally delectable lips.

He moved from her toe to the delicate sole of her foot and pressed kisses against its most tender spots as one hand smoothed down her calf and up her thigh...and when had Miss Granger removed her jeans and slipped her new robes back on, he wondered incongruously...until he finally deemed it too dangerous to continue his attempt to control her twitching foot and leg so close to his face, and released her to roll over on her back and open her arms to him.

Merlin. Fuck. Shite.

She'd somehow cinched it at the waist, but the gaping neckline exposed a swell of cleavage he'd never seen before, evidently the result of the black silk Muggle bra she wore. And beneath the cinched waist...bloody fucking hell...those slender but perfectly shaped legs framed only a scrap of black fabric guarding her quim.

She smiled up at him, her eyes heavy-lidded and lips moist and horrid hair a disreputable yet sexy mop, and there was no doubt the effort that had gone into this look of totally fuckable seduction.

He curled his fingers under one thigh and rolled her half over, and with a flip of her robes exposed her bum. "What in Merlin's name is that?"

"A thong," she said. "No knicker lines."

"And you wore that to Malfoy Manor," he muttered, his cock swelling and uncomfortably trapped in his trousers.

"Indeed..." she purred.

That was all it took. He started to unbutton his robes, but she flicked her fingers at him and smirked as his robe and shirt hung loose over his exposed chest. He shrugged them off and let them hit the floor. Before his hands reached his fly she'd flicked her fingers again and it gaped open. He watched her eyes as he slowly dragged them down his hips until he sprang free.

"These are only good for one thing," she said as she hooked her thumbs in the side of the thong and slid it down her hips and legs then tossed it over his shoulder.

"No knicker lines?" he asked.

"This," she corrected him. She reached for him, and with her long, delicate fingers, stroked him, soft as spring rain dancing down the surface of tight skin, and a reaction rippled through him. "I like the effect they have on you."

"You had that effect on me without the thong." He spread the robes completely open and analysed the way the bra pushed her flesh up and in to create that pretty swell, then released her from its confines and watched her sigh of relief.

"Miss Granger, what am I going to do with you?"

"I hope it involves sex."

"Oh, it definitely involves sex."

But as he sank down to her, sank *into* her...her eyes... those eyes...

Her eyes offered so much more than physical slaking.

They trapped him, held him, and what started as a throb and ache and need between his legs turned into a throb and ache and need in his chest. His thrusts were slow and her sighs were sweet and the clutch at his heart was a pain unlike any he'd ever known.

Her hands explored his body with languid wonder even as her eyes never left his. A certain angle, a certain twist of his hips, and her lashes would flutter on a soft intake of air, but then open wide again, and her hands would roam again...a delicate, tickling skim across his ribs (that brought a snap of his hips in reflex), a gentle knead of biceps (that caused a deeper rocking between her thighs), a sharp dig of nails into his arse as her lips opened wide in a gasp (that simply inspired him to more, to more, to *more...*).

But it was those eyes, her eyes that captured him and held him taut and aching beyond the limits of endurance.

It took no Legilimency to read her eyes.

They begged.

They begged him for more than he could give.

They offered.

They offered more than decency allowed him to take without giving...

If he were a decent man.

And was he?

This was a question he couldn't answer, dared not answer, and so, instead, he drove harder, drove her relentlessly until she climbed beneath him, climbed to a slow, pulsing surrender. She arched beneath him and into him, and drew his own from him in spasm after spasm of release.

And as they lay together, sweaty and entwined, he was grateful that for once she didn't speak, didn't feel the need to verbalize and dissect and explore, because he had no words for what was happening, no words at all.

And then, the reprieve.

Soft words spoken into his ear. Words that released them both from the need to say more. Softly whispered, but words that brought laughter from deep inside him, a place that needed to laugh, it seemed, because he laughed longer and harder than those three words merited...

"What's for lunch?"

What was for lunch, indeed, except for her giggles and his fierce scowls as they fed each other morsels and bits, stretched out on a picnic blanket of green silk spread over the most welcoming of beds.

"Eyes closed," he ordered, his hand behind his back. When she obeyed, he produced the small, brown olive and popped it between her lips.

"Mmm..." she said. "Niçoise." And then, opening one eye she smirked. "I need to cleanse my palate."

"My bride is turning into a lush," he grumbled as he offered her the flute of champagne.

But after a careful sip, she leaned back on her elbows again, closed her eyes and announced, "Next." Her mouth popped open expectantly.

This time he touched the olive to her lower lip but held it until she was forced to suck it from his fingers and into her mouth. Eyes still closed, cheeks sucked in, she appeared deep in thought. "Kalamata." Then slowly chewed, savouring.

"Hold that pose," he demanded, and as she swallowed he held the next bite at the ready. Her mouth opened, and he placed the small square on her tongue.

Her expression turned to pure bliss. "Oh, god, oh, god...Cadbury Fruit and Nut." She chewed and moaned and he felt himself stirring quite impossibly, as there was no way in fucking Hades he was up for another round of "splendid sex."

"Have some champagne."

She sat up, and he handed her the flute and bit into his second roasted chicken leg.

"How did you know?" she asked. "All my favourites."

"After Hooch's performance at breakfast, I realized I might need help producing your favourite picnic lunch."

She frowned. "Harry and Ron would never have known..."

"Please. I'm digesting," he said with a grimace. "I owled your mother."

"You didn't!"

"I did. She's a highly efficient woman. Not satisfied merely to send a list, she sent delicacies, or at least the Hermione Granger Snape version of delicacies." He slid her a sideways glance. "I, however, provided the entertainment."

"For which you get full marks." She leaned across and kissed him, and he got a whiff full of olives, and he didn't particularly care for olives, but found himself suddenly wanting a taste. And decided after due consideration that their flavour was greatly improved by the presence of champagne and Miss Granger's tongue. "But," she added, "you needn't be jealous of Madam Hooch. She has assured me that even though I'm her type, I'm not her type."

A statement for which he had no response that he was willing to share.

She leaned over him, a strawberry held high. "Open up."

He opened obediently and when she lowered the fruit to his mouth he lunged, managing to capture her fingers with it. An action that didn't have the effect he'd expected, as she simply pulled them free, her eyes unfocussed, as she appeared lost in thought.

"You make me nervous when you think that way," he said.

She gave her head a little shake and then laughed ruefully. "It's nothing. It's just that I realized that I'm not her type. I'm not your type. I'm beginning to feel as if I'm not a type at all."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing." But she didn't smile. "What do you mean, you're not my type?"

She waved her hand lightly. "Don't worry. I'm not going to be a ninny over it. But you said it yourself *hair*. And, well, you clearly were drawn to beauty. And in fact, it's what Draco said when he found out. '*You're not Severus's type*.'" She did grimace a little at that. "It was disconcerting. He knew you well enough to call you by your name and to know your type...and here I was, *married* to you, and not knowing you at all. It was a rather telling moment."

"I hope you didn't take it too seriously. Draco has no more idea what my type is than...well, than what we're having for lunch at this moment. And as for him calling me by my name, he does it to show off. He lords it over the Slytherins and has since his first year. Don't give him more power than he has."

"I didn't," she said, but he was suddenly aware that, oh, yes, she certainly had.

"Why don't you call me by my name?"

She blushed. Oh, those blushes. "You won't understand."

"Still," he said, unrelenting.

"Because, at that moment, when Draco called you Severus..." She closed her eyes, as if reaching for words. "I felt cold. I thought, they are his friends and they call him that, and..."

She broke off, her eyes large and forlorn, and he wanted to hold her, to soothe her, but more, he wanted to understand her. "Go on," he urged.

"I don't like your friends. I don't like the people who call you Severus. And you didn't tell me to, so I decided I wasn't going to until you told me to. It's that simple." She gave a half-shrug.

"Many people call me Severus." Although how many of them did he really consider friends? Which of them spoke to him with affection? And how odd of her to pick this as something that bothered her. "You can call me whatever you want." He watched her face, her body, relax. "As a matter of fact, I do believe you already call me whatever you want to, whenever you want to, and in ways that nobody else gets away with."

That, at least, drew a small smile.

"Close your eyes," he said.

It took a moment, but she finally leaned back again and closed her eyes, and her chest...her small breasts and tight nipples and gently-defined ribs...rose as she inhaled a calming breath, and gently settled back as she exhaled.

She had no idea. No fucking idea that her total lack of awareness of the effect she had on him carried more power than any calculated display of flesh framed in silken frillies. She had no idea that in her total assurance that she wasn't beautiful, that her body wasn't seductive, she moved around their quarters in total abandon, half-dressed or even undressed, oblivious to him and totally irresistible to him. Had she any understanding, she would be embarrassed and cautious.

But no, except for brief forays into flirtation and cheek, she flopped here and sprawled there and behaved as if any excess of clothing was an encumbrance that she gladly did without, and in her total absence of awareness offered temptation after temptation.

She opened her mouth expectantly.

And he covered it with his own.

She surged up, wrapping her arms around him and pulling herself up against him as he braced his arms on either side of her. A swirl of wet heat and sensation that coursed from that joining of lips and tongues spread throughout his body and, he was certain, hers as well, and deeper, yes deeper, and if this is what she called a soul, then his was swelling at the contact and soaring high above on a current of emotion that no words in his vocabulary could define.

No words.

Just the air they shared, the touch they shared, the taste they shared, and the current of sensation they shared.

All stemming from the kiss.

And if ever, if ever there existed something so beyond reason as souls kissing....

Well.

If such a thing could possibly exist...

Surely, it must be something like this.

~~~~~

A/N:

I'm delighted and honoured and flattered to be able to share a couple of artfics with you, both made of the wedding scene. If you're interested, you can see them be scrolling to the bottom of Chapter Five for the first one:

[Chapter Five](#)

And Chapter Twenty-One for the second:

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

## Something Happens

*Chapter 47 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*Worshipful adoration to JKRowling for creating the world and tolerating our presence in it.*

*Kudos and thanks to GinnyW for betaing and Juno Magic for an extra set of eyes when I needed them!*

*A/N: I'm flattered and honoured to be nominated for a [Quill to Parchment](#) award as best new author. I'm not sure when voting will commence, but there are so many wonderful fics and wonderful authors and betas nominated that I hope you find time to go there and read and vote!*

*And please, please vote for my fabulous beta, GinnyW! I've been blessed with wonderful betas, both those who have been regular and those who have pitched in when I needed extra help. But GinnyW regularly puts up with my constant emails, my incessant dithering and my whining and moaning and angsty, and she deserves your vote just for always being there!*

*Thank you!*

### 47. SOMETHING HAPPENS

Despite the fact that they apparently resisted wrinkles and stains (if their stint as picnic blanket was any indicator) she decided not to wear her new robes to her session with Madam Hooch. The idea of dodging Bludgers or doing untidy things with quill and ink in her beautiful green silk made her nervous.

"How's the birthday going?" Madam Hooch asked over the edge of her mug of tea.

Before Hermione could respond, Madam Hooch held up a cautioning hand. "Don't say it. It's written all over your face and evident in the glow of your freshly scrubbed body, and I'd rather not think beyond the superficial, thank you very much. Although you do have a very pretty blush, don't you?"

"Will you stop it!" Hermione blurted. And then, "Although at least you come right out and say it. The other professors either get huffy or spill things."

"All because you and Severus are sexual creatures?" Madam Hooch let out a sharp bark of laughter. "I'm sure they do."

Well, if she insisted upon talking about it, Hermione intended to press the advantage. She sat down in her usual chair and propped her feet on the desk as if she owned it, folding her hands across her stomach. She raised her chin. "But, since you mention it, maybe you can explain a few things to me."

"That's what mothers are for, girl."

"Not those things." Hermione fought the blush that threatened to reassert itself. "Why aren't I your type?"

Madam Hooch choked on her tea.

Hermione smirked.

Madam Hooch glared.

Hermione grinned.

Madam Hooch finally gave in with a lack of good grace. "If you must know, I have a taste for the more... exotic."

"I'm certainly not that." Hermione nodded, realizing she wasn't prepared to probe further. Using a silent command, she drew a blank parchment to her, a quill and the pot of green ink.

Madam Hooch watched her supplies slide away from her with arched brows.

"Everyone was upset that we got married," Hermione remarked idly, sending the quill across the page, leaving one word in its wake. "And everybody has their reasons, of course." She started the second line. "But beyond the 'he's a teacher, I'm a student,' and 'he's older, I'm not,' nobody ever addresses the issue of are we suited?"

She sent the sheet of parchment back to Madam Hooch and watched it spin carefully until it faced the Quidditch coach.

*Well?*

*Are we suited?*

Madam Hooch read the words, then looked up at Hermione. "You don't want me to answer that question."

"I believe that could be taken as an answer," Hermione said wryly. She concentrated until the quill formed two more words.

*Why not?*

"Why are you asking me, of all people? I'm not your head of house, I'm not your mother, I'm not your..." Madam Hooch leaned back in her chair. "I set myself up for this didn't I?"

"Yes." Hermione smiled. "When you started acting like a friend."

"Bloody hell." Madam Hooch put her mug down and sighed. "No, you're not suited. He's volatile and sullen and a raw nerve either painfully exposed or painfully hidden. He's Slytherin to the core, distrustful and scheming."

Hermione shrugged. It wasn't as if this was news to her.

"You can discount your age, but your vast experience of eighteen years on this earth has done nothing to prepare you for the man who is Severus Snape, and for that you should be eternally grateful."

Again, Hermione shrugged. This time she added a sigh.

"He's not a man who can be handled intellectually, but instead, instinctively."

Hermione frowned.

"He's like a Bludger. You don't have time to think about him. You just have to react, and in his case, there's only a tiny wedge of a chance that you'll react correctly."

"Oh, that's certainly true." Hermione laughed and nodded, waiting for whatever point Madam Hooch was closing in on.

Madam Hooch, for her part, only seemed frustrated. "Granger, *you think*. A lot."

"Yes, I plan. I definitely plan."

"You can't plan for Bludgers. You don't have time. You only react to them, often on blind instinct. And if you're wrong...the damage is sometimes beyond repair." Madam Hooch leaned across her desk, her eyes intense. "Bludgers *hurt*, Hermione."

"But, I know that. I know he hurts," Hermione explained softly. "Why do you think I forgive him for so much?"

Madam Hooch caught her breath. "That's not what I meant. I meant he'll hurt *you*."

"So what you're saying... if he's a Bludger, he hurts everyone. It's not that I'm not suited for him; it's that he's not suited *for anyone*?" Hermione met Madam Hooch's steady gaze. "Well. That's interesting."

"Interesting?"

"You don't know him as well as you think you do," Hermione responded, and felt a sharp pang. "I thought you might be the one other person who understood him, but you aren't."

Madam Hooch let out an exasperated gasp. "What is your point? Why are you asking me?"

"I'm trying to anticipate problems and be ready for them. I'm planning for the future, the future we'll have when...when it's all over."

She watched Madam Hooch's eyes cloud over and knew why, even as Madam Hooch opened her mouth to respond.

"Today is my birthday," Hermione stopped her firmly. "I know that the future may not be what I want it to be. But for today, I'm planning." She dragged her eyes away from the older woman's and said softly, "I like to plan."

"How about planning some wandless curses?"

"Oh, that sounds splendid!"

An hour later, Hermione had managed two decent Stunners and a dozen or so that failed.

"That's not too bad for your first attempts," Madam Hooch admitted. "You need work, though." She broke out her bottle of firewhisky. "It's your birthday. Share a tot with me."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Does it mix well with champagne?"

"Breakfast was a long time ago."

"Lunch. I had champagne at lunch, too."

"Did you, now?" Madam Hooch's eyebrows arched high.

Hermione felt herself blushing, though she wasn't sure why. There was something so... thoughtful about the way the older witch was looking at her.

"Go ahead. I don't think this is going to hurt you."

This time, Hermione found that the firewhisky went down a little more smoothly than the first time, and the aftertaste was still quite lovely. She sank back in her chair and enjoyed the warmth, watching miniature Harry and the Weasley twins zipping around the sky in one of the team photos.

Her eye skimmed around the room until she spotted the photo turned face to the wall. "Why did you turn your All England team photograph around?" she asked. "I would think that would be the highpoint of your..." Something about Madam Hooch's expression silenced her. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's none of my business."

The photo slowly righted itself against the wall so that the Quidditch team with the Cross of St George emblazoned on their robes was visible again. But Madam Hooch didn't even look in that direction, her eyes pinned on Hermione.

"Friends share things." Her voice was not at all friendly.

"You don't have to. It's not my business," Hermione repeated.

Madam Hooch sighed. "I'm actually surprised you didn't already know. Did you ask Weasley?"

"No." It had never even occurred to her to ask.

"The official version is that I simply wasn't good enough. That half a season was the limit of my ability and as soon as the player I replaced healed, I was benched and then removed from the team."

Hermione remained silent. It was hard to imagine something worse than not being good enough to achieve your dream.

"If the truth had been known, it would have caused an international scandal." Madam Hooch's gaze dropped down to her heavily calloused hands. Those hands, accustomed to handling Bludgers and Snitches and long hours on brooms were harder and coarser than Professor Snape's would ever be, nor had they ever been as elegant. "The truth is that my wandless magic, long a secret, was discovered and revealed by a jealous lover."

Now there was pain, and Hermione wondered if it was the pain of a lost dream or a lost love, or maybe both. A tug of sympathy pulled at her heart, and she longed to have words or actions that would soften the moment, but there seemed to be none.

"Wandless magic is impossible to detect. It's impossible to prevent. And in an arena of sport, an open opportunity to cheat. Had I wanted, I could control a Snitch or a Bludger. I could have sent hexes and curses. I could have done anything at all to cheat our way to a win."

"But you didn't."

"Of course not." She jerked her head up and her eyes were glassy with memory. "But once it was known that I'd hidden my gift, everything was subject to question. I was lucky it ended without the scandal. At the time I thought my betrayer acted out of anger and jealousy. Now I think it's possible that she might have simply been trying to do the right thing for everybody, even me."

"Was she a Gryffindor?" Hermione sighed. What a Gryffindor thing to do.

"Hufflepuff."

Hermione's eyes flew open at that. "What an incredibly brave thing for a Hufflepuff to do!"

"I see you're quite capable of tossing a few Bludgers yourself, Madam Snape." Madam Hooch aimed her an acid look. "I'm so glad you weren't my friend at the time. I'm not sure I could have tolerated your *support*."

Hermione winced.

"And yes, she was brave."

"So this is why you told me too many people know I have wandless magic."

"Having a secret of this sort is never a disadvantage. But you never know who may betray you, because someone doesn't have to intend harm to betray."

Hermione stared at the few smoky drops of firewhisky in her tumbler. She dragged a forefinger through and collected them, then slipped it between her lips to savour.

"Bloody hell, girl." Madam Hooch was staring at her fingertip where it rested on her lower lip as she sucked it. Then Hooch laughed. "You must drive Severus mad."

This time there was no controlling the fire in her cheeks as she yanked her hand from her face and sat up straight.

"It's a shame you can't fly, Granger. Something tells me you'd have been a hell of a Beater." Hooch grinned. "Something also tells me that in eleven or twelve years we'll have a young Snape who will be a force to be reckoned with on the Quidditch pitch, and I think I can hold out that long."

"Thank you." Hermione blinked. "I think." A young Snape.

The idea made her stomach clutch in a new panic.

"Oh, god," she said. "I have to go. I have to..." She leapt to her feet. "I really have to go!"

XX

She ran.

She couldn't breathe.

She wasn't breathless from running.

She was breathless from fear.

She flew down the steps to the dungeon, treacherous steps that could easily trip her, easily send her flying to the bottom in a heap if not in death, but didn't care, didn't care, didn't care.

She didn't go all the way to their quarters but, instead, took the shorter path by entering his office...the wards dropping and then raising again behind her without hesitation...and through the door...

To be grabbed by one, strong arm.

To be hauled against a deceptively hard, lean body.

To feel fingers dig into her hair, her scalp.

To be swallowed whole by black, black eyes moments before his lips captured hers.

And she was lost. Lost to the thrill of it, the absolute thrill of him waiting on her like a snake waiting on its prey. Of him pouncing and grabbing and devouring, and, oh, god, no part of her, no small part of her even considered doing anything but submit. Her passion rose to meet him without hesitation.

One hand...*oh, god, cold!*...slid under her jumper and climbed her midriff, slid under her bra, and tormented her breast until her nipple was tight and aching. She twisted away from his icy cold fingers even as she responded with a quick hot heat between her legs.

"Wait!" she gasped into his mouth. "Wait...wait!" It was the only word she could manage, yet she was caught by surprise when his lips finally broke from hers.

"Wait? Why?" he ground out.

"Because...we forgot," she gasped. "My contraceptive potion." And fear bloomed in her anew.

"Oh fucking hell, I gave it to you with your bloody cloaking potion," he snarled against her throat.

"You said what you took was just as vile as what I took..."

"I'm a liar, Miss Granger. Now do you have any more questions?"

"As long as you're not lying about the contraceptive potion," she snapped back.

"I would never lie about that. I don't want brats any more than you do."

"Oh." She melted into him with a sigh. "Then go ahead. Ravish me."

"I think you've ruined the moment." He released her.

She pulled back, horrified, to find his most evil smirk aimed at her. "Liar," she said.

He leaned into her again and this time when she opened her lips to him, his tongue dragged lingeringly through the interior of her mouth... tasting.

"You've been drinking," he announced softly into the shell of her ear, sending tremors through her body.

"Just a little," she agreed, arching into him. And then, as if revealing a great secret she whispered, "It's my *birthday*."

"If Hooch were a man I'd have to call her out," he growled.

And it crossed her mind to tell him that she wasn't exotic, that she wasn't Hooch's type, but then his mouth was doing things to her throat that made her forget everything else but the whimpers and moans he drew from her.

XX

Her birthday was lasting too bloody long.

He sat in the semidarkness with only a floating oil lamp to cast light across the table beside him. She was with her bloody Gryffindor prats, receiving her presents and having a meeting in his classroom, and this time he had no desire to observe.

He had a strong desire to blow in and clear them out.

He had a strong desire to remind her...and them, oh yes, certainly them...that she was his.

And that would never do. Feeling this way would never do. Being this way would never do. With relief, he felt his rage coming to the forefront of his mind. Yes, that was good. That he could handle.

But not this.

Not this birthday of hers, this one day when she wanted to pretend that they were ordinary, real, not being watched, free....

Merlin, fucking bloody Merlin, each moment of this endless day emboldened that seductive notion tenfold.

It was the fucking, oh yes, definitely the fucking.

But there was more than that. There was the unfettered joy on her face as she revelled in his slightest attention. There was the delight...genuine and unbelievable, but pure delight...when he'd given her the gifts...the potion, the robes. There was the lilt in her voice and the way she leaned into him, pressed against him, touched him...constantly touched him...

And why wasn't she touching him now? Why was he alone while she...

He snapped his head toward the door to his office the moment he heard her. Some fucking spy he was. He dragged his gaze back to the air in front of him, feeling his scowl in the ache of his jaw.

"Don't you dare."

He jerked his head up again.

She stood with her fists on her hips, glaring at him. "I know what you're doing, and I won't stand for it. Not on my birthday!"

"I think I'm tiring of hearing you prattle on all day long about your bloody birthday. The earth does not stop spinning on its axis just because it's your birthday."

She strode closer and scowled down at him. "And just because you've treated me nicely doesn't mean it's time for you to settle back into a sulk and be a bastard."

A sulk? She dared accuse him of having a fucking sulk?

"Remember, Professor, you have a birthday, too, and you're setting a precedent." The last was delivered with an annoying snip in her voice that made him want to throttle her...but a better response suddenly presented itself.

He snagged her hand, yanked her to him, pulled her into his lap and kissed her. And when he was quite certain that he'd kissed her bloody senseless, he finally pulled away and, toying with a strand of her hair, murmured into her ear, "You were saying...?"

She gasped softly against him. "I'm sorry... I must have been mistaken!"

"Indeed."

With an impish smile she added, "Will you forgive me if I share my tokens?" She held up three book tokens from Flourish & Blotts.

He took them from her hand, noticing that one of them had an odd cast to its bronze surface.

"*Finite incantatem*," she said, and with a brief burst of shimmer it gleamed gold. "It's a flex token. Harry always gives me one, but disguises it so it won't make Ron and Ginny feel bad."

Severus turned it in his fingers until he could read the back. "Redeemable for any book." Unlike the others that would be spelled for a certain amount of money, this one was for any book, no matter the price.

Flourish & Blotts had some very expensive books.

"Do I get my choice?" He gave her a sidelong look as he continued to toy with the token.

"No. That one is mine," she said crisply as she retrieved it. "But I will let you help me spend it."

"Just so that I will forgive you for attacking me so unjustly?" he asked, the sceptic in him making itself known.

She scanned the bookshelves. "Because I don't want to buy something we already own in our library.

*Our library?* The wench.

Her kiss caught him off guard, and ended before he could react. She picked up two of the closest vials on the table beside them. "What are these?"

"I've been waiting for you so we can return your memories. And don't play with the vials. They're in sequence."

She stiffened in his lap, and to his surprise, eased out of it and stood. "Do you have a good place to store them?"

"You said you couldn't bear to part with them, and now you want to store them?"

She gave a little shrug, avoiding his eyes.

"What changed?" he sighed. She was going to drive him to madness.

"Before, when I didn't remember so clearly, it all seemed very beautiful, the one beautiful moment in the midst of all the confusion." Again, the small shrug. "Now that I've examined them, it's clear it was a hashed up attempt to make something right out of something that was..."

He felt something tighten in his chest. He suddenly didn't want her to finish the statement, yet had to know how it ended. "That was what?"

"That...at the time certainly...was stupid and a mistake."

Well, she'd finally gotten there. Finally accepted the truth. The fucking, painfully obvious but tragic truth. A bloody mistake, indeed.

"I was confused and afraid. You were angry and in pain. Professor McGonagall was enraged. Hagrid was... well, sweet, but hardly discerning. Professor Dumbledore was calculating and attempting to salvage something out of the mess. Father Gadbury was Confunded. Before, it seemed almost...almost beautiful. Now it's just a calculated hash." She looked at him, her eyes huge and dark and hollowed in the semidarkness. "I liked it better when, when...when something happened."

"When what happened?"

She shook her head helplessly. "You wouldn't understand."

"That sounds like a challenge, and as such, you must now give me the opportunity to rise to it," he said, easing back into his chair, a new tension in his spine and shoulders.

Her cheeks were blazing and she couldn't meet his eyes. She was embarrassed. Not at thinking their mockery of a wedding was beautiful...no, this was something different. He sank back into his chair, watching her carefully.

"What do you know about the Eucharist?" she asked suddenly.

He stared at her blankly.

"Communion. Mass."

"A religious ritual," he answered, and that was about the extent of it.

"In sacramental theology, it's more than just a ritual. *Something happens*. That's what Father Gadbury told me about it, his best explanation. Something happens. You see, some believe nothing happens at all, that they swallow a bit of wine and a dry bit of bread simply to remember and honour something that happened two thousand years ago. But in sacramental theology, it's believed that it's not just a remembrance...it's believed that God is present. That it's...it's *real*. That in that moment, you're part of something bigger, something divine, an ongoing celebration that never ends, along with all the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven..."

She attempted to dig her toe into the stone floor, embarrassed. "Some have tried to explain how it works, even claiming that at that the wine actually transfigures into blood, which believe me, even at eight years old I didn't believe. I'd bit my tongue and tasted blood and I'd tasted wine, and nobody was convincing me of that. But Father Gadbury said that *how* it happens isn't important, that it's enough to know that something *does* happen. That's what makes a sacrament a sacrament, the belief that it's not just words, it's not just actions or decisions by mortal men and women...that something bigger happens that's beyond the scope or possibility of mere mortals."

His blood froze in his veins. "We did that. We drank wine and..."

"Yes, that was the Eucharist."

He stared at her. Didn't she understand? "Blood magic," he said, his mouth dry.

She stopped, stunned.

"It wasn't just Muggle vows...it was a blood oath."

"No, not like that..." Her cheeks were blazing and she tore her eyes away from his. "Not in the way that you think."

"Then what?" he demanded.

She sighed and looked so delicate, so forlorn, he knew a moment's need to touch her, to caress her, to reassure her. But just when he'd started to believe that their Muggle vows were benign, she sprang this on him? Fucking blood magic?

"Our oaths were to each other. About how we would try to treat each other, and honour and respect our commitment to each other. I understand that it was ridiculous for us to make those kinds of vows when we...we didn't even really know each other, much less love each other. And I understand that what Professor Dumbledore did, a ritual without such silly promises, was practical and wise and the best for both of us." She dug trembling fingers into her hair. "My ten-year-old self clearly wanted to believe that something would save us. That by making that sacramental marriage...something would happen to save us from the horrible thing we were being forced to do. And my ridiculously and unexpectedly romantic seventeen-year-old self clung to that instinctively and looked back on that night and hoped that maybe, just maybe... something did happen." She raised her eyes to him, those beautiful tea-hued eyes, and added, "And that it wasn't a bad thing."

He stilled the frustration roiling within him, the helpless feeling of always being the pawn, always being buffeted about by the whims and lusts and needs of others. He even reminded himself that he had chosen to do this, he had chosen to marry her. But finally, the only thing that brought him even a moment's peace was the need to give her back what she had lost, to restore her trust and her solace.

"You need your memories" he said flatly. He stood and opened the first vial, used his wand to withdraw the silvery stream and drift it to her. "Look at me." Her eyes widened in trepidation and yet she stood still for him, and it tugged at him as he watched the stream absorb into her temple. "I performed a consecutive linking charm to meld them together in the Pensieve, but it's best to return them individually, as they were removed."

She stared up at him, leaned into him, until the last one had been replaced.

"Close your eyes, now," he said and stroked her temple. He watched the emotions play across her face...tension as she catalogued the memories, touching them mentally like physical objects, reassuring herself that all was well and none had been harmed. He knew the subtle tension, and he recognized and knew from his own experience the soft expulsion of air when she was reassured.

His hand on her temple stilled as he waited to see what happened next.

Her lips opened with a soft gasp. Her hand went to her breast. Her eyes opened and she stared up at him, and he watched the glimmer as they filled with moisture. "It came back. It all came back."

He stroked his thumb across her lower lip.

"It's still beautiful." She sank against his chest and wrapped her arms around him.

He stroked her hair, her horrid hair, and thought yet again how easily she was pleased, how little it took to make her happy. "You lost it when the memories were gone, but having them returned restores the total experience."

He pulled her trembling body against his and held her tightly, and he knew when it crept into her, that sense of rightness and peace. And just as she clung to it, he clung to her and felt it, as well.

XX

She helped him gather the vials and return them to the lab where he taught her a cleansing spell safe for memory storage. "You can't Scourgify. It might leave infinitesimal debris behind. This type of cleansing is a much more delicate and complex bit of spellwork," he explained.

Her eyes glowed and her wandwork was meticulous and expert within three tries. She wasn't simply a sponge that soaked up learning. She was a being that thrived on it. The simple act of acquiring a new spell shone from within her until she was almost painful to observe.

"It's impossible to experience it fully," she said, straightening, her brows pulled taut in thought. "Through the Pensieve we can see what happened as it happened in all its detail, but it was only when Colin's camera caught a frozen moment in time that we see the silver bonds. And the only way to feel it is inside me...or Legilimency. But it's impossible to truly experience a moment to its fullest, isn't it?"

"I suppose so, when you put it that way. But there aren't many moments that reveal things like magical bonds being formed. Most moments are quite satisfactorily experienced and then forgotten, you have to admit."

"That may be true of most people, but it doesn't seem to be true of us. It seems as if any single moment when we're together, if photographed, would reveal realms of magic beyond our knowing," she said dreamily.

"And here I was going to crack open a bottle of your father's finest with our dinner. You're already pissed."

"Do we have to go to the Great Hall for dinner?" she asked hopefully.

"Alas, Albus put Dinner Patrol on my rota for tonight." He didn't miss the irony that he could clear the day with the Dark Lord but not Albus.

She sighed and cast a wistful glance around the lab. "Well, let's get it over with." And then, that smile. "I'm sure you'll find a way to make dinner as perfect as the rest of the day has been."

"Wear your mother's dress," he responded, knowing exactly what would happen and finding it within him to allow it.

XX

It wasn't until she slipped the green robes over the cashmere dress that she saw their true magic. Threads hitherto unnoticed now shimmered with bronze and gold and copper, drawn out of hiding by their proximity to the topaz Chanel. She stared at her shoulders and face in the mirror, no longer a cheval.

She blushed.

She was embarrassed at her own thoughts, but couldn't restrain herself from thinking them all the same.

*I'm almost pretty.*

And the idea that she might be pretty embarrassed her.

How could she walk into the Great Hall looking like this, feeling like this? It was somehow different at the Yule Ball on Viktor's arm.

But why?

Why was this different?

She didn't know. She just felt exposed, somehow, and that she very much wanted to stay in their quarters and be pretty just *for him*.

She was so weary of the eyes, always the eyes, always watching her, always watching the both of them.

She picked up the hair comb and left the bathroom to find Professor Snape.

He was grading papers in his office. She leaned over his shoulder. "First years? I could help you with those."

"I've seen the way you help. Thank you but no thank you," he sniffed, as he wrote a nasty red comment in the margin of the parchment.

"Just because I'm not harsh enough..."

"Not harsh enough! You count off for misplaced commas!"

"Of course I do. You always count off for misplaced commas!"

"Only on your papers." Another nasty comment joined the first.

She gasped, outraged.

"Miss Granger," he said, his tone as silky as it had ever been, "there are times when your commas are the only thing that save me from having to give you perfect marks."

"That's...that's unfair!"

"It's Slytherin."

"Same thing!"

"Indeed." He put the parchment aside and swivelled in his chair to face her, and her outrage faded as she saw his eyes darken. He slid his hands inside her robes to smooth against cashmere, and they both caught their breath. It seemed that exploring her body through cashmere was as enticing an experience for him as it was for her.

Or... maybe not, she thought with an internal snarl when he pulled away as she was trying to press closer.

"Dinner," he said. "Required by Albus."

She pouted.

He kissed her pout.

She stored that reaction away for later.

And leaned across him and marked a comma for good measure.

XX

He had brought this on himself, he reminded himself firmly.

He followed her to their seats at the High Table, watching her from behind. There was no cheeky sway to her hips, not even the merest twitch. She was, if anything, more primly proper than usual. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was actually embarrassed.

And of course when put that way, he did not know better, and thus he was forced to ponder, why would she be embarrassed?

But that head held high with hair barely contained, that straight, stiff neck, that quick fluid pace...none of it altered the fact that a stunned silence crept across the hall as she crossed the front of it.

Yes, the gold dress and dark green robes were beautiful.

But what they did for his Miss Granger...her skin, her hair, her eyes...was transcendent.

She glowed.

Even Hooch did a double take, and allowed her eyes to do a leisurely drag down and down and finally back up, and only Severus's direct glare caused her to retreat to her wine goblet with an arched eyebrow and a smirk.

Belatedly, he realized...as he held her chair for her and watched her settle into it with downcast eyes...the effect she would have on Draco.

Draco, whose eyes smouldered with envy as they shot from her to Severus before settling into his trademark scowl.

Severus leaned close and murmured in her ear, "On second thought, only if you insist, of course, we'll crack open that bottle with dessert."

She looked at him with an unspoken question.

"In our quarters," he clarified.

"Only if I insist?" The corner of her mouth quirked with the ghost of a smile.

"It's your birthday," he offered magnanimously, "or so the rumour goes."

She looked blithely over to the Gryffindor table as if they'd exchanged a pleasantry, nothing more. "I suppose I could be convinced."

Her calf found his with a long, catlike rub.

Yet again, he was grateful for the heavy brocade tablecloth that hid their feet from the rest of the Great Hall.

He flashed another quick glance at Draco and wondered at which point he'd landed himself so firmly in the handbasket to hell that he took pleasure in making a teenaged git jealous.

He spent the rest of dinner languidly ignoring everything she did, choosing instead to focus his attention on the threatening scowls he aimed at three of the four House tables. This was, after all, the reason for his presence. While professors generally could choose to eat at the High Table or in their offices or quarters, the Rota maintained a consistent calming presence by insuring that at least five professors would be present at each meal.

Of course, it was a lot easier (as if it were ever difficult) to work up a scowl when so many male eyes were glued on his wife.

"Whatever were you thinking, allowing her to come in here looking like that?" Hooch drawled softly. "I thought she looked well-fucked after lunch but now she..."

Her voice broke off under the force of his glare. But it didn't stop her from staring at him with a very calculating gleam in her eyes.

Which, at least, kept them away from Miss Granger.

But the hell of it was, he'd given this to her, this gift of walking into the Great Hall and revealing her future to the stupid dunderheads who had overlooked her for so long.

Just as when she'd gone to the Malfoys, she was transformed into a woman by that dress, those boots, that upswept hair. This wasn't about glammers and tortured hair and padded (yes, he'd checked out the photograph closely) bodices and attempts to look glamorous. This was about a peek into the future when her body and face had left girlhood behind. There was no artifice, here. Just potential fulfilled.

The dunderheads didn't recognize that, of course. They just reacted on a visceral level. He saw it in their eyes. Many of them were more confused than anything...confused by the fact that they found themselves unable to pull their eyes away from the Potion master's wife.

His wife.



None were more confused than Potter, however. Sullen, as always. Confused, as befitted a nitwit Gryffindor. Unfocused, despite the lovely Miss Weasley's attempts to draw him into conversation.

And speaking of Weasleys, wasn't young Ronald's reaction interesting. No confusion there, only sadness.

Severus felt an all-too familiar twinge of sympathy for the young man, even though he still couldn't stand him. Whether Weasley knew it or not, he clearly was seeing his own future when he looked at the High Table...his future without her.

Severus glanced back at the quiet witch by his side and finally cast a Muffliato and asked, "What's wrong now?" And yes, after his earlier successes, this sudden lack of enthusiasm for something he definitely viewed as a birthday surprise left him feeling quite peeved.

"They're annoying me, that's all. The staring. I hate it." She dragged her fork around her plate without actually eating a thing.

"You look very attractive tonight. Surely you must realize that."

She gave an angry half-shrug. "So?" And then, then she had the nerve to give him a filthy look.

"What in Merlin's name is wrong with you?" he demanded. "Most women would enjoy..."

"I'm not most women. Why do I want those gits looking at me, just because I'm wearing a pretty dress and robes?"

"It's not just because you're wearing..."

"Of course it is! And why should I care? You don't have to see me wearing fancy robes to look at me. I don't have to primp and spend preposterous amounts of time in front of a mirror for you to think I'm, well, not pretty, but..." She stopped short. "For you to be attracted to me," she said, more softly. "So why would I want to primp or dress up for *them*?"

He stared at her, hearing her words echo. *Well, not pretty, but...* How could she look at him with those eyes and even think the words, much less voice them, and surely not believe them, *not pretty, but....*

"Professor..." She cast him a glance from beneath her lashes. "It's drafty in here."

"Drafty?" Now what?

"It's my knickers," she said confidentially.

He darted a quick look to make sure the Muffliato was working.

"You know, I wore a thong to the Malfoys' so that I'd have a smooth line under my dress?"

"I seem to recall something about that," he admitted smoothly, his mind's eye supplying a vision of said thong, not to mention vast expanses of flesh that it didn't cover. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, I'm not wearing it," she said with studied nonchalance.

He narrowed his eyes and then, blinked. "And...?"

"You didn't notice any knicker lines did you?" she asked.

"What are you telling me?"

"I'm not wearing *anything* under my dress."

His mouth went dry as the Sahara.

"In fact..." She blinked up at him. "Ooops, I think I just vanished my bra, too."

His eyes were drawn to her breasts like steel filings to a magnet, and fucking hell, those impudent nipples were doing their best to poke through the cashmere.

"I'm cold," she said, quite unnecessarily.

"Miss Granger," he growled. "You have ten seconds to become ill. Believably ill. An illness that doesn't involve any bodily functions, but that otherwise..."

She slumped sideways.

The wrong direction.

He had to lunge to catch her and pull her back upright. Within the blink of an eye he'd released the Muffliato and was saying, quite clearly and with a healthy dose of bored disdain, "Rolanda, will you please complete the dinner hour for me? It seems my wife has celebrated her birthday too heartily, and I don't trust her to make it down to the dungeons on her own recognizance."

He stood, bringing Miss Granger to her feet, only to have her slump heavily against him. "Take my arm," he snapped, thinking she was laying it on a little thick, and then he guided her as quickly as her faux illness would allow through the open double doors, into the Entrance Hall...

And then swept her into his arms and carried her, giggling, down the dungeon stairs.

XX

She'd done it.

She'd wrested the last hours of her day away from the Headmaster.

She wanted to crow and, instead, buried her face in his chest, listening to the hard thump of his heart as he whisked her down the corridor and into their quarters.

He sank into the nearest chair...the ridiculous chintz from her childhood bedroom...and she stood before him, her triumph still burning within her.

She stepped between his open knees and pressed against him, drinking in his touch, kissing his hair, his forehead, his eyebrows, his closed eyes, his cheekbones, his nose, working her way down to his perfect, supple lips.

His hands smoothed the cloud-soft wool against the flat of her abdomen, the jut of her hipbones, the nip-in of her waist, and finally up her ribs to her tight, aching breasts.

Could he feel her heart pounding against his fingertips? Could he feel the air rushing into her lungs, and then back out again, as she first gasped and then sighed? Could

he smell the heat throbbing in her veins, pooling in her belly, and settling into a sweet ache between her legs?

"Wait." He took several breaths. "You...you have one more lesson to learn tonight."

"Right now?" she asked. "Can't it wait?" She leaned forward to press her lips to his, but he pulled away.

"Now."

He was playing games with her. She wanted to just yank away and go to bed without him.

Except, she really did not want to do that. "Then go ahead, but hurry. I'm listening."

But it was hard to listen, because he was stroking her arm absent-mindedly as he spoke, and that was highly distracting.

"You saw through my lies to the Dark Lord. You saw the truths amongst the lies. You're correct about the fact that the more truths I tell to the Dark Lord, the easier it is to slip in a lie. Especially when the truths are painful or revealing...."

He raised his eyes to hers, and she, yet again, was struck by how long his lashes were. It was easy to lose sight of that fact when lost in his black eyes, but oh, his lashes....

"But there's another skill to lying. The most successful lie can be when you tell somebody something that they already believe to be true. They will accept it without question, even if it's a blatant lie."

She looked at him, waiting, but managing to stay silent.

"When I said that you weren't beautiful, he believed me. You believed me. Neither of you caught me in an out and out lie."

Her cheeks burned. "But it's not a lie. Nobody would believe you if you said *was*."

He yanked her to her feet. "Miss Granger, if we are to totally explore the power of the vows we took, I must tell you that over the past three weeks, you have become all that is beautiful to me."

Her heart didn't know whether to break or sing. If the vows made him feel this, and it wasn't real, then what did it mean? But if he felt it, if he really felt it...

She gave her head a fierce shake. "Then it's clearly the stupid vows. A...a blood oath, even, if it's *that* bloody powerful!"

"I'm not so certain..." He caught her face in his hand and held it still as his eyes roamed it, and everywhere his gaze touched she burned and at the same time felt frozen, unable to move any more than a rabbit caught in the hypnotic gaze of a snake.

"Professor," she sighed, her throat tight.

"Is it real? Or is it because of those horrible vows? Or..." His voice drifted until she thought he'd abandoned his thought, but then he finished, "Are the two mutually exclusive?"

She closed her eyes against him. "I think I'm totally embarrassed now. You can let go, and I'll..."

He stilled her with a gentle, "Shhh." He eased the robes...the magnificent robes, his beautiful gift to her...from her shoulders and placed them carefully on the arm of the chair.

He knelt before her, then. He placed her hands on his shoulders and, first left and then right, slipped the boots from her feet.

He slid his hands up her ankles...

"Have you ever seen such delicate ankles?" he asked softly, dragging his thumbs over them.

Her calves...

"Look at them," he urged her. "So feminine and still so strong." He kneaded them with his fingertips, and the pressure sent warmth skittering up her legs; she almost collapsed with her reaction.

Her knees...

"You are not going to convince me that my knees are..." she began, and broke off as he placed the tip of his tongue behind one knee and, ever so delicately, tasted his way up the back of her thigh, until not only was she unable to finish her thought, she could only gasp as he reached the sensitive crease and swell where thigh ended and bum began. His nose, his breath, his tongue, his lips...he was behind her and she had nothing to hold onto, nothing to support her, and when she thought she would collapse...

He scooped her into his arms and simply leaned against the cold, stone wall as he nuzzled her cheek and hair.

"Miss Granger..." His voice was rough velvet, a gentle rasp. "A mere three weeks, do you understand? Three fucking weeks."

Nothing that real, that powerful, could have started from nothing and come to this point in a mere three weeks. It was a painful fear, this thing that clenched her heart in a vise.

Until...

She felt laughter bubbling up in her. Pure and clean in her veins, in her heart, her lungs, her soul...

Her soul.

"A mere three weeks," she repeated. "Like puppies, newborn, waiting for our eyes to open."

He arched one brow at her, one perfect black brow, and if she could have hugged it, she would have, but instead kissed it, and the soft skin beneath it, and the delicate skin of his eyelid, and his gorgeous long eyelashes, and again, the bridge of his strong, beautiful nose. "It happened to us together," she whispered. And then, because she couldn't resist, and because it was true, she added, "Professor, I think you're quite beautiful, too."

"Oh fucking hell," he snapped. "I'm trying to be serious and..."

"So am I," she said, happily nuzzling his cheek with hers. "So am I."

XX

"Professor, what time is it?"

Her voice in the darkness was both irritant and blessing. Irritant, because the day had exhausted him, and he thought she finally slept. Blessing, because it was, after all, her voice in the darkness.

"There are precisely thirteen minutes left in your birthday," he said into her ear, so make the best of them, because I certainly am not up to letting this day stretch into the next."

"We need to plan," she said. "For after."

"After..." he prodded, along with a not so gentle prod of her naked hip pressed so delightfully into him.

"After it's over. After Halloween."

A chill settled over him.

"Because it's still my birthday and we are still an ordinary couple who get to make plans," she added.

"Indeed," he breathed, trying to calm his pulse.

"We haven't argued about the kinds of things married people argue about, and I think we really should, if we're to be ordinary, and so we must plan..."

"And argue about our plans?"

"Exactly."

He took a deep breath and then released it. "You may begin."

"Christmas."

"What's there to plan about Christmas?" Although the thought of an entirely new set of gifts for her was daunting.

"A panto. We must see a panto."

"Is it time for me to argue with you, yet?"

"Only if you want to." She pulled his arm more tightly about her waist. "And midnight mass at Winchester Cathedral."

"Now I will argue." He felt her stiffen in his arms. "I am not attending some ridiculous Muggle ritual to celebrate the birth of someone who has been dead for two thousand years, when we have very suitable rituals of our own to celebrate here."

"Oh, do be quiet. We're going to Winchester Cathedral. You'll like it. It's quite magical with chant and music and candlelight and...yes, Muggle magic, and...incense. We have incense."

"We, is it? You're regressing to Muggle?"

"Only on Christmas Eve, and believe me, you will be happy you went, I promise." She turned her face to seek his in the darkness and bestowed him with the sweetest, most gentle of kisses...off-center, but it was the thought that counted. And perhaps, well, it wasn't as if they'd actually be following through on any of these plans...

He felt the chill, again.

Perhaps it didn't hurt to agree to desperate plans whispered in the cold dark of the dungeon.

"And then, we'll go home to The Grange, and wake up on Christmas morning...I feel you glaring at me, and I simply don't care. You haven't experienced Christmas morning until you've been at The Grange..."

"We are officially ordinary. I'm married to a nag."

She gasped and rolled over to face him, and her intake of breath warned of a fresh diatribe, but he stopped her with a quick stroke of his tongue, which luckily managed to hit her lower lip.

Instead of arguing, she sighed and sank into him.

"We'll do it all, whatever you want, Christmas is yours. And now--it's midnight," he told her. He felt her smile against him, and finally allowed himself to relax, perchance to sleep and, if he were very lucky, to have very ordinary dreams.

## The Dark

*Chapter 48 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*As always, thank to JKR for the universe and characters, and kisses to GinnyW for beta-work!*

*Again, I've been blessed with a gorgeous bit of art...a banner that is sheer perfection. Thank you, crazywriterchic!*

## 48. THE DARK

She awoke to sensory bliss.

His chest was hard and warm against her cheek, with the softest brush of silky hair to provide texture.

His heart beat strong and steady in her ear, its gentle thump a comfort and anchor in the darkness.

He smelled of eucalyptus and spearmint and sweat and sex, and she was as enveloped by his scent as she was his arms.

With a tentative touch of her tongue to his skin, she tasted both salty and sweet, and a whisper of tart lemon.

Here in the darkness without witnesses, she found it so hard, so desperately hard not to say the words that threatened to spill from her...

That she loved him, oh, god, how much she loved him.

That the taste of what their life could be...should be...was almost poison, it was so sweet.

That returning to what they must return to...and she understood that they must, she truly did...bit into her heart like a jagged-edged dagger.

And in the darkness, the can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face darkness...

She tilted her head back and felt his eyes drilling into hers, as surely as if they'd been standing under the noonday sun. She caught her breath at the intensity. She wasn't sure whether it was true Occlumency, but she drew forth her warmest, most welcoming emotions as she sank closer to him, eyes wide.

His arms tightened around her.

"Don't get any ideas," she murmured, her throat raspy from sleep. "You wore me out yesterday." She curled against him with a long, soul-deep sigh.

"I wore you out?" His sharp bark of laughter shook her from the inside out and settled into her furthest extremities as delightful warmth. She felt him rub his face against her and felt his unshaven cheek snag in her hair most deliciously.

And then, because it was not only enough, it was *everything*, she nestled back against him to await the dawn.

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He'd been gone to the morning's double Potions class less than a minute when she whisked into his laboratory and began the task of recreating her own workspace. It took a bit of silly wand waving, but within a half hour, she was settled in with a makeshift file drawer hovering beside her, six pots of ink (blue, black, red, green, purple and sienna) in front of her, and a collection of quills sharpened and close at hand.

Her whiteboard and markers were still packed neatly under her bed in the trunk; she needed to focus on something other than vows for at least the morning.

The day stretched ahead of her. Being a nonstudent adult was beginning to feel very comfortable to her, indeed.

An hour later, she rolled her aching shoulders and closed her *Sentient Hogwarts?* file, having spent more time than she'd intended going over the list of anomalies that were Hogwarts-related.

She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that the very castle they lived in seemed involved in what was going on in her life. Yet the list of suspicious occurrences was too short to justify her suspicions. Yes, the Room of Requirement's gift of a Winchester Cathedral marriage was beyond strange. As easy as it would be to accept that it was done because she (somewhere in her ten-year-old fantasies) wanted it, the fact that the cathedral-recorded marriage protected her from attempts at annulment...and worse...implied a bigger picture than simply responding to Miss Hermione Jean Granger's needs.

And the Muggle vows. Coincidence? (If so, fortunate or un?) Or part of a bigger plan?

There were also the wards.

When the professor had returned from Voldemort injured, the wards had held against all attempts to contact them. Even the headmaster had been unable to breach them.

Hermione, sitting there terrified, had a much more compelling understanding of how many times the Floo had flared green with nothing happening beyond that, of how many times the door to the corridor had shimmered. She certainly wasn't responsible for that. Professor Snape had been surprised that they held, but so much had happened so quickly after that, she'd never actually discussed it with him. Were his wards so strong they would even keep the headmaster out?

Surely there was no other reason for them to have held.

She pushed that aside and started on her next folder, the one marked Hogwarts: A History, which had nothing to do with Hogwarts or History or the book so named, but was instead her research on horcruxes.

She snorted softly. Nobody would bother a folder marked Hogwarts: A History. Still, she had to release two hex traps before opening it. She wouldn't leave something like this around for someone to snoop in without repercussions.

The top sheet listed the horcruxes. Beneath it were the parchments that detailed their (her, of course) research, searches and destruction.

*TR's Diary*

*Hufflepuff Cup*

*Ravenclaw Dagger*

*Gryffindor Hammer*

*Slytherin (?)*

*Nagini (?)*

They couldn't be certain about Nagini, but everything pointed in that direction. The Slytherin artefact remained a mystery. And Halloween was fast approaching.

She opened her battered copy of *Hogwarts: A History* to the chapters on the Founders, retrieved *Magical Encyclopaedia, Vol. II Historic Magical Artefacts* and opened the Salazar Slytherin biography to the Hogwarts years.

Again.

She spent the rest of the morning adding fresh ink stains to her fingertips as she compiled new lists of similarities and differences in the tale the books revealed.

If only she had the elusive Vigor translation of Salazar Slytherin's diary.

She checked her notes and decided.

It was time to visit the library.

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Madam Pince gave Hermione a most disdainful stare. "Yet again, I must direct you to your...to Professor Snape."

"He checked the Vidor out, too?" Hermione asked, astonished.

"No, dear," the librarian said with a sniff. "Professor Snape owns the only Vidor translation I've ever seen. If you need it for your project, you'll have to ask him."

Hermione restrained herself from rolling her eyes, but only just. "Thank you," she said politely.

"I must say, you're looking very well today," Madam Pince added, and Hermione wondered what that was about as she gave a quick nod and stepped away from the desk.

She glanced back at her favourite table and felt a twinge of wistful longing. It had been so long since she'd spread out there to study, knowing that her friends always knew where to find her if they needed her.

The twinge became sharp pain when she saw Harry and Ron there, with Ginny pointing a stabbing finger at their Transfiguration texts, clearly forcing them to study. Hermione pulled back quickly before they could see her. Good for Ginny. If anyone could hold them in line, it would be Ginny.

And she wasn't jealous. Not at all.

She was relieved.

She stood there with her eyes closed and took a few deep breaths... and realized that she truly was relieved. That sharp pain had faded as quickly as it had come.

She was turning to leave when Ginny appeared in front of her. "Hermione!" she whispered softly. "Just who I need to see!"

Hermione allowed Ginny to tug her out into the cold corridor. "I need to talk to you," the ginger-haired dynamo said. "Privately."

Hermione cast a glance over her shoulder through the open door and back at the table by the window. Harry and Ron were bent over their books, oblivious to anything else. "All right, where?" she asked.

Minutes later they were in Ginny's empty dorm room. Ginny pulled Hermione onto the bed beside her and gave her a look that was almost threatening in its intensity. "Teach me about sex."

"What?" Hermione gasped.

"Harry won't touch me! And what if...what if..." Ginny's eyes filled with tears. "What if he dies and we never get to? You've got to help me, to teach me what to do so that he can't say no!"

"Ginny, you're only..."

"Don't talk to me about age. You're not that much older than me, and you're already married and doing it any time you want!"

"Ginny, is this about sex, or is this about Harry?" Hermione asked quietly.

"It's about everything. It's about Harry and how much I love him and how much I want to give him and how much I want to know what it feels like to experience love in his arms and...I'm so afraid something will happen and we'll never..." She burst into tears.

Hermione stroked her shoulder, her gleaming red hair....

Had he admired it? How could he not? It put Narcissa's and Bellatrix's to shame. She forced herself to shake that awful thought away and was ashamed when she realized she'd let her own petty concerns distract her from Ginny's true distress.

She felt helpless. Who was she to tell Ginny anything, and most specifically, who was she to tell Ginny no?

But how could she help her? It's not as if she was about to give her lessons!

And if Ginny and Harry actually...

And if they got caught...

Hermione realized she was holding her breath.

Ron would be furious.

Molly Weasley would kill her.

What would Professor Snape think?

And should she care what any of them thought?

"Ginny," she said softly, "I have a book...."

Ginny sat up abruptly, her face red and splotchy, and she blurted, "Of course you do!" and burst into laughter. She began scrubbing her tears from her face with a serviceable white handkerchief and then blew her nose.

Hermione waited for her to collect herself, wondering how big a mistake she was making. "Can you safeguard it? I don't want it becoming a Gryffindor artefact," she muttered, picturing the ignominious entry under her name in some future edition of *Hogwarts: A History*. "Hermione Snape, responsible for the fall of the wizarding world to Lord Voldemort when her scandalous Muggle sex manual resulted in the previously valiant House of Gryffindor absenting themselves from the Final Battle to shag."

Ginny snorted softly. "As if I couldn't hide something. With my brothers and my mother..."

"Point well made," Hermione relented. "All right. I'll get it to you."

"Is it..." Ginny began, and then broke off. "Is sex..."

"What?" Hermione.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said, and she looked horribly ashamed. "I don't want to..."

"Spit it out, Ginevra," Hermione sighed.

"It's just that as Harry gets more powerful, his body...oh, Hermione, he's turned into a man overnight. His shoulders, his arms...he's so strong and beautiful and I love him so and..." She stared at Hermione, her eyes hollow with pained sympathy. "I'm sitting here planning something wonderful with the bloke I've loved since I was nine years old, and you're stuck with Snape."

Hermione blinked. She wanted to snatch her friend's hair out by the roots. She wanted to laugh at her for being so ignorant. She wanted to defend her professor, her husband, her love and force Ginny to understand...but what business was it of Ginny's?

Professor Snape wasn't a fresh-minted man, still dewy behind the ears. He wasn't her *boyfriend*, to giggle about with the other girls and compare notes about his prowess.

But he didn't deserve scorn, and she, his wife, didn't deserve pity.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said, oblivious. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. I mean, I should be so lucky to still have Harry beside me when he's as old as Snape, and if he is, I won't care if he's strong and muscled or not..." She looked rather doubtful, though.

"Ginny!" Hermione finally managed to say, her head spinning. Professor Snape was muscled. He had strong shoulders and thighs and arms, and yes, he was lean, but to think that he wasn't strong! Hermione hadn't spent a lot of time dwelling on such things; she'd never really given a lot of thought to male bodies prior to their marriage, and now she only had the one for reference, but whatever image Ginny had of him was clearly inadequate. "I'm not going to discuss my private life with you, and if one word of this comes back to me, I'll hex you! But I can assure you that Professor Snape has a..." She broke off, embarrassed and, for once in her life, at a loss for words. Finally, her cheeks burning, she forced herself to say, "He has a very nice body."

"He does?" Ginny was clearly gobsmacked.

"He does," Hermione snapped. "Now, let's not discuss it any..."

But the expression on Ginny's face stopped her.

Ginny's eyes grew large and, after a moment, knowing and even amazed. "You're right, Hermione... he would have to, wouldn't he?"

"Have to? Why would he have to?"

"The magic." Ginny shook her head slowly and shot Hermione a guilty look. "Okay, it's enough to make me ill trying to imagine a nude Snape..."

"Then don't! Fucking hell, Ginny!" Hermione gasped in horror. "I don't want you imagining my husband nude!"

"That's not the point. The point is...it's Harry's magic that is making him stronger. All the Quidditch players are muscled, of course, but with Harry it's more. Controlling magic is physical. The more powerful the wizard, the stronger his body is. And Professor Snape is a very powerful..." Ginny broke off.

Hermione lowered her eyes and smoothed her robes primly.

"Wow."

Hermione shot her an evil look. "You're extrapolating all sorts of things. Whatever you imagine you know about my personal life, just be sure it doesn't become Gryffindor Tower gossip, or I'll tell your mother you're shagging Harry."

"You wouldn't!"

Hermione arched one eyebrow.

"Okay, okay. I wasn't going to gossip about it, anyway." Ginny suddenly examined Hermione more closely. She raised Hermione's hand and pushed her robe back, exposing Hermione's arm.

Her forearm was still feminine, yet the muscle definition was remarkable. Hermione stared at her own arm. When had that happened?

Ginny lowered it thoughtfully. "Maybe it's the wandless magic."

"That's something else nobody can know about," Hermione said urgently.

Ginny nodded. "I know. Harry and Ron know. It goes no farther."

Hermione nodded, relieved.

Ginny gave her one last probing look. "I didn't think Charlie could possibly know anything. He's just a man, after all, but... he's right, isn't he? You're really happy."

Hermione met her gaze straight on without wavering. "You know, for a smart witch, you can be really slow sometimes. Ron figured that out ages ago."

Ginny leaned closer and grinned. "Now, about that book..."

XX

He had one hour. One fucking hour before he had to start a long night of glaring over the Great Hall and patrolling the halls, flushing out young lovers when he'd much prefer to be...

He cut that thought off. After the previous day... Merlin.

Still. One hour of blessed solitude. One hour of her.

He entered their quarters expecting to find her draped across the bed studying or perhaps even asleep. Instead, she sat before the fire reading.

"What is this?" he demanded.

She looked up at him coyly, her eyes peeking from beneath her lashes. "My chair," she responded with her usual clear tones.

He stared at the ridiculous piece of chintz-covered furniture that once was her chair, but now was something different, at the bare toes peeking from under her robes where she'd curled her legs under her. "Your chair was smaller. It, in fact, was a *chair*."

"This is a wider chair."

"Are you planning on gaining weight?"

"I thought this would be big enough to share." She slid over, making room.

"Not unless someone is willing to tolerate a very tight squeeze," he growled.

"That was rather the point."

She patted the seat beside her, and he found himself easing into it, and yes, it was a damned tight fit, and yes, now that he was firmly ensconced in it with her, with the insufferably charming Miss Granger, he realized that being a tight fit was rather the point, indeed.

She placed the ridiculously rose-spangled teacup in his hands, and he sipped without even trying to disguise his reaction. Merlin's fucking ghost, but he'd never imagined ending a day with such a glorious pursuit as sipping tea in close proximity to the minx that was his wife.

She leaned against him, and he adjusted his arm to give her closer access...and finally let it rest around her in a half-embrace.

Awkward fucking chair.

Ugly fucking teacups.

Horrid, horrid hair...

Which he found himself stroking gently, as he sipped.

She attempted to tunnel into his side.

"You're like having a cat," he announced. "Constantly rubbing and shedding."

"Ridiculous," she murmured. "I'm like a dog. Cats are aloof and troublesome. Dogs are affectionate and faithful."

A sudden image of an Animagus that he'd prefer not to remember flashed through his memory. "You are not a dog."

"Well, I'm certainly not a cat."

He snorted. "You have a cat."

"Because nobody else wanted him. Somebody had to take him. And besides, I wasn't allowed to bring my dog to Hogwarts." The last was said softly.

"You have a dog?"

"Had. She died during my fourth year. They didn't tell me until I went home and... she was gone." So wistful, that voice. So yearning.

"Don't tell me you want a dog."

"Someday. Don't worry. It will love you beyond reason, and you'll be unable to resist," she sighed happily. "My mother claims to dislike dogs, but whenever she's at The Grange, she always has one or two at her feet, and the only thing that stops her from taking them to town is that they'd be miserable without the fields to run in."

Shit. He'd forgotten. "Your mother sent you a message with your olives."

"Oh, dear. What now?"

"She said," he began and suddenly wished he'd just forgotten the whole thing, "that my efforts to give you an appropriate birthday gave her hope." He didn't restrain his upper lip from curling or his voice from sneering. As if he cared whether the harridan approved of him or not. "And said for you to use your 'Grandmother Granger' as an inspiration. Would that be the grandmother who is a witch with the heavenly tea or the one who discarded husbands like soiled handkerchiefs? My guess would be the latter." Nor could he blame her for hoping the girl would move on to greener pastures, he thought with a lurch in his chest.

She sat up and looked at him, perplexed. "Grandmother Granger was not a witch, but what does Mummy mean?" She glowered suspiciously, and he had to fight the urge to tease the corner of her mouth with his thumb until she smiled again. "It can't be nice. She still hasn't forgiven me for..." She flashed him a defiant look as if he were the one causing trouble. "For getting married."

"Then she's an intelligent woman."

She looked as if he'd slapped her.

"Holy fucking hell," he grated, "who would be happy that their seventeen-year-old daughter was forced into a marriage with a man twice her..."

"With the most powerful, intelligent, valiant, wizard I've ever met? A man who is tender and..."

"Dark."

"You are not!" She shot him a sideways look and corrected with a flicker of concern, ever the meticulous Miss Granger, "Well, only a little bit."

But her eyes were bright and shimmering, and her body suddenly posture-perfect and erect beside him, not nestled in for the winter, and he cursed the fates yet again for putting this life...this fierce yet fragile heart...in his hands for safekeeping.

"Fucking hell," he snarled and pulled her back to him. "This chair isn't big enough for you to get in a snit. If you wanted a chair fit for quarrelling, you should have transfigured it into a sofa."

"How short-sighted of me," she complained, her face buried in his chest as she curled her body around him and snaked her arms around his neck.

Her hair was wild and wilful and seemed perfectly capable of snaring him in a web of her making.

And just when he felt the peace seeping into his joints, easing through his veins, she sat up abruptly, and their faces were so close, all he would need to do to kiss her would be turn his head just so and lean forward mere inches...

"Oh, my god, Grandmother Granger! I know what Mummy meant!"

"Must you call your mother 'Mummy'? I already feel like I'm robbing the cradle." He glowered at her in an effort to shut off the flow of words and bring back the curl of woman wrapped around him like a soft quilt with bony elbows and knees.

Glowing didn't do the job.

But her face...her face was filled with wonder, and he forced himself to pay attention, to jerk his mind away from how she felt and what comfort settled over him when she

was near. "What about your grandmother who was a witch?" he sighed.

"It was the war," she breathed, her eyes glowing. "It was the most romantic story I ever heard, and she told it to me again and again and again.... How she was at the cathedral polishing brass, and a dashing young captain of the Royal Hampshire's swept her off her feet, and because he had influence with the cathedral...he was the baronet's son and already a war hero, after all...they were married two days later."

"Fucking hell."

"It was the war," she explained. "Everything was so urgent, so immediate." Her eyes grew distant, and her eyebrows met in a soft frown. "His regiment shipped out the day after their wedding and landed on the beaches of Normandy." She swallowed. "It was always such a romantic story, but now...now it's terrifying. Now I understand what war means.... It was more than just love at first sight, wasn't it? It was about fear and desperation--" She shook her head a little, as if to force away bad thoughts. "My grandparents were the happiest people I ever knew. His father never forgave him for marrying outside his circle, but, oh, they were so happy, and when all was said and done, he became the baronet and my grandmother was Lady Granger, and they're the ones we'll always remember, not his horrid father."

This time when her eyes claimed his, they were deep and dark with emotion. "She understands. She forgives me. That's what she's telling me." She covered her mouth with ink-stained fingers, and he saw she was struggling to hold back tears.

"And she seemed like such a sensible woman," he muttered. "Romantic fools, the lot of you." But his voice was soft, and her eyes filled with joy as she leaned closer until their lips met.

And he considered what a very sensible chair she'd crafted as she filled his arms and senses and time fell away.

XX

After dinner, Hermione reduced the sex manual until it was smaller than the palm of her hand and tucked it deep into her robe pocket, then slipped into the dungeon corridor to make her way up to Gryffindor Tower.

She'd barely made it around the first corner when she smelled him, the reek of him, and froze.

Draco Malfoy was blocking her way, his back against the wall, a cigarette dangling boldly from one hand.

"Granger. I've been waiting for you."

"It's Snape," she correctly crisply, "and I can't imagine why."

"What would you say if I told you that I actually fucking feel sorry for you and wanted to warn you of something?"

"I'd have to be incredibly stupid to trust any warning from you, Malfoy."

"Unless, of course, it rang true. Unless you recognized the truth, even coming from me."

"And why would you want to warn me or help me?"

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I have my own selfish reasons. But they happen to coincide with warning you, so we both profit."

She wasn't supposed to be alone with any male. She'd promised. The professor was on duty making his rounds; she was unlikely to be seen, but she had no desire to spend another moment in an empty dungeon corridor with Draco Malfoy.

She attempted to step around him.

He closed his hand around her forearm, and she fought hard to control the surge of anger...and magic...that swept through her. "Don't touch me."

"All right," he said, releasing her. "But hear me out."

"Make it fast."

"Feeling anything odd, lately? Anything hard to imagine in the cold light of day?" He drew deeply from his cigarette and then lowered it, staring at her through narrowed grey eyes. "The Dark Lord wants you, Granger. He wants to break Potter, and he wants to do it by controlling you, and he's using Severus to do it. Whatever it is you think you're feeling? Whatever it is that has you fucking glowing every time you look at him? It's not real. It's a spell. You're getting sucked in, Granger, and I thought you'd be too intelligent for that."

She rolled her eyes. "Let me pass," she ordered.

"Granger, you're an idiot. You think you're afraid of my family? You'd have been safe with us. It's Snape you should have been afraid of. He'd do anything for the Dark Lord. He sits at his feet like a pet and would do anything to please him, and that means serving you up to him on a sterling silver platter. He's securing his position by using you, and you're too fucking stupid to know it."

Flashes of images flew past her, images of the professor at the Dark Lord's feet, crouching before him, kneeling and prostrating himself, and then of the professor and her, his hands, his lips, his...

She broke away from those images, shook them off.

She drew herself up straight and stared Malfoy down.

"Out of my way," she said, her voice low and barely controlled. "And don't come to me with your lies again."

He stepped aside, his eyes wary, and she swept by him.

But just before she turned the last corner, he called after her, "Imagine how Dark a spell it has to be to do this to you, Granger. Just imagine."

She cast a cleansing spell as she walked, chasing away the stench, longing to chase it from her mind, as well.

It wasn't until she was safe in Gryffindor Tower and had silently given Ginny the book that she allowed reactions to quake through her.

Alarmed, Ginny sat her in a squashy chair and knelt before her. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "Did someone hurt you?"

By this point Ron and Harry had joined her, and they knelt on her other side. "Okay," Ron said, "do I get to kill Snape now?"

And laughter won out over fear and rage, and she felt relief course through her. "Not Snape, you berk."

"Ah," Ginny said knowingly. "Malfoy."

"Yes," she said, "Malfoy. But you don't get to kill him, either."



"Damn," Harry muttered.

Hermione sank back in the chair, relieved. Something distinct and comfortable clicked into place.

Hating Malfoy was so normal; it almost felt like old times.

Except that part of her was already stirring, already yearning for the dungeons and the quarters and the glorious bed that awaited her.

"Anybody want to walk me back down?" she asked.

Soon, they all four were walking and laughing together, and she didn't even mind that they were talking about Quidditch.

There would be no talk of Quidditch once her dark wizard joined her in their corner of the dungeons.

XX

He entered their quarters.

Steam clung to the air from one of her never-ending baths.

A closed book, bookmarked and ready for reading, languished on the faded chintz seat.

He looked beyond and...

Bloody hell.

There she was on the bed, wearing the white shirt and, it would seem, nothing else.

Bent over with her hair fanned in a bushy toss up.

Evidently examining her own quim.

His mouth went dry, and he had no words...no fucking words at all.

"I wish I'd looked before," she said, her voice muffled. She raised her face then, leaving her open legs and all that lush pink flesh between them exposed, and as much time as he'd spent there, he found himself feeling awkward and speechless at the sight.

"I don't know what it looked like when I was a virgin," she continued, "so I'm not sure what might have changed."

"Miss Granger..." he managed. Barely. "Your hymen, or the remnants thereof, aren't readily visible..."

"That's not what I'm looking for," she sighed, closing her legs. "I mean, I know that changed. It's the rest. It's whatever...well, perhaps it's the clitoris, I mean, I'd assume it is, but I'm trying to determine what changed.... Besides the scar. It's rather pretty, isn't it? Just a thin silvery line...I don't know what you were so upset about. I expected something horrid..."

For the first time, she seemed hesitant, and he was grateful for whatever sense of modesty that might have stemmed her flow of words, if only so that he could breathe again.

But her pupils were large and black, and her lips parted and moist. He dropped to his knees beside the bed and pulled her to him. "What?" he murmured into her throat. "What are you looking for?"

"For what changed...for what you did to me, when you made me *feel*..."

She sounded choked, as if she held back tears, and he cupped her face and studied it in concern.

"I want it to be something you did, or something about our...our bonding, our *real* bonding, something about *us*. Not about the Ministry, and not..." She drew in a sharp breath. "Not something... *Dark*."

She couldn't duck her face; he held it still. Instead, she lowered her eyes and swallowed convulsively.

"Dark?" It cut him, that she even suspected such a thing. But why wouldn't she? What was he, if not Dark?

"I know it's not that," she rushed on. "I just wish...I just wish I could hex Draco Malfoy into oblivion. I wish I could..."

Cold fury seized him. "What did he do?"

"He said that you're using me, and I know you aren't. He said that I'm under a Dark spell, and I know I'm not. He said that if I was feeling anything new...anything unexplained...it was Dark magic you were using on me to bring me to the Dark Lord's side, and I know they're lies, I know it..."

"You're babbling, and you can't hex him, but what the hell were you doing alone with him to begin with?" he demanded, the blood roaring in his veins at the very thought.

"He was waiting for me in the corridor, and I can't stay locked up here all day and night and never leave! And I know he's lying, but then I was here alone for hours waiting for you, and I couldn't think of anything else, and I remembered the other brides and how they were upset about sex, and I'm not, in fact, I like it very much, but I want it to be about you and about us and not..."

She broke off, finally overwhelmed by everything assaulting her, and he wanted nothing but to hold her and absorb anything that distressed her so.

"My girl," he murmured into her temple, soothing her with his hands, his lips. "My darling girl."

She froze in his arms.

Before he could react, she was scrambling backward on the bed, scrambling away from him.

"Why did you say that?" she demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" He was blindsided; he didn't know what to say, what to do, whether to reach for her or to draw his wand in self defense.

He wondered what time of month it was, but was too distracted to figure it out.

"You don't say things like that to me," she insisted.

He didn't. Of course he didn't. Where had they come from, those words?

"Call me insufferable."

"You're insufferable," he growled and meant it.

And then she was back, clinging to him, nibbling his ear, latching onto his throat...

"*Fuck...*" he breathed.

"We can't, not until we know that the potions worked," she responded, ever the literal-minded. "But we can do other things...."

She purred like that and then insisted she wasn't a cat?

"It's not Dark," he said, pressing a moist kiss against her cheek. "Trust me. This isn't Dark."

"I trust you," she whispered, pulling his hand between her legs, and he found her wet and open to him. He slid his fingers over the moist nub of her clitoris...had it changed? Interesting thought, that...and slipped one finger inside her, and as she dissolved into his arms with a moan, it seemed to decide of its own volition to linger and play....

Later in the dark, when they were both spent and languid and she was already asleep, he pushed a handful of hair out of his face and settled her more comfortably into the curve of his body.

His last thought before sleeping was the certainty that nothing...*nothing*...about his Miss Granger could ever be Dark.

And that he'd never felt so safe as he did now, when holding her in his arms.

*A/N: I'm flattered and honoured to be nominated for a Quill to Parchment award as best new author. There are so many wonderful writers in that category that I will be happy if you even consider voting for me!*

*But please, please vote for my fabulous beta, GinnyW! I've been blessed with wonderful betas, both those who have been regular and those who have pitched in when I needed extra help. But GinnyW regularly puts up with my constant emails, my incessant dithering and my whining and moaning and angsting, and she deserves your vote just for always being there!*

*All nominees are listed here:*

<http://awards.quilltoparchment.com/nominee.html>

*Thank you!*

## Howling

*Chapter 49 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*I'm flattered and honoured to be nominated for a Quill to Parchment award as best new author. There are so many worthy nominees that I'd be appreciative of your consideration, whether or not you vote for me.*

*But please, please vote for my fabulous beta, GinnyW! In this chapter alone, her input has been worth your vote. Don't skip the "beta" vote just because you don't know anything about it. Vote for GinnyW. Take my word for it...she's worth it!*

*All nominees are listed here: [awards.quilltoparchment.com/nominee.html](http://awards.quilltoparchment.com/nominee.html)*

*Thank you!*

*As always, thank to JKR for the universe and characters, and kisses to GinnyW for beta-work!*

### 49. HOWLING

Hermione spent the first half of the day on Saturday avoiding Ginny's dismayed stares and the second half of the day on Saturday simply avoiding Ginny.

Clearly, Ginny had read the book.

Clearly, she was doing more than imagining people nude.

She was imagining...not just people, but Hermione and Severus...having sex.

And from the expressions on her face that ranged from speculative to envious to horror-struck...she was imagining it many different ways.

Hermione eventually decided to stay in the dungeon.

And watch her lists grow longer.

And feel the clock ticking toward Halloween as relentlessly as a heartbeat.

And hope Professor Snape didn't catch Ginny giving *him* looks.

Or looking him over.

What the hell was she thinking when she gave her that book?

She had to get back to work, to thinking about something else, something not about sex.

Professor Snape found her in his lab, working, and glared at her from the doorway. "You aren't eating dinner?"

Dobby chose that moment to appear behind him with a crack and put a tray of sandwiches and a jug of pumpkin juice on the table.

"Thank you," Hermione called out to him.

But the house-elf gave the professor a wary look and cast a quick bow with a, "Missy is welcome," and cracked back out too quickly for more conversation.

"Why?" he asked.

"I've got so much to do." She gestured at her work.

He leaned against the door. "Do you think you could find it within your abilities to share my lab with me tonight?"

"Oh." She began gathering up parchments. "I'll get everything out of your way."

"Did I ask you to leave?"

"But, if you need me to leave..."

"It's not volatile and I don't need a lot of space."

So. He wanted to brew here, with her, when he could have brewed in his classroom.

"All right," she said, oddly embarrassed.

He bent over and picked up a parchment that had fallen on the floor, and then gave her a sharp look. "What's wrong now?"

"Wrong? Why would anything be wrong?"

"Your lower lip."

She sucked it into her mouth and realized she'd been chewing it.

He stepped closer, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "What are they up to?"

They. They? She shook her head, and then realized... "Oh, they're not...it's not about Harry and Ron. I mean...it's nothing." She glanced away from his sceptical expression and began straightening and moving her things to one end of the lab table.

And still, he glared at her, waiting.

"It's just that..." She cut her eyes up at him and down again. "Last night. You... I was upset and you...you called me a girl." The last words were almost whispered.

He stood stiffly, much more stiffly than before, when he'd merely been glaring at her. Now she didn't even dare look up at him. She just pushed the six pots of ink into alphabetical order...black, blue, green, purple red, and sienna...and continued casually, "Because you thought I was... acting like a child? Letting Draco get up my nose like that?"

"No," he snapped. "I was not thinking you a child."

"Oh," she said and released a breath she hadn't noticed holding until it left her in a gentle whoosh of relief. "Oh," she repeated and felt colour flooding her face, and kept it angled down where he couldn't see it.

"Do you honestly think I could..." He broke off, the bitterness in his voice tangible. "I couldn't. I don't."

"In that case, if you ever want to...I mean, not that you have to...but if you ever decide to call me that again..." She gave a little shrug. "Well, I won't get upset at you again."

"Indeed."

She didn't dare look at him.

"I'll keep that in mind." And after a moment, he added, "But at the moment, insufferable seems more appropriate."

She let out an exasperated huff. "I ordered extra sandwiches."

"I suppose," he said with a scowl, "I could forgo the pleasures of the Great Hall."

She went to scoot past him through the doorway, but he reached out and snagged her arm and spun her to face him.

He stroked her hair away from her face and cupped her cheek in his hand and stared down at her until she thought she'd burst from not breathing.

Unable to take such scrutiny a moment longer, she closed the space between them and brushed his lips with hers.

And every muscle, every corpuscle, every part of her body sang a simple, yes....

His fingers stroked into her hair, and when the kiss ended, he muttered, "Totally insufferable."

And the warmth coiled through her, because the word "insufferable" curled her toes, the way *he* said it.

She tilted her chin up and smiled. "But then again... so are you."

She then headed for the sandwiches, feeling his eyes follow her every step.

XX

Hermione was saved from having to talk to Ginny before breakfast the next morning by Professor Snape's presence at her side.

She simply had to avoid Ginny's desperate attempts to make eye contact, which she did by keeping her nose buried in the *Daily Prophet* while the professor drank vast quantities of tea from his personal teapot and otherwise attempted to supplement his day's desire for vitriol and nerves.

When the owls came flapping into the Great Hall, she paid no attention, not expecting anything from her parents, and thus was surprised when an official-looking scroll plopped into her porridge.

"*Scourgify*," she said, wincing as she retrieved it, dripping, and handed the owl a crust of fry bread rather than the bacon it would have much preferred.

She unrolled hers and then realized that Professor Snape had one that was identical.

Quick glances between the two revealed that they were being given until the end of the day to fulfil the contractual obligations of their marriage...

Hermione leapt to her feet, unable to sit still. "We did it," she crowed softly and saw the corresponding gleam in his eyes, even as he sniffed his disdain at her public display.

"If you don't mind, I am eating," he said silkily, but his tone promised... oh yes, *he promised*.

She looked down at him, aware that now they were most certainly being watched by most in the Hall.

And it oozed through her, cold and slimy, that they would certainly be "watched" when they had sex.

Oh, maybe not literally, but there were now officials...at the very least, Percy, and maybe more...who would be avidly awaiting indication that she and he had....

She rolled her scroll up and shoved it into her pocket. She rarely had reason to wear her backpack, now that she wasn't keeping a class schedule.

"I'm leaving," she said. "I lost my appetite."

His eyes met hers. "I have a Head of House meeting, and then the werewolf is coming to pick up the Wolfsbane I brewed last night."

She merely nodded, incapable of words. They actually had to work it into their schedule.

Sick rose in her throat.

She felt his eyes on her as she exited into the Entrance Hall, along with the eyes of more people than she cared to think about.

Including, it was suddenly evident, Ginny.

"Hermione Granger, this book, this book!" Ginny gasped, following her out the door. "The pictures! Where on earth did you get this?"

Hermione headed down the stairs to the dungeons, leaving Ginny to follow her.

When she was sure no one else was following, she finally cast a Muffliato and said, "My mother gave it to me two years ago. I brought it with me to school this year because I thought if I had to marry... Well, at the time, I thought I might have to force somebody to read it before allowing them near me in my virginal state," she sniffed. "I was not going to allow some teenaged boy to go at me like I was some sort of a cow and him a bull in rut."

"Hermione!"

Hermione stopped and Ginny plowed into her. "What? I gave you the book because you asked, and now you're shocked? Grow up, Ginny. It's a scary world out here where the grownups live."

She'd taken three steps before she felt the twinge of guilt and spun to face her friend. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...this is just a bad day for me."

Ginny stared at her. "There are things in this book...things that a decent person would never do!"

Hermione sighed. She didn't want to know which things Ginny might classify as indecent; she really did not. "It's not a textbook. You don't have to master every technique for a grade."

"Oh, Merlin," Ginny moaned. "Did you?"

"All right, that's it, that's the limit, I refuse to deal with this any more. Give me back my book!"

"No!" Ginny clutched it to her breasts. "No, please...I just wanted to know...I needed to know...do nice girls do these things?"

"I'm sure some do and some don't." Hermione sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "What answer are you wanting? Do you want me to give you permission? Or do you want me to tell you don't have to? Because frankly, I can give you either answer with a clear conscience."

Ginny sighed in turn. "I don't know."

"Then figure it out before you go to Harry. That's all I know to tell you."

Belatedly, Ginny asked, "Are you all right? You seem...stressed."

"Yes, stressed might be one way of putting it. Bullied and beleaguered might be more appropriate...and before you even start, it's not the professor. It's the Ministry of Magic's Marriage Law Enforcement Division, or more specifically, Percy Wanking Weasley."

"Oh, Hermione. I'm so sorry."

"Right. Well, I need to go..."

"Wait, one thing." Ginny's face flamed as she drew closer, but her eyes gleamed. "How would I get Harry to use his tongue on..."

"Ginevra Weasley!" Hermione shrieked. "Get out of my dungeon before I hex you!"

She dropped the Muffliato and dashed the rest of the way down the stairs and finally made it to the safety of their quarters, where she flung herself across the bed and anticipated sex.

Which was a good thing.

And being monitored.

Which was not.

And then she sat up, energy practically crackling from her fingertips.

"I am not going to perform on command," she snarled. "This is going to end, here and now."

She headed for the lab, for her parchments and quills and, almost as an afterthought, she Accioed the professor's blood red grading ink.

XX

He'd had to listen to Pomona and Filius each go on about the difficulties of dealing with married teenaged couples until he would gladly have hexed them all out of their miseries. He'd alternated between wanting to box their ears for not having more understanding of what the bloody dunderheads were going through and wanting to destroy the Ministry of Magic and anyone who had ever set foot in the place.

Which, he noted with grim satisfaction, included everyone sitting at the table.

But the meeting finally ended, and he was able to make his way back down to where she waited for him, blowing through students like a whirlwind with no regard to the debris in its wake.

She was miserable.

He hadn't counted on that. Even with the success of her potion...and it was her potion, though the very idea still amazed him, that she'd created such a thing...she still sat in their quarters waiting for him to come invade her body for the Ministry's nefarious pleasure.

And the image of Lucius Malfoy floated before his eyes, and he suddenly knew he would not be going back to greet his blushing bride.

Not bloody yet.

XX

"Severus!" Cissy was surprised by his arrival, as well she should be. "Is the Dark Lord expecting you?"

"This is purely a social call," he responded. "Where's Lucius?"

She tilted her nose higher. "With our Lord."

"I wouldn't dream of interrupting," he said smoothly. "If you'd please send him a message. Let him know that I await his convenience."

He sank into an uncomfortable chair and stretched his legs and templed his fingers under his chin as if he owned the place.

It was less than two minutes before he'd been summoned.

He didn't bother trying to hide his smirk. The Dark Lord would not make him wait, even if his arrival cut into Lucius's precious private audience.

They were in Lucius's study, the Dark Lord enthroned in Lucius's leather wingback chair. He rose and offered his ring. "Severusss, to what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Severus kissed his ring and raised his eyes to the glowing red orbs. "My Lord." And then, most graciously, he nodded to the other man. "My visit is personal with Lucius, my Lord. I didn't intend to interrupt you."

"Nonsense. There is no such thing as you interrupting me." The Dark Lord sat again and crossed his legs with a display of elegance. "And Lucius has no secrets from me. By all means, have your visit."

Lucius's smile was almost genuine. "Severus. I'm surprised to see you here today. I would assume you had more pressing matters to attend to."

"Indeed? And what might those matters be?"

Lucius gave a negligent wave of his hand. "I assume performing your marital duties must be taxing when one's partner is a Mu..." He cleared his throat delicately. "Muggle-born and one's own constitution is not suited to such regular physical endeavours. You've been single and celibate for a very long time, Severus. This must be a difficult challenge for you. If only you'd allowed Draco to..."

Severus pinned Lucius with a cold stare, even as his lips curled in a smile. "It seems that my bride has grown uncomfortable under Ministry surveillance. Uncomfortable enough to devise a way to block the Ministry's efforts to monitor our sex life. I'm sorry to burst any delusional bubbles you might have blown for your own entertainment, Lucius, but a sex life that does indeed exist. However, as of this morning we received official notification from the Ministry of Magic that her efforts have succeeded, that the attempts to monitor us have been in vain." He watched Lucius attempt to register this information.

"You mean, you devised a way to..."

"She did. And because I value what little peace I am allowed, not to mention the fact that she has grown to 'quite like sex,' I am here to tell you to call off your pet dogs at the Ministry. Use whatever influence you have to remove their interest from my private life. Anything you can do on my behalf will be greatly appreciated..." He let his voice drift and then glanced significantly at the Dark Lord and nodded respectfully. "In the near future."

The future in which he would be the Dark Lord's right hand.

And Lucius would be toadying for his favours.

Lucius's face suffused with an unbecoming shade of red, and he would have spoken, if a house-elf hadn't popped in at that moment with a red envelope on a silver tray. The house-elf trembled so violently the envelope began sliding sideways.

Lucius snatched the envelope and stared at it in disbelief, then dismissed the house-elf with a hard cuff to the head.

Narcissa rushed in with such speed, her hair was mussed.

A little.

"*Mon cher,*" she said, "what on earth is that?"

"A Howler," he announced with distaste, dangling the red envelope from his fingertips as if it were soiled.

"Fascinating," Severus said, intrigued despite himself. "You realize the longer you put off opening it, the louder it gets? And," he added with an innocent shrug, "there is no way to destroy it before it delivers its message."

"I realize that," Lucius snapped. With a wave of his wand, the envelope opened and fell to the floor, and...

*Fucking hell.*

Miss Granger's clear, crisp voice filled the room.

XX

Filled with nervous energy, Hermione headed to the Gryffindor common room where she found everyone she sought: Harry, Ron, Ginny...and Colin.

"What's got your knickers in a twist?" Ron's bishop captured Harry's queen; it was a mark of how dismally Harry was playing, that the bishop actually yawned in the midst of the manoeuvre. "Can't we finish our game?"

"No," Hermione said. "You can't." She gave him a piercing look, then swung it to hit Harry. "We don't have all the time in the world, you know."

Harry glanced at the board and reached to tip his king over.

His king anticipated the move and collapsed with a relieved sigh.

"She's got a point, Ron. We may as well go see what she has in mind."

Ginny seemed unable to look at Harry without her cheeks flaming, which gave Hermione pause until she decided that nothing could have happened yet or else Harry wouldn't be so bored.

"Wait," Hermione said. "I need one more thing. Documentation."

She approached Colin Creevey, who was busy reassembling one of his many cameras.

"Do you still have that old Polaroid camera?" she asked Colin.

"Sure. I even found a magical method to create film for it," he said.

"I need a quick photograph, but anything you witness must be kept under the utmost vow of secrecy. Would you please help?"

"You don't even have to ask," Colin asserted. "You know I'm willing."

A few moments of further instruction, and Colin was accompanying Hermione and the others down to one of the furthestmost dungeons.

Unfortunately, they attracted the attention of the Slytherins, as they had to pass the Slytherin common room to reach Hermione's goal.

Hermione sent the others ahead and turned to face Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode. "Yes?" she asked silkily, doing her best to model Professor Snape.

"What's that lot doing down here?" Millicent demanded. "We may have to put up with you, but we don't have to put up with them."

"I suggest," Hermione said, her nose tilting higher, "that you take it up with Professor Dumbledore, as we are here at his direction." She waited only long enough to make her retreat seem to be her choice and not caused by her heart hammering in her chest.

And she hoped that they didn't take it up with Professor Dumbledore, because she was certain that if he knew her aim, he'd stop her.

Somehow they managed to get to the cellar in question without open warfare with the Slytherins, though just as the door closed behind them she heard what was clearly Pansy Parkinson's whine raise an alarm.

Hermione warded the door with a satisfied smirk. Let them try to get in now.

She turned to see...

*Shite!*

"Colin, I told you...don't go near that bed! It hates Muggle-borns!"

But Colin ignored her, as Harry, Ron and Ginny watched warily, wands drawn.

"This is amazing," Colin breathed, firing off shots with his magical camera, the Polaroid on the floor beside him. He leaned closer to the snakes coiling and slithering up and down the bedposts of Salazar Slytherin's bed.

But nothing happened.

The snakes ignored him.

Harry crept closer.

"Honestly, Harry, that's Slytherin's own bed," Hermione began.

"I don't think it's the safest thing for you to be mucking about with, mate," Ron added, following him closely.

But the snakes merely twined and coiled their way up and down the posts, seemingly oblivious to their observers.

Ginny finally marched forward and sat on the edge of the bed. "Nice," she said. "It would be a shame if it really is a hor..."

"Ginny!" Hermione warned, cutting a sharp glance at Colin. It was enough of a risk to bring him down here; they couldn't clue him in that the significance of the bed might be that a piece of Voldemort's soul was caught within it.

"Oy, excuse me, Ginny," Colin said, and to Hermione's dismay he crawled past Ginny and flopped down in the middle of the bed to take pictures of the underside of the canopy.

Ron actually reached out and touched one of the snakes. "The asps look like they're oak, but they're so old it's hard to tell. The cobras might be... poplar?"

Hermione felt like a ninny.

"Why did you think the bed was dangerous?" Harry asked.

"It attacked me," Hermione said, feeling like a whinger. "I mean, well, the snakes didn't like me. We...I assumed it was because I was Muggle-born...." She let the thought drift as they all looked at Colin, blissfully snapping away from every odd angle.

"What did it do?" Ginny asked, bouncing gently on the bed and eyeing Harry with a look that would have scared him, had he any idea what she'd been reading and why.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Well, it..."

Suddenly, a red envelope slid under the dungeon door...how on earth did it avoid the wards, Hermione wondered...and landed in front of her.

"Oy, Hermione, you got a Howler? Down here?" Ron looked aghast. "You haven't annoyed my mum, have you?"

"You mean, other than ditching you and your brothers for Professor Snape?" she snapped. She reached for it and, taking a deep breath, opened it.

A nasal, officious voice filled the room.

*"Madam Snape..."*

Ron and Ginny said simultaneously, "Percy!"

*"I am shocked and appalled that you would take it upon yourself to send a Howler to me for simply doing the job which the Ministry of Magic (in all of its wisdom) has deemed to bestow upon me.*

*"To imply in any way that my monitoring of your marital relationship with your husband is prurient and salacious is an insult to me and to the department and highly respectable witch for whom I work. To know that you sent identical Howlers to our esteemed and honourable Minister of Magic, to my immediate supervisor (the aforementioned respected and revered Madam Umbridge) and to even include the esteemed Mr. Lucius Malfoy in your vile accusations is beyond the pale.*

*"While I'm certain that you think you're very clever, Hermione, I must assure you that whatever it is that you have done to hide your activities from this office will not be tolerated, and your veiled offer to share your "experimental potion and incantation" with other Marriage Law couples if we don't stop monitoring your activities will be considered a threat.*

*"Although I shudder to think what kind of offspring will result from your union, I must remind you that I will not be the only one watching for evidence that you and Professor Snape have fulfilled your contractual obligations through marital relations before the day ends. If such evidence doesn't present itself, the results of such rebellion will be dire, indeed.*

*"Finally, I consider my brother the luckiest wizard on earth, that he avoided being married to such a harpy!*

*"Yours truly, Percival Weasley*

*Undersecretary of Marriage Law Compliance*

*Department of Muggleborn Relations*

"They know when you have sex?" Ginny gasped.

"You sent a Howler to the Minister of Magic?" Harry moaned.

"Percy Weasley will have no bollocks by the time I get through with him," Ron snarled.

"Brilliant!" Colin muttered, snapping away at the four of them.

"Well." Hermione smoothed her robes, her cheeks flaming. "I think it's time to get back to the business at hand. Colin, are you ready?"

She took a step closer to the bed.

Every snake on every post hissed and lunged, and despite the fact that she was still several yards away...

A snake hurtled through the air and its fangs sunk into her wand hand.

Agony screamed through her veins.

XX

It was an indication of his state of extreme agitation that he did something he'd never even attempted before.

He landed at the Apparation Point outside Hogwarts gate already lunging forward.

Not a moment's pause to gather his balance.

Instead, a non-stop motion from appearing to crossing through the gate in long strides, taking the path in record time, all in an attempt to get his hands on his vexatious and insufferable wife.

The fucking Minister of Magic?

He wanted to kill her, plain and simple, kill her, for her absolute recklessness.

Dolores Umbridge?

He wanted to throttle her for her impudence, despite the fact that he appreciated the sentiment that prompted it.

Percy Weasley?

Well, he highly approved of sending a Howler to that twat.

Lucius Malfoy?

He wanted to fuck her senseless, and then start over and do it again.

The expression on his face. The expression on Narcissa's face.

They had been glorious to behold.

It was, however, the reaction of the other witness that terrified him.

The Dark Lord had remained expressionless throughout the reading, his red eyes glowing and fixed on Severus.

How many ways had she wrought disaster with her fit of pride and pique?

And why was his own overriding reaction to the disaster the simple swelling in his chest that by Merlin's ghost, his annoying Gryffindor of a wife was magnificent....

He entered the castle with full intention of going straight to the dungeon, so wasn't slowed by the presence of first year Peregrine Burns who clearly had been waiting to pounce on him upon his arrival.

"Professor Snape, you've got to come, there's trouble..." he said, his unchanged voice high-pitched and desperate.

"What are you nattering about, boy?" he demanded, already taking the stairs two at a time.

"War!" the boy spouted. "Madam Snape brought Gryffindors into the dungeon and now half the sixth- and seventh-year Slytherins are about to attack them!"

"Oh, bloody fucking hell," he muttered, the desire to kill her taking the forefront, again.

Burns ran ahead of him down the hall, and he followed, his long legs giving him the advantage.

Suddenly, a vague pain, a startled awareness...

*Miss Granger.*

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

They were past the Slytherin common room and taking the corridor to the lowest level of sub dungeons when the very foundations of the castle trembled.

Stones groaned against stones.

Sound concussed upon sound.

An explosion rocked the floor beneath their feet.

Terror gripped him as he took off at a full run, plunging through dust and...smoke?

He ran faster.

By the time he reached the cellar room in question, his head roared with anger, with pain, and his Slytherins were mere obstacles in his path. They fell aside, stunned by both the explosion and his assault as he pushed through to where a door had once been, and now splinters covered the stone floor.

"Owwww," moaned Crabbe as Goyle stood by and stared at the chunk of wood jutting from his friend's arm.

"Take him to the hospital wing, you idiot," Severus snarled and hurled himself into the thick of the dust and smoke within the chamber...

The chamber where he'd banished the Slytherin bed.

What the fuck was she doing here?

Where the fuck was she?

Panic coursed through him as he coughed, choked, finally cast an air clearing charm and saw the devastation.

Potter, the Weasleys, and Creevey were already hauling themselves to their feet, coughing, eyes streaming.

His heart stopped beating.

Miss Granger...*his Miss Granger...*was still on the floor, covered in dust.

And blood.

Her arms, her face...a wound on her forehead dripped blood.

He dove for her, lifted her into his arms.

"Get the Headmaster!" he barked. "Warn Madam Pomfrey that we're coming!"

And then, he felt a hand on his cheek, and he looked down and saw her eyes, wide and trusting and bloodshot, as she tugged at his hair until he pressed his face near hers...as if she had to force him, the stupid girl...and he heaved great gulps of air and of relief as he pressed his cheek to hers.

And she spoke, so weakly he strained to hear her...

"I knew you'd come..."

And then, with the most devious of smiles, she added, *"My darling boy."*

"I'm going to kill you," he responded with all the emotion he could muster. "Slowly and excruciatingly. Kill. You."

She nestled into his arms with the most contented of sighs.

## The Hospital Wing



**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*As always, if you recognize it, it's not mine. It's Jo's.*

*As always, more thanks than I can explain go to the fabulous GinnyW, who walked every step of the way with me on this one.*

*Once again I've been blessed with a gorgeous artfic, this time wallpaper, and this time from the talented Selinabin.*

□

To see it full-size and read the caption (squeee!) go here:

[http://miamadwyn.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/both\\_bs7.png](http://miamadwyn.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/both_bs7.png)

## **50. THE HOSPITAL WING**

Pain screamed up her arm.

Her eyes burned in torment.

Her head, god, what had happened to her head?

But all she could see was his face...the look on his face...the unveiled distress. If any of his Slytherins had seen him...what was he thinking, looking at her that way?

And so she'd said the only thing she could think of to snap him back to being her professor, her Professor Snape *My darling boy...*"

And it had worked.

He'd sucked in a deep breath, glared at her, and yes, he'd clutched her to his chest...oh, the relief, the peace at being held so...but his vulnerability was gone.

She rested her cheek against his strong chest and allowed herself to feel safe again....

But...the pain. She couldn't succumb to the pain.

She couldn't succumb to the comfort of his arms, the quick rolling of his long strides, the fierce muttering of low-voiced accusations she couldn't discern but could imagine....

She couldn't.

She had to think...think...think.

Professor Dumbledore...she had to tell him...not Professor Snape. No, he couldn't know. She couldn't tell him. She had to tell Professor Dumbledore....

Her arm was pressed against his chest, his hard chest, his beautiful angel-white skin beneath layers of linen and wool, she could see his chest, could taste it, could practically feel it with her fingertips...

Fingertips that howled with pain.

Each stride, pressing her arm, the bloody wound, the snakebite.

And Colin, he couldn't tell them...couldn't show them...had she told Colin not to show, not to tell? Had she warned him?

So much to do, to control, when all she wanted to do was sink into his arms and let him hold her until....

If he kissed her, she would be well.

She must tell them that...that was all she needed...to kiss her and make it all go away.

He must kiss her. He could heal her with his...

No, not that. She couldn't think of that.

She must talk to Professor Dumbledore.

Colin.

She couldn't succumb. Not now. Not yet.

The pain...

Oh, god, the pain.

If only he would kiss....

Her eyes burned. They burned.

"Please," she begged, but had no more words. Simply, "Please."

And he didn't hear her.

He didn't kiss her.

She buried her face in his chest and fought not to succumb.

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"Fucking hell, Albus, what were they doing? What was she doing? She came close to killing herself, and I demand to know why!"

Albus ignored him and continued to lean over her arm, examining the two jagged wounds.

"This isn't good." Albus's wand hovered over the wound and revealed a sickly pallid green glow and the same icy green spreading through the veins beneath her skin. He performed a quick spell...

Miss Granger cried out in pain.

...and the green stopped spreading.

"Severus..."

Before Albus could take another breath, Severus had her wrist pinned to the bed with his right hand while his left stroked the matted hair from her face.

"Leave," he ordered quietly, watching her face as she...incredibly and foolishly...relaxed under his touch. Didn't she realize this was Dark poison, this magic seeping into her veins? That her faith in him was naïve and...well, he simply was all she had, and that was her misfortune, but did she have to look so expectant and trusting when his own pulse was thudding in his veins at the visual evidence of her situation?

When Albus and Poppy had left them...no arguments from either quarter that he was best able to handle a Dark curse...he leaned back over her arm. "It's cold?" he asked softly.

"Li...like ice in my veins," she whimpered.

He felt her eyes clinging to him, but couldn't be distracted by them. Albus's charm held; Severus leaned even closer and examined the tiny threads of poison that had spread from the larger, more noticeable veins, saw it already pulsing, straining to break through, to finish its job and carry its deadly infusion to her heart.

There was no time for anything but the most desperate, most elemental defence.

One hand still on Miss Granger's bloody forehead, the other on her arm, he began the incantation...the soft half-chant, half-sung ancient words that sprang from deep within. He hated his voice, hated the way it swelled and overwhelmed on the one or two times in his life when he'd been forced to actually sing where others could hear and turn and stare at him, and thus he kept it stifled, choosing instead to use his voice for the spoken word rather than song.

But this was different. This was a chant older than time, a beseeching, a... he stopped short of the word prayer.

And then, he stopped thinking as the spell overtook him from within, swelling in his chest and emerging with the very air he took in and then released....

Soft, yet so overwhelming, so desperate, that for long moments it was his entire being, his only awareness, this incantation, until he realized that another voice had joined his...

Hoarse, equally soft, but feminine.

His eyes flew to hers to find her watching his lips as if being reminded of a song long forgotten, needing his prompting, following him a split-second after his own voice formed the archaic words.

How soft, how honey-sweet yet rasping with pain. The words flowed from her in mellifluous splendour until they were no longer hesitant but simply part of his voice, part of him...lifting where he lifted; pausing where he paused; another part of him, and equal part of him, that missing part that had shifted into place and made him feel whole, and then... fading to nothing when the incantation ended....

Belatedly he dragged his attention back to her arm and shit...oh, shit...at first thought Albus's revealing spell had failed, for he could no longer see the green tracery beneath her porcelain skin.

But her fingers flexed, and the arm beneath his hand was warm and firm...when on earth had she developed such muscle tone? He wondered distractedly...and he realized....

It had worked.

His gaze shot back to her face. Her eyes were already heavy-lidded and her smile smug. As if it were nothing more than to be expected. As if casting off a curse from one of the most powerful Dark wizards in history was as simple as "Finite Incantatem."

Which it wasn't, it bloody well wasn't, and all the rage and frustration he felt returned tenfold, that she had put herself in this position, risked herself blithely, and then looked at him with full expectation that he could save her...always looking to him to rescue her from whatever foolhardy situation she leapt into...

"What happened?" he demanded. "What did you do?"

"I can't discuss it with you, but you have to trust me..."

"To blow up the fucking castle next?" he demanded, his pulse still pounding in his temples.

"Severus Snape, either calm yourself or leave," Poppy snapped as she swept open the curtain and entered with a tray of instruments and potions. But her brow was knit with concern. "Were you able to slow it down or..." Almost as if she dared't voice the hope, she added, "Or stop the spread?"

"The poison is gone," he said, his voice clipped.

Relieved, she stood aside and Albus entered behind her.

He belatedly realized, Miss Granger...her eyes still bloodshot but filled with warmth...was stroking his hand. Not clinging to it in search of comfort, but comforting him!

He yanked his hand away and spun away from her and immediately felt the loss, wanted to step back and block Albus from her.

Albus, who now bent over her arm, then stood up abruptly.

His eyes met Severus's, then swung quickly back to the smooth, unblemished arm.

Not a scratch, not a scar to betray the existence of healed snakebite.

No indication that such had ever marred her soft skin.

Albus's silence as he looked from Miss Granger to Severus again was more powerful than words.

Poppy's startled gaze met Severus's. She clearly had questions about whatever healing had taken place. Questions for which he had no answers, not a fucking one.

Albus cleared his throat. "Perhaps you can now treat her eyes, Madam Pomfrey. They can't be comfortable."

"Of course," she said and then for good measure, repeated distractedly, "of course."

She leaned over and examined Miss Granger's bloody, bloodshot eyes with a magnifying charm.

Miss Granger was still and calm, as if she hadn't mere moments before survived Dark poisoning. As if she had no fucking idea she'd done so.

He wanted to hold her, to whisper soothing words...fucking hell, to take her out of this place and back to the dungeons where she belonged.

But she lay there looking straight ahead, then to this side and the other, down and then up, as Poppy moved back and forth between her eyes. Only her lips...lips that he knew to be so warm and soft beneath his...betrayed her discomfort, drawn in a tight line as they were.

"Well, then," Poppy finally said, her relief evident to those who knew her ways, and after years under her care Severus definitely knew her ways. "Nothing but a bit of grit and debris, which I can remove easily enough. It appears the concussion of the explosion caused the burst blood vessels in your eyes, dear, but I can heal those, too. Go ahead, blink if you need to."

She blinked a few times, wincing, and then opened them wide again.

"Hold still now," Poppy instructed briskly, then raised a cloth in front of the injured eyes and murmured a summoning spell while performing an intricate pattern with her wand.

Miss Granger watched every movement, as if memorizing it for later...which she probably was. Startled, she gave a soft yelp and squeezed her eyes shut and then popped them open again. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"That's all right dear. It's reflex." Poppy showed her the cloth that was now spattered with bloody grit. "Instinct, to blink. It happens when the debris flies out."

Severus was reaching for the cloth...he wanted to examine that debris...when Albus snatched it first and deposited it neatly in a pocket of his robe. "Very good, my dears." He cast a benevolent smile on both witches. "And Severus, I'm quite impressed with the healing you performed. Under the circumstances I fear the results could have been much more malevolent."

"Believe me, the blood loss is malevolent enough," Poppy remarked, critically examining the wrist of Miss Granger's uninjured arm with skin so pale, the veins beneath it provided stark blue contrast. "First, however..." She lifted a small vial and popped the cork out. "Hermione, I'm going to put this in your eyes, and then we'll bandage them for 12 hours. The ointment interacts with your tears. Within moments of application, your eyes will be pain-free. By morning, most of the capillaries will be healed, and your eyes will look and feel almost normal, although some sensitivity to light may be present."

Severus seized the vial from her fingertips. "You won't be using that on her. I'll brew fresh. It won't take more than a few minutes, and then an hour to cool..."

"Severus Snape, you prepared that ointment yourself not six weeks ago, and it has a shelf life of eleven months. It hasn't been opened since it arrived here, and I am not going to make this girl..."

"Woman," Professor Dumbledore corrected.

"...suffer another hour just to give you something productive to do. There is nothing else productive for you to do, so just deal with it. You've already done your part when you brewed this year's potions, unguents and supplements!" Her tone shifting back to calm, she held the vial over Miss Granger's eyes. "Open again, dear. That's it, perfect." A wave of the wand and twin streams of pearly, viscous liquid dripped into those trusting eyes, and he saw the pain leave her body in the way her muscles softened, her breathing slowed.

"Blink."

She did as instructed.

"Now, I'm going to put a bandage on them..." Poppy cut a hard glance in his direction. "Don't touch that tray, Severus."

"I need..." Miss Granger began, and he was at her side in an instant.

"Need what?" he demanded.

"To... to talk to Professor Dumbledore," she said quietly. "Alone."

He stiffened. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

"Why don't you order some dinner for the two of you?" Albus asked genially.

"Excellent idea. I think some... nourishing broth? Yes, nourishing broth would be in order," Snape snapped.

"She needs something more substantial than that if she's going to have the strength for a speedy recovery," Poppy chided.

Severus met Miss Granger's gaze and watched the penny drop. "Oh, but my wife has specific ideas about appropriate nourishment for the injured," he said silkily. "I wouldn't dream of varying from them."

And with that, he exited the curtain and strode toward the window at the far end of the ward to glare down at the empty Quidditch pitch through the gloom of a foggy dusk.

This entire ward was defenceless. He couldn't articulate, even to himself, what danger he thought hovered nearby, of course. He only knew that high above the ground with windows all around, it felt insubstantial, vulnerable.

He couldn't leave her side; that went without saying. But to remain with her through the night, how would that look to those who were monitoring him for any weakness, any at all?

And Albus, sending her off on dangerous errands that resulted in explosions and terror and blood...he looked down at himself, still covered with it.

He'd find Potter and the Weasleys. That's what he'd do. He'd find them and get the answers out of them if he had to hold them at wandpoint. And the older Creevey, too. That meant there was photographic evidence.

For the first time since he'd felt the tremors and heard the explosion, he felt control surge through him, control fuelled by anger, yes, but control all the same.

He crossed the ward and approached the door and was startled when Albus stepped in front of him.

"Ah, good, I was hoping to get to speak to you."

"Indeed," Severus sneered. "I can't imagine why."

Albus, damn his black soul, twinkled. "My dear Severus, there are some things we need to discuss. It seems that as Hermione is here for the next twelve hours at least, tonight would be a good night for a chat in my office."

"I think not, Headmaster."

Albus raised his eyebrows at the formal address.

"She may be here, but she will not be alone."

Albus let out a long breath. "Ah. I see."

Severus made to step around him.

"It's just that...I must ask you a question, Severus. I hope you don't mind..."

As if his minding had ever mattered.

"...but I truly must know. When you married her, who and what did you think you were marrying? I fear I'm confused by your attitude."

"I have no fucking idea what you're saying, old man. Just spit it out."

"I assumed you were marrying a young woman, as I can't imagine you agreeing to a union with anything less. Yet you seem to forget that even before your marriage, she was an adult witch who already was serving our noble cause in ways beyond your knowledge and that even as your wife, her responsibilities continue. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, she asserted her rights as such when she insisted upon you being her bond to the Order, and as a member of the Order her responsibilities are even more important and necessary. I would have you explain to me why you think you should be privy to them. Are you telling me that she knows all of your clandestine activities?"

"Of course not! But this is..."

"Not different." Albus stood stiffly before him and, for once, was pulling rank without artifice. "Is that understood?"

Rage stirred within him. Rage, boiling rage.

"Is it?" Albus demanded.

"It is," Severus managed to say. "If you'll excuse me, I have to order dinner," Severus snapped.

Albus relaxed into his grandfatherly mode and patted his shoulder. "Have some wine with it. It will do you good."

"Your concern flatters me." He jerked away from the gnarled hand and headed to Poppy's desk where he picked up a scrap of parchment and scrawled his order. By the time he sent it through the Floo, Albus was gone and the curtains around Miss Granger's bed were open.

"Don't badger her," Poppy ordered, "or I'll banish you."

It was all he could do to cross the floor, to close the curtains with a wave of his hand, to stand and stare at her. She was so small in that bed of white linens. How wrong it was to see her framed by white instead of red. To see her hair matted instead of wild. To see her eyes covered with a bandage only shades whiter than the pallor of her skin.

What the fucking hell had she been doing?

"Professor?" Her voice was calm. "Please," she said in those clear, crisp tones, "could you come closer?"

He forced himself to move slowly, to match her mood, calm for calm.

When he stood beside the bed, she reached blindly, and he moved his hand to hers so that she could find him. And when she clutched for his hand, he finally, finally allowed his hand to return her grasp, to reassure himself that she was truly alive and well, within his reach, within his protection.

Just as he felt the faint trembling, the flutter of tension that flowed from her fingers to his, she beckoned with her other hand, and he bent closer...

To have her grasp blindly until she found his face, then slide her fingers into his hair...grab it, pull it, pull him down until her lips were so near him, her words...mere breaths, really...were desperate in his ear.

"We did it," she breathed. "We did it."

And when he stood there without responding, she added, "The Ministry! We blocked them!"

And her smile...her triumphant smile...that was a balm to his battered soul. With everything that had transpired since then, she savoured their triumph over the bastards in the Ministry, over Lucius.

He allowed her to place her hands on either side of his face and to guide him until their lips touched, and then, well, then... His heart lifted and settled again in his chest, this time at peace, as he fed from her joy and yearned to share it, if only for now, if only for this moment between dangers.

And then, she was whispering again into his ear. "Please..." she begged...was begging him. "Take me home. I'm strong enough. I can stand; I know I can. I'll heal better there. I'll heal better in our bed with you...please!"

And what could he do, then, but bury his face in her hair that smelled of smoke and blood and pull her to him? What could he do but promise to take her back where he'd wanted her all along, in their quarters where he could keep her safe, where he could hold her and soothe her and...fuck it all, forgive her for whatever it was that she'd done, as long as she was with him, part of him, where she belonged.

He felt her trembling body relax in his arms. "Thank you," she said, "thank you," though he hadn't spoken a word, somehow she knew.

He started to slide his arms under her, but she stopped him. "No, I told you, I can stand. I can walk, if you guide me. They'll never let me go if you have to carry me."

"I'd like to seem them fucking try to stop me."

She giggled, damn her, giggled. "Still. It would be better if I demonstrated I could get there on my own two feet."

"I'll not have you traipsing through the castle, blindfolded and bloody..."

"Of course not. We'll Floo." She sat up, and he braced himself to catch her, but she used one hand to clutch his forearm. "There, now. This isn't bad at all," she said, her voice thready with the strain.

She rose to her feet and, with only the slightest of unsteadiness, took the first tentative step. He moved forward, matching her slow pace. They were halfway across the ward when Poppy emerged from her supply room with a fresh tray of Merlin knew what and stopped, aghast.

"What do you think you're doing, Severus? Get that girl back in the bed before..."

"I'm going to my own bed," Miss Granger announced imperiously. "I'll return in the morning for you to remove my bandages and change my dressings, if that's quite all right with you." And, her tone implied, even if it was not.

"Severus, you don't mean to let her..."

"She's an adult witch, Poppy. She can do what she wants," he said with a sniff of disdain.

With that, they arrived at the Floo. He thrust a fist of powder into her hand to match that in his and said, "On the count of three."

And on the count of four...had they still been counting...they stepped into their quarters and she fell into his arms.

# Names

*Chapter 51 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*As always, my thanks to JK Rowling.*

*These two chapters (50 and 51) have been extremely challenging, and my brilliant beta, GinnyW, has suffered through them with me, word by word. GinnyW, my love and kisses to you!*

*And extra thanks sent to lifeasanamazon for her last minute extra set of eyes!*

## 51. NAMES

The sliver of chicken was warm and moist on her tongue as she let her teeth close lightly around it, then quickly, sucked it into her mouth.

Along with his fingers.

Even bandaged...blindfolded, for all intents and purposes...she could hear what she couldn't see and heard his soft intake of air. She licked the rosemary residue from his skin and savoured it, and finally allowed him to retrieve his digits along with, so it would seem, his ability to breathe.

"This is very nourishing broth," she remarked. "So thick, you don't even need a spoon."

"Horrid girl," he muttered. His fingers stroked across her forehead as he pushed her hair back out of her face again. "You're lucky I don't make you drink broth for four days."

She needed to see him, to see what strained his voice, whether it was concern for her or anger at her. Concern she could alleviate easily, deliciously easily.

But anger...

"I wanted to see what colour the magic was," she said on a sigh.

"What do you mean?" he asked stiffly.

"When the snakes moved, when they attacked...I wanted to see what colour the magic was. I asked Colin to take pictures."

"Are you *insane*?"

Anger. Definitely anger.

"I kept my distance. I thought it would be like before, that they'd just, you know, hiss."

"And you took another Muggle-born down there and put him at risk, too?"

"Oh, he was careful," she lied nonchalantly. "And after all, I had no idea it could actually fly through the air at me!"

She heard him grinding his teeth and flinched. She was being careful, though. Telling him only what she could, as if it were everything. For once she had the advantage of his not being able to read her eyes to detect how much she withheld. "I'm sorry I destroyed the bed," she finally said. "It was self-defence. Once it started attacking, I... I lost control."

*And the last Horcrux exploded. And the expression on Professor Dumbledore's face, when I explained what happened...*

The Headmaster had been flummoxed. Totally flummoxed. And had clearly wanted to shout at her.

But how could he? She'd found the last Horcrux and had destroyed the last Horcrux and had only a headache and sore eyes for it, when all was said and done. She rather thought she'd done well for herself, and the expression on the Headmaster's face was the cherry on top.

"Professor...? Are you angry?"

"Angry that you almost killed yourself and took half the castle with you? Why ever would you think such a thing?" he snapped and, taking hold of her chin, plopped another bite of meat into her mouth.

"My turn," she said and then probed for the plate on the bed beside her, trailing her fingers across it until she felt...a chicken leg?...and lifted it in the direction of his mouth.

He closed his hand around her wrist, and for a moment she didn't know whether he intended to snatch the leg from her or just push her hand away.

But then he angled it just so, and she felt and heard him take a bite. And another. And then, he removed the bone from her fingers and trailed his tongue over the palm of her hand, searching out the drips of flavoured oil that clung to her flesh.

And a surge swelled within her, liquid and overwhelming, a surge more potent than sex and more dangerous than rage...a surge of...oh, god.*words*.

They spilled from her lips without heeding her already protesting mind, her supposedly prodigious mind, that was already insisting she think better of saying...

"Grow old with me."

She felt him freeze, his nose pressed to her palm and his breath fanning across her moist skin with tickles of delight.

He pulled away.

But she wouldn't let him. She groped until she found his hand again and tugged him to her. "Grow old with me, Professor. Promise me that."

He dismissed her with a haughty sniff. "I'm already old."

"Liar."

"Then I am an old liar." He wasn't giving an inch.

"Well." It was her turn to sniff. "A true Slytherin Potions professor would know to lie and promise to grow old with me."

"Impertinent."

"Hufflepuff."

"You court danger," he growled.

And as he dipped lower over her, she reached for him and curled her hands around his head. She drew him close until their faces almost touched, and she whispered again, "Grow old with me...."

She couldn't feel gloomy that he kissed her instead of responding with the words she needed to hear. Couldn't feel let down that he wouldn't at least pretend. It wasn't her birthday, after all, and he wasn't much for pretending.... And so she revelled in the touch of his lips to hers, so gentle, so aching. She tasted his ache, felt it deep in her joints, how he ached, and she had caused it with those four words. Lest she bring herself to tears, she had to let other words take their place, and so she did; she whispered into his lips, "Make love to me."

The ache flared to flame, and she felt that, too, with the corresponding need in her core.

But he braced his hands on either side of her to lift his body away. "You heard Poppy's instructions. You must keep your head slightly elevated and your body still...no stress, no strain...until morning."

"Then I will lie very still. I won't move. And you will be very gentle and..." She breathed the last word and trembled at the sound and taste of it. "Slow..."

His entire body grew rigid over her and his voice was tense. "Miss Granger, a wife who lies still and doesn't move is the curse of many a marriage, and not the promise a man wants to hear."

She felt her cheeks flame. She hadn't considered...hadn't thought of it that way.

"So tell me," he continued, his voice rasping in her ear, "how you can make that most unsatisfactory situation sound like sheer temptation itself?" He nuzzled her neck and shivers trembled from her scalp to her spine.

"Because..."

His lips stopped hers from answering. And when all thought, all words, had flown from her, he said, "Don't speak. Don't think. Don't move."

And she didn't.

Couldn't.

As his lips turned her body to liquid and sought sweet crevices and bestowed her with spiralling sensations...but, not stress? No strain? Her entire body quivered with it, and she didn't care, couldn't care, just needed more; she just needed *him*....

And when she thought she'd weep from need and die if he didn't bring her to release, he settled himself between her thighs and touched her there.

Licked her *there*.

Teased and tantalized and tormented her *there*.

Until her back arched off the bed and she cried out and tears seeped from her eyes, her bandages, and her face was wet with them, and she could only reach blindly until she found him rising from between her thighs and settling again, this time the heavy heat of him pressing in so slowly, so... so carefully, so deliberately and restrained and delicious and oh...oh, yes, so perfect...she had to move, had to move against him, but his hands pressed her hips into the mattress and allowed her no movement. Instead, she was victim to his slow torture.

And when the torture had built to an impossible level, when she thought she'd splinter from it, he held himself back, hovering at the point of yet another sensuous plunge, and his tension radiated from him and through her. It wasn't just a tension born of blood and engorgement and trembling need, but another tension, a deeper tension, something undefined yet rampant between them.

She whimpered beneath him clenching her fingers closed into fists. "Please..." she said, and then again, because it seemed no other word could form, "please..."

"Miss Granger," he said hoarsely, his voice rumbling softly into her ear, "say my name."

She fought to make sense of it, to bring forward the words. "Profe..."

"Severus... call me Severus."

She moved beneath him, fighting through the quiver of her desire, trying to make sense of his words. Why was it so difficult for her? Why couldn't she just say it? Just because she heard it echo in her mind in a dozen other voices, why was it an issue, and why now, when it was so little to ask?

When his hair brushed her face, her shoulder, she tunnelled her fingers into it and inhaled the scent of eucalyptus and spearmint and smoke and turned her mouth to his ear and whispered, "Severus..."

He jerked within her, plunged deeply, and it became a chant, an incantation of deepest desire and need and finally, fulfilment, that word, that beautiful word, "Severus, Severus, my Severus," timed with each stroke, each pump, each plunge, until she was gasping it and weeping it, and still, still, her lips wouldn't stop, her voice couldn't stop.

Because he wanted her to say it.

And she couldn't refuse him.

Wouldn't refuse him.

Ever.

XX

He'd never heard his name before.

Not like this.

Not like she said it.

It was silk sliding across his skin.

It was air to his lungs, moisture to his parched soul.

It grounded him to the warm earth in a way that he had never been before, a way that felt safe and protected.

It ignited flames in his blood and sent him soaring.

All from hearing his name...

The way she said it.

It was more than the breathless hoarseness of her passion, much more. It came from deep within her, from her heart, from her very soul, and she spoke it with such... he couldn't bring himself to use the word. It sounded as ridiculous as the idea she'd brought forward of them being soul mates.

Fools and lightweights bandied words like love around as if they meant something.

He was neither.

But neither could he deny that no one had ever spoken his name the way she did.

And if she kept on, if she didn't stop, he would break open.

And so he stopped her with his lips on hers, and absorbed her breath, her moisture, her earth and her fire straight into him, like the most dangerous of drugs...

And when he came up for air, saw her cheeks streaked with tears.

And panicked.

"Bloody hell. I hurt you. I told you we shouldn't..."

"You didn't hurt me," she said breathlessly. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"But...you're crying."

"Don't be absurd. Just calm down..." She stroked the side of his face like she was gentling a fucking horse, and fuck it all, it was working. The tension eased from him as she continued, "I'm not hurt. I'm happy. I'm just...happy."

"You cry too fucking much."

"Yes," she sighed, nuzzling his cheek. "I know I do. It's a weakness. But it doesn't mean I'm weak."

He snorted. "Far be it from me to ever call you weak."

She smiled, pleased. "In fact, my eyes feel so normal, I think you could take off the bandage."

"We will do no such thing." He forced himself to break out of her embrace, to leave those soothing hands and lips and heave himself up from the bed. "In fact, you have more potions to take before you sleep."

"Potions. Bah. I don't need any potions."

"Oh, then I can pour this contraceptive potion down the drain?"

She scowled and stuck her hand out. "Give me the potions."

He smirked and carried three vials to the bedside, but before he began giving them to her, he had to stand and stare at her, to run his free hand up her calf to her thigh, testing the supple muscles that formed her legs so perfectly.

"That tickles."

But she didn't twist away.

He covered one breast with the palm of his hand and felt her heart pounding beneath it, steady and true. She arched into his hand with a sweet sigh, and he had to lean over her and take another kiss, strands of her hair getting caught between their lips and neither of them caring....

"So happy," she repeated. "You make me so happy."

And he longed to remove the bandages and see her tea-hued eyes warmed in the afterglow of their sex. Instead he gave her the contraceptive, the taste potion and the healing potion, watching her lick them from her lips and wanting to let his tongue follow....

"Professor..." The way she ran her fingers through his hair and let her voice curl around her words was pure seduction.

"What now?" he demanded, cursing his own libido.

Her lips tipped into a smile. "Would you run me a bath?"

"Bloody fucking hell, you need to go to sleep."

"But we'll sleep so much better if we have a hot bath first."

With a snarl, he headed to the bathroom.

He didn't seem able to tell her no.

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She had annoyed him by giggling. She knew it; he told her so. But the healing potion had gone to her head and she felt... giddy.

And sharing a bath with him had brought out her giggles, since almost everything he did to her tickled.

She really hadn't meant to elbow him, but it was reflex, pure reflex, and his blast of foul language had sent her into more laughter and...

And now he was buttoning their shirt up to her neck as if that would somehow shut them off, her giggles.

"Insufferable chit," he muttered under his breath as she lay very still in an attempt to contain herself.

And of course, there was the fact that when she had settled back against the pillows, the bed had felt so heavenly every single muscle in her body had sighed and settled in for a long, luxurious sleep.

She felt the bed dip as he joined her.

"We don't want you tossing and turning. I'm going to have to charm you to stay on your back all night, and that will be much more comfortable for you if you're deep in sleep."

She sniffed the new potion he offered her and recognized it, of course. She'd certainly brewed enough of it. She opened her mouth obediently even though the last thing she wanted was Dreamless Sleep. She wanted sleep with him holding her, with her stirring and finding his arms around her and feeling his breath ruffling her hair and skimming her skin....

She sighed and opened her mouth and allowed him to pour it in.

And then the mattress shifted again, and she realised he was walking away from her.

And she leaned over the other direction, mentally crossing her fingers that he wasn't watching and spit the potion out.

By the time he came back she had slid one of the pile of pillows to cover the wet spot and had nestled down more deeply for sleep. And proved herself right...she certainly hadn't needed it...by dropping into a most pleasant dream as soon as his body curled against hers and his chin nestled on her shoulder and his hand cupped her breast possessively....

XX

"Severus?"

She didn't want to wake up. She wanted Professor Dumbledore to go away and leave them alone, and why would he be in their quarters with them in bed...what if they'd been actually having sex? She sighed deeply and rolled her head to the side...

And felt Professor Snape rearrange her head and felt the magic settle over her more firmly as his spell braced her neck.

He took such good care of her, such sweet care of her: he was really so sweet....

But he was gone. Where she'd been warm, she now was chilled. She needed him back, needed her bed warmer back....

Somewhere deep down she wanted to giggle again, but decided not to, because what if he worked out she hadn't swallowed all of his potion?

Which she didn't really need, because she was so sleepy....

"Severus, I need you in my office."

"And I told you I would not be available tonight."

"She should be in the hospital wing."

"She should be exactly where she is, Albus. Whatever you want can certainly wait until morning. This has been an extremely trying day..."

"I'm afraid it can't wait."

"If you fucking insist, then come through. We can talk here, but I'm warning you, I have no patience..."

"Miss Granger..."

"Is sleeping the sleep of the innocent under the influence of Dreamless Sleep Potion."

She wondered if she should speak up.

No, she *knew* she should speak up.

But... she also knew she wasn't going to.

It wasn't as if she would reveal any of their secrets, and if they'd just be quiet enough, she fully intended to sleep through it anyway....

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*Fucking, fucking hell.*



He leaned over her once more. Her breathing was slow and steady, her lips gently parted in sleep. She'd stirred at Albus's Floo call...which surprised him no little bit...but had sunk back into the arms of Morpheus soon enough.

He stood up and almost knocked Albus over.

Albus, who was leaning in and squinting at his wife as she slept.

He stood taller, blocking the view, and swept one arm toward the darker area of their quarters with mock grace. "After you," he snarled.

He sent the chairs sliding noiselessly and, after a moment's hesitation, took her floral monstrosity for himself, meeting Albus's amused smile with a glare. "Proceed."

The smile faded. "Severus..."

He remained silent, forcing the old man to continue without encouragement.

"Time is growing short and there are things we must address." Albus shifted and reached deep into a pocket to fish out a sherbet lemon. "Would you care for...no, I suppose not." He popped it into his mouth and stared at Severus, and for a moment the years fell away and he was the kindly Headmaster who had soothed the much-abused young boy Severus had been, the Headmaster who poured healing unguents in the form of praise and comfort into his young heart.

He felt a lurch of familiarity, of need, even as he resented the old man's ability to return him to that vulnerable state.

"Severus, you have had to prove yourself to Tom again and again in ways too dreadful to consider and it has been the price we've paid...yes, we, even though I realize it is more difficult for you to endure than for me to witness...." He sighed.

Severus shifted and refused to meet the old man's eyes. He could put up with most anything, but Albus in a maudlin mood pushed him to the limit.

"And I've anticipated that as time grew short, he would give you ever more difficult tasks to perform in order to prove your loyalty. Time is officially very short, indeed, my boy," he said with a wry smile, "and I know what task you've been given, Severus. I know."

"And your point is?"

"I know you. I know you so well. And I know that even as we speak you're scheming and plotting a way to trick him, to make him believe you are doing his will even as you avoid that final task."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing."

"It is a disastrous thing!" Albus leaned across the space that separated them. "Do you think I don't know what he's asking of you? Do you think I haven't seen this day coming and dreaded it? Do you think I didn't know the day would come when you'd have to kill..."

"Silence!" Severus hissed, his blood running cold. "Do not speak it!"

"I will speak it, my boy, and I will make myself clear. You will not shirk this task. You've grown complacent and are taking Tom's affection for you for granted at your peril...at all our peril. You think you can fool him, but Tom is not a fool! Do you think he doesn't suspect your regard? Do you really think it hidden so well that he can't see it, after all these years of diving into your memories any time that he wants? And if you dare...if you dare attempt to trick him, he will know, and he will kill you. And if you die, our cause is lost. Lost."

"Don't be ridiculous! There are ways, there are always ways..."

"To forfeit all the gains we've made over the past two decades? To make your sacrifices worth nothing? To throw it all away on some misplaced loyalty..."

"Misplaced!" Without even being aware of his own movement, he was standing, looming over the old man, his fingers flexing with the desire to...

He shook himself free of the need to silence that voice, to close off that throat. How dare he? How dare he!

And then Albus was standing, his hands on Severus's shoulders, his eyes warm with compassion. "Did you think I didn't see this coming? Did you think I haven't prepared for this time? Do you think I haven't known the sacrifice that would be demanded of me?"

"Sacrifice." His mouth was dry. "Demanded of *you*?"

"Severus, I have always known that the day would come when Tom would demand that you kill me."

"And...and *that's* what you're telling me to do?"

"We have no choice. If you don't, you will die. If you die, our cause is lost. Harry is lost. The future...is lost."

He shook his head numbly.

"I wouldn't ask this of you if there were any other way. You have to know that."

How could he stand there, his voice so filled with compassion, and speak inanities? How could the old man be so blind?

"I've lived a long life, but more importantly, I've planned for this...you won't be left without resources, and when the Final Battle comes, you will be standing where you need to stand to help Harry..."

He had to stop the flow...stop the flow of words, stop them before his rage got the best of him. He grabbed Albus's wrists and forcibly removed them from his shoulders, fighting for air, for words of his own..."

"Albus, he has not asked me to kill you."

Albus was startled. "He has. He must have. He's set you the final task..."

"Not to kill you."

The old wizard was, for once, totally perplexed, and then, concerned. "Severus, if he hasn't, it's because he doesn't trust you..."

"Oh fucking hell, Albus, he trusts me! Never you doubt that. He trusts me to do his bidding no matter what it is, and I wish to hell he'd told me to kill you because I could do that this moment in a heartbeat, you insufferable old bastard! It's not you I'm to kill, it's..." The words choked in his throat, hard and solid, and he found himself unable to continue.

"No," Albus said. "Surely not... It makes no sense. He lives in fear of the prophecy; he wouldn't dare attempt to circumvent it by..."

"Not Potter!" He squeezed his eyes shut against the horror, the reality of it now that he was putting it into words. And as words, they almost didn't exist, as he could barely

force them through his lips, and they came as a whisper, "Miss Granger."

"Severus, what have you done?"

Startled, he met the flat blue gaze, the rigid anger.

"Why did you marry her? Why did you bring this down upon us? Why did you choose this moment to go against me?"

"It's too late for that!"

"Indeed, it is." How quickly the old man's voice went from compassion to cold fury.

"You think so little of me, I see. Perhaps you'll feel better when you know that I have received concessions from him. That she is safe from all but me and that I am being allowed to use poison rather than a public... event."

"And these concessions comfort you, how?"

"You think I don't have potions at my disposal that will mimic death? Don't insult me by underestimating me!"

"And don't underestimate Tom! You think he doesn't expect just such trickery, if trickery there is to be had?"

"I can do it. I can manage..."

"To doom us all."

"You don't mean...you aren't telling me I should..."

"I can't tell you anything, Severus, except that the future of the wizarding world is in your hands. You forfeited your *own* chance at a future when you took the Mark and betrayed the woman you loved..."

"I didn't know..."

"And you now have the opportunity to redeem yourself, or to doom us all."

There wasn't enough air to fill his lungs, enough strength to support his body. He collapsed into the chair...her chair, her ridiculous chair...gasping.

"How much simpler, if you had allowed me to arrange things for her. How much easier your conscience would be. You've already ruined my plans beyond repair, Severus. You have no choice."

He felt the hand, the gentle and hated hand, touch the top of his head.

He shook his head, partly in dismay, and partly to dislodge the hand. "You can't mean this."

"I'm sure when given time to ponder the ramifications... I'm sure you'll do what you have to do."

He heard rather than saw the flare of green and the Headmaster's exit.

Cold, so cold... when had the dungeon grown so cold?

His hands trembled with it, and shivers rocked down his spine.

He needed her.

He needed her.

Nothing else mattered.

Nothing else *could* matter.

He staggered to the bed, collapsed on the edge, reached out to touch her cheek with icy cold fingers.

"Miss Granger," he whispered. He had to tell her, had to reassure her, to comfort her.

Still, so still.

Almost like death.

Except that she was warm, so warm, the only thing warm and alive in his world, and careful not to move her head or tilt her body, he wrapped himself around her and rested his cold, wet cheek against her breast and clung to her until the shudders had stilled and the nightmare receded.

But when dawn crept over the Eastern horizon, he still lay awake, listening to her strong, even breaths and the life that beat in her chest, steady and true.

His.

His Hermione.

## Betrayed

*Chapter 52 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*Thank you, Jo, for your creative genius and your generous spirit.*

*Thank you, GinnyW, for support and wisdom beyond my ability to measure or describe.*

*Thank you, lifeasanamazon and Juno Magic, for once again flinging yourselves into the breach and giving me fresh sets of eyes and notes.*

*And finally, thank you to all of my readers and reviewers whose support and interest and wonderful feedback keep my muse fed. I'm totally humbled by and grateful for all of you.*

## **52. BETRAYED**

She heard. Of course she heard.

It began as disjointed phrases but ended with nightmare clarity.

What irony, that the spell that kept her frozen in stillness to protect her eyes also kept her frozen in stillness to listen without reaction.

Except, of course, for her tears.

Tears that were absorbed by bandages.

Bandages as the ultimate form of Occlumency...the reason she could mask her knowledge from him.

She had wanted to cry out, to interrupt, to leap into the fray of their discussion. To defend him, to protect him, to attack in his stead.

But being so frozen had been her salvation, had somehow given her the strength to restrain her reactions, and that had bought her time.

She lay very still beside him despite the fact that hours had passed, despite the fact that every fibre of her being strained to curl against him, into him, and...

Seek comfort.

Give comfort.

Soothe and be soothed.

She wondered how Legilimency worked when there were no images to be seen, only the blackness of the backs of her eyelids, only words, only emotions quaking through her in the terrifying black of a blindfold.

She wondered how she could hide her knowledge from him long enough to act to save them both.

She wondered if the tears that bathed her eyes now could possibly be healing, or would they undo the good done by the tears she'd wept when he made love for her.

Mostly, she lay so very still beside him, counting his breaths, knowing he didn't sleep, and knowing that now, it was all up to her.

And finally, her guilt so overwhelming...what had she done, what had she been thinking when she had so selfishly and stupidly set them on this course of events that ended with this man she loved destroying himself over her...she went back to the beginning, the very beginning, and a half-hearted and unintended prayer....

And prayed again.

Full-hearted and with full intention.

Because when the previously revered headmaster revealed himself capable of dreadful emotional abuse to get his way....

When her previously indestructible professor became an all-too-vulnerable but dearly beloved Severus....

She needed, in this black moment in this black night, to believe in something invincible.

And her childhood's God was all that was there.

And then, when her body could no longer tolerate inactivity and every bone and joint ached, when she could no longer live in dread of morning and his eyes...oh, god, his eyes...and the pain they would hold...

She set her plan in motion.

She sat bolt upright in bed and screamed.

XX

Her scream wasn't shrill; it was deep and jagged and from the depths of her soul, and it hadn't ended when he grabbed her and held her flailing arms and attempted to wrap her up in his own.

She knew.

She'd heard.

*She knew.*

Again, the scream, and she wrenched herself from him, but he was faster, stronger. "Wait! I won't...I won't hurt you!"

"Please...Professor...the snakes!" Her voice was strangled, her panic and fear as palpable as the air they breathed.

"There are no snakes," he insisted, stroking her hair, her skin, her bare skin....

"They were...they were biting me! Oh, god, please...please hold me!" She flung herself against his body and he hauled her to him like a drowning man grabbing a lifeline.

His heart pounded. A nightmare? She'd had a nightmare?

He clutched her body against his, breathed in her scent, relished the feel of her, so trusting, in his arms.

"Just hold me," she whispered into his neck as she clung to him, and there was nothing he wanted or needed more than that, to just hold her.... "I need you. I need you to hold me."

A nightmare.

A nightmare of snakes and bites and pain.

A nightmare that didn't hold a fucking candle to reality.

But still, a nightmare, and he could hold her and soothe her with nothings and nonsense. He could conquer the nightmare and hold her in their bed, not the nightmare bed of which she dreamed.

He dragged his body up against the headboard, and pulled her into his lap, and rocked and soothed and kissed and murmured, and for a few long minutes the rest of the world retreated.

He pulled back to look at her in the dim light and saw the bandages. Muttering a soft curse, he reached to release their closing.

She stiffened and caught his hand in hers. "Shouldn't we...shouldn't we let Madam Pomfrey?"

He felt her heart pounding against him and frowned. "I'd like to look for myself first."

She waited a moment too long before slowly releasing him with a smile that was all too nervous. "All right."

A twitch of his fingers and the bandage fell away leaving her face raised to his, her eyes still closed.

Gently, he teased her lashes with his thumbs until they fluttered open....

And her eyes swallowed him whole. He fell into them, hard, with a clutching in his gut like he was freefalling from the highest tower...

And before he could collect himself, before he could see, couldsee...

She jerked her face away and squeezed her eyes closed again.

"What's wrong? Are you in pain?" he demanded.

She gave her head a hard shake. "No, not that."

"Then what?"

And the voice in his head chanted, *She knows, she knows, she knows.*

Her chin was quivering, her lips quivering, her voice quivering as she struggled to turn sounds into words.

"Pro...Professor... I can't...I can't...I can't pretend nothing is wrong. I can't keep waiting for you to tell me..." She fell apart in his arms, and he clutched her against his body, his heart ripping. She lifted her face to his and her eyes were swimming in tears. "You know the truth, don't you?"

He couldn't speak.

"You read the book," she said, dropping her eyes from his again, her voice a mere whisper.

The book?

What fucking book?

Air filled his lungs again, and he managed to pull her head close to his so she couldn't see his face, couldn't watch as relief washed through his veins.

"Madam Pince told me you had it," she said mournfully. "And now you know."

Irma? And then he remembered. *The Magical Child*. He'd got it, flipped through it, couldn't figure out what in hell made her want it burned. "I give up. I don't have any fucking idea what you're talking about," he ground out. His hands gripped her arms too tightly, but to release them would be to allow them to tremble like leaves.

She kept her head down, so he buried his face in her hair, her... he couldn't even rouse enough emotion to think of it as horrid. His head pounded; his pulse raced; he fought for calm.

"The incantation we sang... when you healed me. I'd never heard it before but when you sang...it was as if I were part of you. I knew it because you knew it.... That was earth magic, wasn't it?" she asked.

"It...according to some schools of thought, yes, it's a form of it. The most basic kind, what might be considered similar to a magical adrenaline. In moments of desperation, sometimes a witch or wizard can draw on the ancient power. It's often a mother calling upon it for the sake of her child."

"Like Harry's mother?"

He swallowed. "Perhaps. Yes, it's probable."

"I don't have any earth magic."

"Of course you do," he snapped. "We just established that."

"No, that was yours. I was using yours! Through this, this connection we have." Again, she jerked her eyes away from his. "You said..." she whispered. "You said that if I didn't show any magic on my own before I bought my wand, I was a squib."

"Miss Granger, you are not, nor have you ever been a...a fucking squib!" What was she carrying on about? With everything else, he didn't have time or patience for...

"The vows," she said. "I'm talking about the vows!"

He forced himself to be still, to release her arms. "Proceed."

Her hands fluttered as if she didn't know where to put them. She almost touched him, jerked back, started to push hair out of her face, stopped, finally clutched her hands in her lap and stared at them. "I had no magic. I would know if I did, and I never had that kind. Until..." Finally, she looked at him, her eyes haunted. "Until you gave me yours. 'With all my earthly goods I thee endow.'" She shivered as she spoke. "You gave me your earth magic." Again, she looked away. "And I...I gave you nothing. It's the way

the vows are written. We exchanged oaths of fidelity and respect and comfort...exchanged in equal measure, but you're the one who gave something, and it was too high a price for you to pay."

What was she blathering about? They were beyond the point of vows mattering now, beyond the point of any of this mattering. Again, he tried to shut her off. He shook his head, numb, unable to follow her. "I've never excelled at, nor have I attempted to master earth magics."

"According to *The Magical Child*, the highest form of elemental or earthly magic is the spirit. Earth, air, water, fire...and the fifth point of the pentagram is the spirit. And, according to the book..." she said urgently, "Professor, after our vows I began to use wandless magic, for the first time in my life. They are what particularly powerful children use when they're first manifesting. I not only used it, I excelled at it. *Like you*. I was suddenly proficient at Occlumency. *Like you*. I got it from you. It's all from *you*." She pinned him with her eyes.

And suddenly they washed over him, memories long suppressed, memories of laughing at his father, jabbering nonsense...and his father hating him, not wanting to be near him, hitting him when he stared too long, when he...

When he read his fucking mind and repeated it, thinking he'd be praised and rewarded for being such a clever little boy.

And got knocked across the room.

"The spirit," she was saying. "Your spirit. You gave me your magic when our spirits... connected."

"Preposterous," he spat.

She pulled away from him, and he knew she was stung by his rejection.

"All right," he said, frustrated. "Just say, for the moment, that you're right. Why are you upset? Why are you crying? It's not as if this is a tragedy."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "It means what they said is true about me. That I was nothing but books and...you even said it! I was just a know-it-all."

"For fuck's sake..."

"But it's more than that. Are you sure...can you be certain...that your magic wasn't diminished after our vows?"

"You witnessed what we did together when we healed your arm. You witnessed Albus's surprise and Poppy's reaction. It was remarkable. Together we did something I've never seen done before. That, Miss Granger, is not a sign of diminished magic. It's a sign of enhanced power." He watched her trying to assimilate that information, felt relief easing the tension in her body. "When I was injured, when you cared for me...at the time I thought perhaps your unintended use of Drowning Sleep potion had been a lucky happenstance and had resulted in a healing more effective than any I've had under Poppy's care.... But perhaps it was an early manifestation of... this."

"Then you believe it? You believe something special, something important is happening between us?"

He measured his words. "I don't disbelieve it. More to the point, however, I would prefer that you stop wasting your time and energy on the preposterous idea that you weren't born with magic. It makes no sense and more to the point, it makes no difference. You are what you are now; nothing else matters."

"If it doesn't matter..." She stared into his eyes, and for a moment he felt as pinned to the felt as if it were Albus, fucking Albus, or the Dark Lord staring at him. "Professor, would you have ever chosen a wife who might not give you magical children?"

"No."

She flinched away from him.

"And it's a moot point. This conversation serves no purpose."

"Indeed," she said, and with that single word broke away and headed to the bathroom, leaving him feeling more frustrated and angry than he'd felt since...since the first long night he'd spent wrapped around her in the cold, dark dungeon.

*Fucking Albus Dumbledore.*

XX

She sank against the bathroom door, her heart pounding.

She'd done it...so far. If she could just hold on longer, just a little longer....

She used the loo and washed her hands and face...her face looked ravaged, as well it should after a long horrible night without sleep, not to mention the injuries of the day before. But her eyes were shining...the whites milky white, no trace of blood or irritation. Perfectly healed, in fact.

She opened the door to find him still sitting, staring blindly into space.

She sank beside him and let her head hang. "You think I'm a twit," she said mournfully, hoping he continued to accept her desperate performance.

"On the subject of your deficient magic?" he sneered. "Indeed."

He was angry, so angry, and it was all she could do not to reach for him and pull him down onto the bed with her so that she could remove this anger, this suppressed rage.

But she needed his anger. She needed him to keep his distance from her, to think her foolish.

Neither to suspect nor discover her horrible knowledge.

So she denied herself even the solace of a goodbye kiss...something he wouldn't initiate and now, she couldn't either...before he left for the morning's Advanced Potions class.

Only when he'd been gone for a full five minutes and she trusted that he wouldn't return for a forgotten quill or reference did she finally allow herself to fall apart.

To sob into his pillow, taking huge gulps of his scent and clinging to what little of his essence remained there.

How easily she'd distracted him, tricked him, manipulated him.

So easily that it struck terror in her heart.

Had he always been so vulnerable? Or was this her doing?

And he thought he could trick Lord Voldemort....

XX

From her spot around a dark corner in the corridor, she watched the small N.E.W.T. level Advanced Potions class gathered outside the classroom door. She couldn't call attention to herself, but she needed...desperately needed...

Harry glanced up and, surprised, met her eyes.

Relieved, she gestured and ducked back out of sight.

Moments later, Harry and Ron both joined her. "No, she said, "not both of you!"

After a moment's hesitation, Ron and Harry exchanged glances and Ron reluctantly nodded and left them.

"You look terrific," Harry stammered. "You look like you were never injured. Your eyes...are they okay?"

"Madam Pomfrey just checked them. I'm fine." She didn't have time for such discussions. "Harry, the pictures. I need them."

"I saved you a couple that showed the auras, but Dumbledore wanted the others. I got them for you while he Obliviated Colin."

She gasped in anger, and he rushed on, "Nobody knows about the bed, Hermione. We can't take a chance on Voldemort figuring out what we're doing."

"I know that," she snapped, but the hot surge of rage she felt had nothing to do with Voldemort or with poor Colin being Obliviated, or even the headmaster having her photos. Her rage was focused solely at the thought of the headmaster's visit, the way he used and abused her husband, the things he said...

She shoved it down, hard. She couldn't let herself think about that.

"Hermione," Harry said quietly. "How did you know that bed was there? I mean, how did you even know Salazar Slytherin's bed existed?"

"Before I came to live with him, Professor Snape had a smaller bed. When we needed a bigger one..." she felt her cheeks blazing and hoped in the dark corridor he wouldn't notice, "it showed up. But it...well you saw what it did. I couldn't get near it, so Professor Snape got rid of it."

"Thing is, Professor Dumbledore didn't even know it existed until after you blew it up. He wanted to see the pictures. So what you're saying is..." Harry stared at her, "if you hadn't married Snape...we wouldn't have found the last Horcrux."

How silly of her to feel her eyes brimming with tears, to feel vindicated, justified, and...dare she even think it? *Important*. Their marriage, it was vital. It had done something *vital*.

She had to tell the professor. He needed to know. She wanted him to know, to understand...

But he couldn't understand. He couldn't know about the Horcruxes. She couldn't tell him.

When she knew she could speak without betraying her emotion, she said, "And the pictures you saved for me? Where are they?"

"In my bed, under my pillow."

"What's the password?" she asked tersely.

"Clytemnestra's knickers." Harry touched her arm. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

She brushed him off with a quick, "Nothing," and added, "Don't tell anyone you've seen me this morning. I'm supposed to be resting."

"*Oy, Harry!*" Ron whispered down the hallway, and Harry gave her a quick wave and took off for class.

Hermione waited several long minutes to be certain no latecomer turned up and saw her.

If even Harry could tell something was wrong with her...

She took deep breaths. She had to get control of her emotions or all would be lost.

She ran through her mental list, and once again realised that there was truly only one person she could count on to help her without question, without second-guessing and without feeling any desire or need to confess later. She just hoped she could find her before it was time to return to bed and her pretence of exhaustion...

The boys' dormitory was, as usual, a tip. But the photos were where he'd promised, and a quick glance of a striking snake almost made her drop them.

If she'd allowed herself to sleep, she *would* have had nightmares about them.

If she'd swallowed the Dreamless Sleep potion he'd given her, she wouldn't have had any dreams at all, of course.

But then she wouldn't know about the headmaster's visit...

She swallowed thickly. Took deep breaths. Pulled herself together.

She couldn't think about these things, not now, not here.

It only took her two attempts to break through Harry's wards and open the trunk to retrieve his Invisibility Cloak.

She was halfway to the Ravenclaw common room when it hit her.

If she'd taken the Dreamless Sleep potion she wouldn't have had nightmares....

And Professor Snape was bound to realize that.

That she hadn't been asleep.

That she'd heard.

*Not now. Not here.*

She hovered outside the Ravenclaw door under the Invisibility Cloak and prayed...funny how often she was doing that lately...for things to go her way.

Terry Boot emerged, followed by two boys who looked like they must be first- or second-years. The combination of clattering footsteps and lively chatter as the group disappeared down the tower stairs was enough to make her want to scream.

She was wringing her hands like a first-year herself.

And with a gush of relief, she heard the off-key humming moments before the door opened and Luna emerged.

"Luna!" she gasped.

Luna raised her head and looked calmly around. "Hermione? Where are you?"

"Over here," she whispered. "Come closer." She watched Luna come unerringly forward and noted that today one earring was a radish and the other a miniature aubergine. If anyone noticed Luna talking to a blank wall they'd never pay it any mind. "I need your help, desperately, but no one can know."

Luna tilted her head. "What do you need?"

"First, I want you to show this photo to Professor Trelawney and ask her what this aura means. She can't know who gave it to you or anything else about it." She took a tightly cropped close-up of the sickly green and silver magical aura around a snake's fangs and did a bit of charm work to remove the fangs from the picture, and then she slipped it through a fold in the cloak. "Don't let anyone else see it, and after you get your answer I want you to destroy it."

Luna accepted the photograph emerging out of thin air without any reaction other than, "It's rather pretty. Do I have to?"

"Yes!"

Luna shrugged. "Is this all?"

"There may be more. Right now I'm not sure. How long will it take you to find out?"

"This must be a very important mission."

"It is."

"Wait for me in the library. I'll do it now." Luna broke into a wistful smile. "Thank you for trusting me, Hermione."

"*You're both very lucky*", Luna had told them at the Sorting Feast. *"Not everyone will end up so happy when this is all over"*

Somehow, she had seen what nobody else did. She had known. How could Hermione *not* trust her?

Hermione felt her eyes welling...*not now, not here*...and infused her voice with all the warmth the pale blonde deserved to hear. "Thank you, Luna, for being my friend."

Luna smiled and tucked the photo into the pocket of her robes, and then headed to the tower stairs, humming again.

XX

He prowled the classroom, his rage tempered to a fine edge, lusting after an excuse to release it.

He had assigned a difficult potion, one prone to volatility if not brewed to a precise standard, simply because he needed the threat of danger to keep his mind away from Albus, from what the malevolent bastard expected him to do, from the real risk of failing a task set forward by the Dark Lord....

"Potter," he sneered. "It is only the fact that I desire to live for another hour that forces me to point out your idiocy. Otherwise I'd gladly let you blow us all up when you add acidophilus powder rather than asphodelus pollen to your cauldron."

He didn't even pause to see if the spoiled berk had stopped in time, but moved on to Draco's cauldron, itching for a reason to snap at him. Alas, his potion was sheer perfection, shimmering and pulsing red like...

*Like the Dark Lord's eyes.*

He stared into the steaming depths and was whipped back to those long moments when those eyes, those burning cold eyes, stared into him and through him as Miss Granger's voice pierced the frozen silence of the Malfoy study.

Eyes that narrowed to mere slits.

Eyes that examined his reactions, probed his weaknesses, looked for evidence of betrayal.

Which he averted by the simple measure of allowing himself to laugh at Lucius's silent fury and the icy displeasure Narcissa aimed at her spouse.

When it had ended, the Dark Lord spoke not a word, leaving it to Lucius to dismiss it with a haughty wave and a clipped, "And this is the way you control the Mudblood?"

Thank Merlin she'd taken all the credit herself. If she'd even hinted that he'd assisted her, the questions would have been difficult, indeed.

Somehow he'd escaped unscathed.

Only to find her penchant for trouble had reached new heights.

If the Dark Lord, not to mention the other Death Eaters and the fucking Slytherins, ever learned exactly what it was his precious wife had destroyed...the last existing Slytherin artefact...protecting her from their wrath would become astronomically more difficult.

"Professor Snape?" Draco drawled smugly. "Do you find anything amiss?"

"Perfect, as always," he snapped, and moved on.

His heart hammered in his chest. He needed to see her. To reassure himself, to be certain... what? That she still breathed. That she was safe. That she was in his bed, waiting. And if there were tea....

Two minutes. Less than that, even. Two minutes to move quickly through his office and their quarters to find her lazing the morning away, toes waving in the air as she surrounded herself with books, parchments and quills.

Without a word, he whirled away from the student tables and past his desk and through the door, the office, into their quarters...

The bed was rumpled and empty.

The books lay undisturbed.

She wasn't there.

He felt the uneasy clench in his gut, the slow burn.

He forced himself to return to the classroom where Potter and Weasley and Malfoy were probably hungering to hex one another into oblivion.

And tried to remember why he was supposed to care.

XX

Hermione lingered near her usual table in the library. She longed to sit down but didn't dare. The one time somebody actually sat in her favourite chair in the library would be the one time she was already in it, under Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

She hadn't long to wait.

A mere twenty minutes had passed when Luna wandered through the door and began a circuitous and dreamy stroll through the library stacks. Only the fact that she seemed more or less headed in the right direction stilled Hermione's desire to grab her by the neck of her robes and drag her into a quiet corner.

Eventually Luna stood about five feet away from her, staring blankly in the wrong direction. "Hermione?"

"Behind you," Hermione whispered. "Sit down."

Luna took a dusty old book from the stacks and sank into a chair at the table. Only then did Hermione sit beside her and lean in close to her. "I'm right here. What did she say?"

"She told me that all I needed to do was show it to Professor Snape. Why didn't you do that?" she asked, idly turning a page in the upside-down arithmancy book on the table in front of her. "Few people realise how intriguing the formulae can be when examined from above," she pondered.

Hermione stifled the urge to shake her. "But the aura...why would Professor Snape know? He doesn't set any store by divination!"

"It isn't a normal aura," Luna replied. "It's a protection shield, one of those placed by the Founders on the castle. She'd never seen one isolated from the others, but she said this one was placed by Salazar Slytherin, without a doubt."

"Was that all the old charlatan could come up with?" Something she already knew? Hermione blew out a breath in frustration.

"Yes, just that it was protection shield and it only activated when mortal peril presented itself. She thought it likely that since it was by itself, it was something he'd set up as a personal protection rather than part of the castle defences."

"Mortal peril."

"Yes, isn't that interesting that you could get a photograph of the exact moment when mortal peril set off the shield? I find it fascinating, myself. I would have liked to ask her more but she was totally unconcerned and much more interested in her tea leaves. She wanted to read mine, but of course I told her I hadn't time...."

Hermione stared blankly at the bare table in front of her.

She'd been in mortal peril, but only because the shield was activated.

The shield was activated *because* of mortal peril.

Personal protection.

Protection that would have, perhaps, been passed along to future Heads of Slytherin.

Mortal peril presented not from Harry or Ron or Ginny.

Not from Muggle-born Colin Creevey.

*If you dare attempt to trick him, he will know, and he will kill you.*

And the only reason her professor would try to trick the Dark Lord was to protect her.

*She* was the mortal peril.

"Luna," she said in a raspy voice she didn't even recognise as her own. "I need your help most desperately, and you're the only one I can trust, the only one who won't..." she swallowed, "Won't try to second-guess me or change my mind."

"That's because they're Gryffindors," the blonde said placidly. "A Ravenclaw would know better than to second-guess the cleverest witch of our age."

And then, without lifting her gaze from the book in front of her, Luna slid her hand sideways and into the folds of the Invisibility Cloak, where she found Hermione's hand and squeezed it.

Hermione clutched Luna with a death grip, knowing...knowing without a doubt...what she must do.

It was strange, how it all fell into place. How disjointed and tormented thoughts suddenly fell into order with an almost audible click, and she simply *knew*.

"You won't tell anyone?"

"I won't...even if they ask."

Because Luna understood what Hermione knew, had known when she turned to her for help.

That nobody would ever think to ask Looney Lovegood anything. She wasn't one of the Golden Trio. She was... Looney Luna Lovegood.

Hermione's heart lurched in her chest as she finally let go of the small hand that for a brief moment anchored her.

"Good," Hermione said. And then she repeated it, "Good. I need time...time to get a few things done, but... I'll leave you written instructions that you can only access with a password. What do you want it to be?"

"*Amour*. That would be a nice password, don't you agree?" Luna turned another page in the book. "Do you need a tissue?"

"No, no...I'm fine," Hermione lied. "I'll leave the message for you..."

"Here. Put it here, in this book, on page three-hundred-sixty-seven."



"Yes, that will work."

She didn't wait.

She couldn't wait.

Suddenly, she was a frenzy of movement, of certainty, of desperation.

She practically flew through the corridors, hissed a barely discernible "Clytemnestra's knickers," and was tucking the Invisibility Cloak back into Harry's trunk and re-establishing his wards before it seemed she'd had a chance to breathe.

Her luck held.

She managed to leave the Gryffindor Common room and escape back to the dungeons without running into anyone. It seemed almost as if...

She choked back a sob.

As if the very castle itself were helping her.

Even as her heart wept and begged her, *no, no, no...*

Her mind rattled off the facts, and she knew what she had to do.

*How much simpler, if you had allowed me to arrange things for her. How much easier your conscience would be. You've already ruined my plans beyond repair, Severus.*

*No, she thought fiercely. We didn't ruin them. We saved them!*

Their marriage...it was vital, it was important, it was real.

And it had served its purpose.

The Horcrux was gone.

But the bed's protections...the *warnings*...were also real.

She would not let him die.

She wouldn't let their cause fail.

She flew down the empty corridor and felt the warm welcome as she passed through the wards and into their quarters...

*Their* quarters. This had been theirs, together, for such a short time but it was the most amazing and beautiful time of her life, and...

She couldn't think about that, not here, not now.

She couldn't think at all.

To let herself think was to let herself feel, and to let herself feel was to...

No. Not now, not here.

She was all motion, all frantic motion, as she made hasty decisions and acted upon them.

But her last action...such treachery...was the most difficult.

She couldn't let him suspect what she knew and what she intended.

She couldn't let him stop her.

She waited for the water to boil, spooned tea into the pot, blinking back tears.

She heard him enter from his office, the rustle of his robes and sharp movements.

He was still angry.

"I hardly think it should need stating," he snapped, "that in future if you feel you have bested an enemy, it is a very bad idea to gloat?"

Instead of responding, she kept her back to him and poured his tea into a cup, her hands trembling.

"Do you have any idea what a position you put me in when you sent a fucking Howler to Lucius? What it said to them, to the Dark Lord, that my wife dared do such a thing? Have you any fucking idea the risk you took with my life?"

Was there any way in which she *didn't* risk his life? The question burned into her like a searing brand. She stirred, and stirred, and stirred, and turned to face him, her eyes brimming.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It won't...it won't happen again."

And watched his expression melt from anger to surprise to... softness. His eyes...*oh, god*...his eyes, as he looked at her and the cup she offered, and his anger seemed to melt away as he slowly closed the distance between them and cupped her cheek in his hand.

It took so little to soothe him.

She wanted to soothe him, needed to soothe him, but...

She braced herself.

"Sit down," she urged.

But he didn't. He took the cup from her hands and pressed the briefest of kisses to her forehead, and then...

He sipped deeply.

She could only watch in despair as, once again, his expression shifted.

As his lips parted in a belated attempt to spit...

As his eyes darkened...*oh, god*...not in anger, but in pain, in the awareness that she betrayed him...

His black, black eyes--*God forgive me*--those eyes staring at her in shock and betrayal.

And then...

He slumped to the floor, unconscious, the rose-spangled teacup in shatters around him.

"No!" she cried, as she dove forward to break his fall, as if she hadn't been the one, the one who drugged him with his own Dreamless Sleep potions, who put them into his tea, as if she had the right to weep as she clutched his head in her lap, rocking and stroking his hair away from his ashen skin, watching the pulse slowly beating in his temple, his throat.

As if she didn't inhale guilt and agony with every breath she took.

And, finally, because she had to, she had no choice...

She eased his head to the floor, cushioned it with her grandmother's quilt...

Took her wand in her hands...her trembling hands...

And snapped it in two.

And something deep within her screamed as pain ripped through her, pain that took her breath, sent her careening off the wall and to the floor.

Pain, oh, god, the pain.

And the scream wasn't silent. It tore from her throat as she fell...

*Red.*

Everything was red.

A low moan pierced her, and she saw him so near she could touch him if she but reached out her hand...

His face was a twisted grimace of agony, his cheeks streaked with blood, and he opened his eyes and saw her...

And his face, oh, god, the expression on his face. Confusion, pain, fear, as he groaned, "Miss Granger, what have you done..."

Her finger burned...it burned...oh, god...it *burned*.

The ring...the gold Ministry ring...was melting away.

He reached for her.

She sobbed.

Grief washed over her in a sickening wave.

She staggered to her feet, grabbed her rucksack and reached into her pocket for the old halfpenny her grandmother had once given her for luck...bile rose in her throat, nothing about this was lucky...

And activated it.

The sickening tug pulled at her stomach...

And she was gone.

## Red

*Chapter 53 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

I'm thrilled and honoured that Care of Magical Creatures has been nominated for four The New Library Awards:

Amortentia: Best SS/HG Romance

Gripping Charm: Best SS/HG Drama

Diffindo: Best SS/HG Angst

Engorgio: Best SS/HG WIP

I have also been nominated Best New Author.

More info and a fabulous list of nominated fics in all sorts of ships and genres here:

[http://community.livejournal.com/tnl\\_awards/4104.html](http://community.livejournal.com/tnl_awards/4104.html)

*Nothing you recognise belongs to me, and without the genius and generosity of JK Rowling it would not bless our lives with so much happiness.*

*I can't offer enough gratitude to GinnyW who not only (as recognised by Quill to Parchment) is the Best Beta, but is also patient beyond measure. And finally, much thanks to lifeasanamazon for being that additional set of eyes that makes the difference.*

### 53. RED

Red poker-hot pain seared into him.

Deep.

She was there, eyes huge and dark and bloody...

He tried to blink, tried to clear his own vision, but the red...

Everywhere the *red*....

And then.

She was gone.

*Dreamless Sleep.*

He tasted it, smelled it.

She'd given it to him.

In his tea.

Deep within him his soul ached and screamed and raged...

But...

It was difficult to remember why.

And *she'd* given it to him.

In his tea, his sweet, sweet tea...

And he didn't remember how to be angry, not at her....

The waves beckoned...

The deep...

The black solace.

He felt himself being sucked under, under the waves, into the dark, deep nothing....

*Dreamless Sleep.*

No thoughts, no memories, no images.

No pain.

Nothing.

XX

And then.

Deep within.

A voice.

Fuelled by fury.

And terror.

*Noooooooooooooooo!*

And...

A different voice.

A gentle voice.

In his ears, so close to his ears.

He could almost feel the hot, moist breath...wanted, needed to feel it curl into his ear and shudder down his spine....

*Professor...*

So easy to slip back into the depths, to just slip in....

Again, the rage.

Again, the voice.

*Nooo!*

Breathing was hard; his chest was heavy, his arms like stone, and his legs beyond feeling at all.

That voice, that deep voice, that hot, angry voice.

It seized him, demanded and commanded.

And he found himself moaning, forcing...

Forcing a hand to rise.

Forcing his head to roll sideways.

Forcing his eyes to open.

To open.

And see.

The broken wand.

XX

Somehow...

He was standing.

Staggering.

Instinct rather than thought drove him forward...

To his cabinet.

His potions cabinet.

His unlabeled potions.

Instinct rather than thought led his hand to the red vials of Pepper Up.

And then he was on the floor, slumped against the wall, staring at the empty bed.

The flavour of pepper burning his tongue, his sinuses, his eyes.

Two empty red vials in one hand.

A broken wand in the other.

XX

Memory flooded back through him.

Hazy and razor-edged.

He lunged to his feet...

Saw blood on the floor, on his own shirt, felt it...

He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. Dried blood flaked on his cheeks.

He remembered.

Her face.

Her eyes.

Her eyes....

Thick, red tears dripping down her face.

Tears.

Of blood.

Like the blood staining his own skin.

Confused, aching, he rubbed his face, scrubbed it raw, washing all traces away.

Bloody tears.

Tears of blood.

*Fucking hell.*

He wanted to roar, but no sound formed, no sound, no sound...

Just the question, the whimpering, raging question....

What had she done?

XX

He ploughed into a group of third years standing outside his classroom door, blew through them without speaking, felt them staring, and heard their murmuring voices as he took the stairs two at a time.

Through the Entrance Hall, down the sloping lawn, his mind racing.

Portkey.

She'd activated a Portkey.

It was the only way she could have disappeared before his eyes...

But how?

And to where?

How was simple. If she could use Protean Charms, she could create Portkeys.

But why and where?

For an emergency.

Where would she go in an emergency?

A sick rage took hold of him.

XX

He resisted the need to storm in and tear the shop apart.

Instead, he stayed in the shadows across from No. 93 Diagon Alley.

Watching.

Steady traffic in and out.

All he needed was to see even one of them, to see a twin...

He'd know.

XX

He had to wait longer at The Burrow.

It had only taken twenty minutes before Fred Weasley appeared in the front window of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes to retrieve a Pygmy Puff from its cage.

He was too jaunty, too relaxed, too normal, as he laughed over his shoulder and spoke to someone deeper within the shop.

She wasn't there.

But here, at the Burrow, it was over an hour before Molly emerged with a basket and her charmed shears to clip herbs from her garden.

Unlike her son, she was tired, worried. The thoughts of approaching war didn't thrill her; she'd seen it before. And no chick had returned to the nest or Molly would bustle with agitation and energy.

She wasn't here.

He lurched into a turn and Disapparated...

And landed on his knees at Spinner's End.

Dust rose from the rug and choked him.

He refused to stop, refused to think about why she was doing this...this thing she was doing. It made no difference why, not now, not when he only needed to find her and stop her before it was too late.

To protect her.

Because even as the old pain growled and stirred within him, he felt a desperate need to protect her.

As he'd vowed to do.

Only how? Where?

He stared blindly at the gloom, the hated Muggle-ness of it all. The air was stale and dank. Not like when she'd been here with him, when the air had pulsed with the sounds and smells of red sheets washing.

Sheets as red as blood.

At some point, the rage drained and was replaced with fear.

She was alone without a fucking wand.

She hadn't retreated to the Weasleys. She had no family to turn to, nobody to protect her...

From him.

Of course she'd heard, she'd fucking heard, and she was running...running from him...

He wanted to vomit.

No family to protect her....

No.

Hell, no.

She wouldn't be so stupid.

But, who else knew about The Grange? He wondered if even Albus knew. Her address on file at Hogwarts was in London, not Hampshire....

With a surge of emotion he tried once more...

The Apparation was fast and silent.

This time he didn't stand in the shadows and watch. This time it was evident; the structure was locked and empty, windows shuttered and chimneys cold.

It evidently wasn't the posh season for staying in the Country.

But...to be certain...

He landed in that other Muggle room. That other room of stale air and dust.

He lifted his nose to the air. Not a tinge of magical signature was present, not even his own from his last quick visit.

The books on the shelf from which he'd retrieved her prayer book still tumbled sideways.

She hadn't even asked him how he'd known the words to say...the Muggle rites...when he'd given her the cloaking potion.

He wondered what she'd think when she found her prayer book missing.

If she found it missing.

If she ever returned to this, her childhood home.

Because she wasn't here. Her energy, her vitality, her magic...

He had to find her.

He grabbed books from the shelf, flipping wildly from inside cover to inside cover until he found it: a carefully handwritten name and address in Mayfair.

Their other home.

If he didn't find her in London, he was lost.

XX

She couldn't breathe...didn't dare breathe...didn't dare...didn't dare...didn't dare...

Until she heard the soft pop and knew he was gone.

Even then, she couldn't move. She lay pinned to the floor of her dressing room by a heavy weight of exhaustion.

She'd arrived in a frenzy, dizzy and worse from the Portkey.

Stumbled through the door into the small chamber adjoining her bedroom and collapsed.

Even now, sobs still threatened to tear through her.

Sobs of pain.

She'd barely managed a wandless spell...*it hurt, why had it hurt*...to scour her bedroom of magical residue...

And closed the door...

And collapsed in the darkness.

Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

And he'd been there, on the other side of the door, and all she would have had to do was to simply breathe his name....

But she couldn't.

She couldn't.

It was up to her, always up to her, first with Harry and now with her professor.

She would save him.

She would save them all.

If only... if only she could rest first.

Maybe she just needed to rest....

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed through the pain, the deep, deep pain.

The pain that had started when she broke her wand.

And pulsed through her still.

XX

He practically fell through the wards, through the melting wall, and barely kept his feet as he stepped into their quarters, their empty dungeon quarters...

Only to find Albus, damn his black soul to the lowest level of hell.

Sitting in *her* chair.

Waiting.

If the bastard twinkled, if he dared twinkle...

Something slow and hissing burned within him.

The bastard was sitting in her chair.

Severus fought for an illusion of composure. He slumped against the now-solid wall and folded his arms, glared through his hair.

And resisted the urge to blast the old wizard out of her chair, out of the air she'd breathed...

It hit him hard, the knowledge.

Severus wanted to kill him.

His fingers itched, itched to grab his wand...or to point, simply point, and *think* the words, and watch the bolt of green...

He wanted it like he'd never wanted anything in his life. The Dark within him rose with a roar, and it was all he could do to restrain it.

The old wizard held two envelopes in his gnarled fingers. "The Ministry has been trying to contact you."

"Leave them. Leave them on the table." He curled his trembling fingers into fists. "Leave."

"Ah, I wish I could, but we must talk about these."

"You read them?" he snarled.

"No, of course not, that would be overstepping my boundaries, would it not?" The barest twinkle threatened to emerge. "However, it is perfectly within my rights to read anything that comes into these walls addressed to a student, in certain circumstances. I read Miss Granger's."

"She's no longer a student!"

"We," Albus said with a sharp look, "must talk."

He flipped the two missives in the air and they sailed to Severus and fluttered around his face until he slapped them aside. "Enlighten me," he sneered.

"The first was a notice from the Minister of Magic himself. It seems that he has found it within his powers to waive the marital monitoring clause on your marriage contract. Miss Granger's somewhat unseemly but totally understandable reaction to such monitoring found a receptive ear when Madam Scrimgeour witnessed the Howler her husband received." He smiled like a fond grandfather.

Severus stared into the fire. She'd done it. She'd fucking done it.

"The second was the automatic notification that, having registered the snapping of her wand, the Ministry allows that the marriage has ended with Miss Granger's forfeiture of her place in the Wizarding world." His gaze was penetrating and unwelcome. Severus averted his eyes. "It spells out the penalties should she dare try to return. Azkaban, of course. Not that we'd let that happen." Albus cleared his throat. "When this is all over, she'll have her place here, which I'm sure she realises or she'd never have made such a gesture."

That was it? She'd broken her wand and had flown, and this was the extent of concern? They'd straighten it all out later? He didn't even seem surprised by the news.

"Your letter, on the other hand," Albus continued, gesturing at those on the floor, "most likely informs you that you have six weeks to find a new bride."

He thought he was going to vomit.

"I don't think it's necessary to concern yourself," Albus continued blandly.

Of course not. Because he wouldn't live that long. He wouldn't survive Hallowe'en.

"Leave," he repeated.

"Ah, but there's one more thing." Albus reached into the folds of his robe and pulled out a length of parchment covered with frantic and familiar script.

A letter. She'd left him a letter. And that bastard had it, had read it...

He lunged forward, his hands still fisted, and if the headmaster's shields hadn't been strong he would have used his fists...

Instead he bounced back and fell to the floor.

Her letter drifted into his hands.

His eyes squeezed shut. He couldn't read it, not now, not like this.

"I take it you didn't find her."

"So you'll send someone else to kill her? Or are you reserving that black blot for my soul alone?"

"She's a loose cannon, and I admit I'm worried about what she might do out there with nobody to temper her. All this time, I thought she was the temperate one, but after the past few weeks.... Still, whatever is guiding her...instinct? Something deeper? I can no longer dispute that the marriage she instigated was necessary. And now, seeing that it has served its purpose, she has ended it. Remarkable. She is, indeed, remarkable."

He tried to stand, to eject the wizard physically if necessary, but his head swam and he fell back against the wall, the cold, dry parchment in his fingers.

"I always knew Harry would need her intellect, her dedication to research and study," Albus continued. "I seem to have overlooked what, perhaps, should have been obvious." He flickered his fingers toward the parchment. "She is, after all, a teenaged witch in love with the idea of love."

He snapped his eyes up at the old man despite his resentment.

"She writes a lot about... love."

Something inside him jerked.

"I was concerned, Severus. I feared you would wound her, would leave her unable to form a connection when this is all over. I vastly underestimated the impact your...."

He snapped his head up at that, stared into the sharp blue eyes.

"Your *need* would have on her."

"What the fuck..." he started, his voice a low growl.

"Why, Severus, isn't it obvious? She ended up with the most wounded of all of us..."

His breath came in sharp gasps. "Wounded? Don't you mean unworthy?"

"All are worthy of love, Severus. Some are more difficult to embrace, however. Miss Granger found it within her..."

"Like a fucking charity, Albus?"

"...to embrace the most unlikely partner. And even to believe she'd found love."

To *believe* she'd found love. Of course she hadn't really found it. He knew she hadn't found it, simply didn't know better, had even said so to the Dark Lord.

*I'm the first cock she ever knew, and she thinks it's love....*

But to hear it articulated...

"And I'm grateful for this, truly I am, Severus. I'm grateful that you found it within you to be patient. An older wizard, experienced in the ways of sex...of course you had the knowledge to please her. Of course, she equated that with romantic love. I can hardly imagine that the boys she knew before you..."

*She knew no one before me.*

"...were experienced enough to..."

"Enough!" He staggered to his feet. "Enough. Just... leave."

"You deserved this escape, my boy. This preparation, if you will, for what lies ahead. You've gathered your strength, your power. You're ready for the end."

Strength? He felt weak, drained, empty. The only strength he felt was the low-boiling rage that wanted to stop off the words flowing from the old man's throat, and even then there wasn't enough power to carry out the desire.

"Her life won't end at the final battle. She will live on. She will love still." And after a long moment, Albus added, "She will love."

Of course she would. And she would love someone worthy, a shining hero, and would live a charmed life, not a life hidden in the dungeon like...

He couldn't even find words to describe what they'd had.

She was gone; her essence was gone; nothing of her remained. A glance around the quarters showed red sheets and a tea set and an odd, faded floral chair that were already consumed by the gloom.

To her, they'd had an interlude.

What would she think when she looked back on this time, looked past a life with someone else? What would she remember?

For her, it would eventually be nothing but a strange interlude.

For him, it was everything.

Everything.

She was everything.

And she was gone.

"Severus? Do you hear me...?"

He jerked away from Albus's touch, from his concern. How long had the old man been speaking to him?

He was losing it. Losing control.

Fucking hell, if he was summoned now he'd be unable to... "But you told me to kill her, anyway."

"She's made that rather difficult."

"The Dark Lord..."

"Whatever he does, it's now on her shoulders. She's the one who..."

"Protected me."

"She thinks so, but you and I know the truth. She thinks she's saving you, but in fact, she left you to Tom Riddle's mercy."

She thought she was saving him. He knew that, but she had no idea, no fucking idea, what dangers surrounded her now.

"And, we must hope that once again, Miss Granger is right."

"Snape!" he spat. "Her name is Snape!"

Albus smiled sadly and glanced at Severus's bare ring finger. "Not any more, Severus. Not since this morning."

Albus studied him, ignoring his shock, his pain, as if they were of no import, no import at all. "It was a gamble, but it could work. Because, quite simply, if it were within Tom's shredded soul to love anyone, he would love you, Severus. He holds you in some sort of twisted affection, and you know it. He will punish you, but there is plenty of



time for healing. He won't kill you."

"The curse of my life, that neither of you will kill me."

"Tom needs you, and he wants you by his side."

"And you, Albus?"

"You know what you mean to us."

"I won't survive."

"We've always known that."

Words rang hollow in his head. This was someone else's conversation, someone else standing here calmly discussing the end of everything, and it meant nothing, nothing to him, because somehow despite his desperate words to the contrary, the only thing that meant anything had ended already.

Albus flung a fistful of powder into the Floo, stepped in and was gone.

Leaving Severus with a piece of parchment, a piece of parchment filled with her hastily scrawled words.

Her words.

He forced himself to forget that Albus had read them first, forced himself to open his eyes and...

Her voice filled his heart as he read.

*My dearly beloved professor....*

*There's no time to think, to say the right things, and now I see you sneering at me for even my salutation but I must say the words...must say them. I don't know what to call you any more, professor or Se...I don't even want to write it, I just want to write the only words that echo with truth, that are real.*

*You are my dearly beloved.*

*And...now that I'm writing, I'm really writing them down, they seem more important than anything else, more important even though I know you're asking WHY? And I'm sorry, but I must say this first...I must say this before I answer your question...*

*I love you.*

*I can see your face, I can hear your sneer, I can see and hear you and I have to say it anyway. And I don't mind if you sneer because that's your way, but if you don't feel it, too...*

*I never felt it before, never once, never even a moment's attraction, and yet now I know that before I was conceived, before I was even a pair of cells in my mother's womb, I loved you.*

*It's as if it existed deep within me, patient and waiting, until the day I had to choose a husband from a list without your name, and every cell in my body cried out, every part of me screamed, and I flung a prayer up to heaven because...*

*I knew. I knew it was wrong. Not just wrong in the way that forcing young girls to marry against their will is wrong, but wrong on a more horrifying level.*

*Wrong, because I hadn't had time yet, hadn't had time for us to discover it on our own, for life to unfold for us in its own time and suddenly my heart was being wrenched out of my body and even when I didn't understand it, couldn't comprehend...*

*I knew. I knew that you could save me, you were the only one who could save me, and without you, I would be lost.*

*And with you, I was found.*

*I became somebody different, somebody new, somebody Ron and Harry wouldn't have recognised had they ever seen me the way you saw me, and I loved being that person for you and with you and...*

*I love you.*

*And now, I must save you.*

*That is the WHY, the WHY I know you're asking, and I would give anything not to hurt you but...*

*Professor Dumbledore was right. You would sacrifice yourself to save me, and while I appreciate the gesture, and while I think you must have a plan...*

*I know no other way to say this, and so I say the truth.*

*I am afraid. I am afraid of your plan. I'm afraid of anything that relies on you going before the Dark Lord so you can lie to protect me.*

*And so I must leave in the only way I know how, the only way that will allow me to truly disappear, and leave you with the truth to tell the Dark Lord. A truth that he will believe.*

*I'm leaving because I no longer trust you to protect me.*

*He will believe it's because I'm a stupid Muggle.*

*He won't understand that it's because I need you more than the air I breathe, and can't let you die for me.*

*I love you so much...oh, stupid, stupid words, if I could show you, if I could only show you...and thank you, for saving me, for letting me be yours if only for a short time, for giving me joys of which I never dreamed.*

*I don't know how to thank you. And instead, I do this.*

*Oh dear God, what am I doing?*

*You'll think I'm so foolish but please, please promise that you will keep my little jade Slytherin snake, and our pictures, and your mother's hair comb...that you'll keep all my things safe for me. I wanted them so badly but fear I won't be able to keep them whole....*

*I'm rambling. I'm running out of time.*

*I'll never forgive myself for betraying your trust.*

*I could not live knowing you sacrificed your life to save me.*

*Please forgive me.*

*Always your...*

*Hermione*

The last page was splattered with tears but the ink didn't run, not Miss Granger's ink, for of course she would have spelled it to shed water, even the salt of her tears.

He raised it to his lips and tasted... and had he found even a trace of salt he would have devoured it...devoured her, anything he had of her...

He needed her.

His mind raced, again, and again, through the list of places she might be...

She didn't trust him to protect her.

Clever girl.

Those who trusted him lived to regret it.

Or... didn't.

She fucking thanked him.

Thanked him!

She...who had flung trust and faith and even, Merlin help her, love at him by the armful...thanked him.

What had he given her? Harsh words, a place on the floor, and then in his bed, but oh no, just a place in his bed...

He'd used that bed to bed her, to seduce her and take his pleasure and his comfort from her, even as he shoved her away.

He couldn't love her.

Those he loved...

He couldn't love her.

Or so he thought.

So he fucking thought.

She was out there somewhere alone and without a wand, and he feared her control of wandless magic...

Word was already out that she was gone.

She was a target.

She didn't have the Dark Lord's protection any more, not now that she'd removed herself from his dungeon.

She bloody fucking thanked him and took it upon herself to save him.

He bent double as the pain in his left forearm seared through him, blood red and poker-hot.

XX

It came on him slowly, a slow creeping thing, the need.

The need for relief, for at long last, a final relief.

And yet when he became aware of it, it was as if it had been gnawing at him for years, for decades.

And perhaps, after all, it had.

It was more than a need; it was a desire.

A desire that he dared not acknowledge.

Until now.

And now when he was weakest, he suddenly felt a surge of strength.

The answer had always been there, terrifying and dangerous, and he'd lived his life avoiding it.

The curse of my life, that neither of you will kill me.

He'd voiced it.

In voicing it, he had made it possible.

By summoning him, the Dark Lord could make it real.

XX

If he'd ever planned this moment, dreamed of it, he would have been standing erect, relaxed, every button buttoned and his robes immaculate. He would have proceeded with elegance, with grace.

He would have demanded.

With a sneer.

Proving to one and all, that in this act, this very last act, he was in control.

Instead, robes gaping open over his half-buttoned shirt and dirty trousers, he barely managed to walk through the crowded drawing room in Malfoy Manor before he collapsed at the Dark Lord's feet.

"You *lossst* her? You let her get away?"

He barely heard the voice hissing, barely felt the bony fingers seize his chin and yank up.

Was barely cognisant...but no less in control...oh, no, even thus, he was in control...when he opened his eyes.

Opened his memories, his damning memories.

Opened his soul.

And knew what was coming.

She doubted his ability to lie. Well done, Miss Granger. She'd taken his *will* to lie.

He looked into those glowing eyes.

And offered the truth.

He braced himself for the shift to rage when awareness hit.

But, to his shock, the Dark Lord released him and drew back, his eyes glowing slits of ruby red. *Who did thisss to you?*" he hissed, his words crackling with anger.

Severus almost fell sideways, barely kept on his knees. Did what?

The Dark Lord bent over him, yanked his chin up again, and this time...

Dived in.

Not a rapid viewing of memories, but an icy penetration, a cold slither that somehow went deeper than memory, coiled and glided in an invasion unlike any he'd known before.

And the hiss, the Dark Lord's hiss, this time seemed to come from within him, from deep within him when he drew in a sharp gasp.

This time, when he released him, Severus fell to the floor at his feet, unable to rise.

"And the old fool saw you like this?"

Severus fought to focus, finally managed to say, "I just... left him."

The Dark Lord's reaction was electric. "Did he not *see*? Did he not even *notice*?"

Severus couldn't respond.

"How could he not?" the Dark Lord mused, pacing restlessly and then stopped, alert. "This means..." He broke off, and jutted a pointed finger in Severus's direction. "*Rise!*"

Severus felt himself jerk to his feet through no effort, no strength of his own.

"You come to me broken, and the old man didn't see. You come to me broken, and I want to know why." And with those words, the Dark Lord entered again, this time straight into his mind, his memories...

They flew by in reverse.

*Albus, waiting for him, in her chair, in her fucking chair.*

*The frantic search for her, the hours outside the townhouse in Mayfair, her bedroom at The Grange, The Burrow, Diagon Alley...*

*Her face. Streaked with red.*

*The snapping of the wand.*

*The tea, and his slow awareness of betrayal as he fell....*

He was falling again, his knees like water...

But somehow, they still supported him as hands steadied his face, hands as cold as bone caressed his cheeks and...somehow...he was still upright by force of magic that felt almost... tender.

"He didn't see. He didn't see what I see." The low laughter ghosted over him.

The invasion continued.

If he'd first fallen at the Dark Lord's feet with a will to bare all, he now was stripped of the ability to even care. His head fell back and his mouth sagged open in pain as the images kept coming.

*A frantic Miss Granger in his arms, falling apart over a nightmare...*

No, not a nightmare, because she'd heard. She'd heard it all, but she hadn't wanted him to know.

The pain twisted deeper.

*The night before, and his Miss Granger, his fierce, angelic Miss Granger asleep as he curled around her seeking warmth, seeking comfort....*

*Seeking absolution.*

Only she hadn't been asleep, had she?

*Albus in his quarters, Albus giving him the impossible task, finally pushing him farther than he could go....*

And then, in rapid succession, the Dark Lord isolated them, the words, the words that had set forth a course of events that felled Severus Snape and brought him to his knees, and now damned him, blessedly damned him...

*"You think I don't have potions at my disposal that will mimic death? Don't insult me by underestimating me!"*

*"And don't underestimate Tom! You think he doesn't expect just such trickery, if trickery there is to be had?"*

*"I can do it. I can manage..."*

*"How much simpler, if you had allowed me to arrange things for her. How much easier your conscience would be. You've already ruined my plans beyond repair, Severus. You have no choice.... If you don't, you will die. If you die, our cause is lost. Harry is lost."*

He waited for it now, the blow, the curse, the pain that would end his pain, his guilt...

But no, there was one more thing the Dark Lord wanted to linger over....

Albus's voice. Albus Dumbledore's fucking voice, delivering the death knell.

*"Because, quite simply, if it were within his shredded soul to love anyone, he would love you, Severus. He holds you in some sort of twisted affection, and you know it. He will punish you, but there is plenty of time for healing. He won't kill you."*

"Fool..." The Dark Lord's voice was chilling.

Severus forced his tongue, his voice to work. Forced the words that he wanted to be a demand, but were a mere, breathless plea.

"Kill me. Prove him wrong. Kill me *now*."

And the world went red again.

XX

The world was black.

Silent.

Freezing.

Her arms trembled as she braced her hands against the floor to push up, to sit up, to fight the weakness....

Something was wrong.

Breaking her wand...she winced at the thought for even the thought, the memory of that horrible moment sent a shaft of pain deep into her even as she shivered alone on the floor of her dark dressing chamber...breaking her wand had been a tactical surrender, a sacrifice to buy time, to buy him time, to buy them all time....

Something had gone horribly wrong.

She collapsed again.

What had she done?

Oh, dear God in heaven, what had she done?

And where was her professor, her beloved, dearly beloved professor?

Deep inside, deep in her heart, she only knew one thing.

What she'd done had been very wrong, as wrong and evil as sin, and she'd done it, she'd done it to her beloved professor and she'd done it to herself, and as she lay there shivering in the black, black darkness, she knew that she'd needed no curse.

That this was the meaning of unforgivable.

XX

He awoke to the cloying scents of red musk and patchouli, to find himself on the floor, supported in the arms of Narcissa and Bellatrix.

He was equally torn between the urge to gasp at the injustice that he was still alive, and the need to wrench himself free and vomit from the stench.

Bellatrix's mouth twisted in disgust and then smoothed into obsequious submission as she raised her improbably thick lashes to the Dark Lord, who sat in his high-backed chair... watching.

Narcissa's concern was evident as she fluttered and dabbed at his face with an icy cold cloth. Icy cold and pink where it blotted blood from his face.

He let out a slow, shuddering sigh.

"You're back with us." The Dark Lord leaned forward, his demeanour intense. "Tell me, my boy, how you felt when you turned to Albus Dumbledore for comfort and found betrayal?" His voice rose. "Because surely, he...*he*, the leader of the Light...could be counted on to release you from your burden, couldn't he?"

He tossed his head back and laughed, and those present laughed with him, despite the fact that they hadn't seen what he'd seen and didn't know what he knew. Seeming to realise that fact, he lifted one hand to the group at large and announced, "Last night, my friends, Albus Dumbledore ordered Severus to kill the Mudblood. This is the leader of the free wizarding world! This is the leader of the Order of the Phoenix!"

Severus fought for air as he strained against the arms of the Black sisters, an embrace that had fuelled many of his schoolboy fantasies.

"Oh, the irony of that is beyond comprehension, that his self-righteous power would be aimed at killing Potter's friend, because it never crossed his mind, never, that I would have other plans for her than her death."

What was he saying? Of course those were his plans. He'd reminded Severus of them repeatedly.

"You all know, though it isn't spoken aloud in polite society," the Dark Lord said, rising elegantly to his feet, "that I spent my formative years in a Muggle orphanage. Years of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer and Sunday liturgies until I wanted to rip my ears out from the hypocrisy of it all. But I learned. I learned...."

He leaned over Severus then and touched his cheek with a bony finger. "Did you learn, my boy? Did you learn the story of Abraham and Isaac?" At the shake of Severus's head, he flung his hands wide. "What? Your Muggle father didn't insist?"

Severus shook his head again.

The Dark Lord smirked. The lipless mouth actually managed to twist in a smirk. "But you were baptised?"

How had he known that? Severus remembered the odd photo on the wall of his mother, sullen and angry standing with a smug Tobias Snape, their ugly bundle of joy enveloped in a voluminous christening gown of white and lace. "It seems," he rasped, "baptism was the extent of my religious training."

The Dark Lord cocked his head sideways. "It seems, my dear Severus, that the ironies never end. You went to the old fool expecting a reprieve, and he ordered you to kill your Mudblood wife. And I, the *evil* one..." He paused, milking the moment. "I never intended you to kill her at all."

Something sharp and cold shifted within him. Lying, the Dark Lord had to be lying.

"The Great Jehovah demanded Abraham sacrifice his son simply to see if he would. It was a test, Severus, *a test*. And once Abraham proved himself willing, once he had the knife at the boy's throat..." Again, he paused dramatically. "Reprieve." The Dark Lord shook his head. "I am surrounded by fools! Even you, Severus! Especially you! What did you tell me when you first married the girl? That to kill her would be a mistake, a grave mistake, that the murder of a Muggle Pureblood would create too much of a stir!"

At the uneasy muttering of the Death Eaters in the room, the Dark Lord added, "Yes, I said Pureblood. The girl is a Pureblood amongst Muggles and while we're on that subject, Lucius, Severus, did it ever occur to either of you, even once, that when my power is complete I might find a Muggle Pureblood married to my second in command to be conveniently useful?"

"But, she's filthy!" Lucius interrupted. "And she despises you!" Only after the words had escaped did he seem to realise their potential for disaster. He quickly lowered his head in submission.

"Of course she despises us," the Dark Lord corrected smoothly. "But she loves Severus. I would be remiss if I didn't give him, my most loyal and valued servant..."

This drew a soft hiss from around the room.

"...his heart's desire and at least the opportunity to bring her to our way of thinking, once her cause is lost and her friends are no more. These are the things I had planned before poor Severus lost his way and turned to his other master for relief." The expression he turned on Severus was almost sympathetic. "And now, where is he? Grovelling on the floor, begging for death, and not even knowing why."

"Let me kill him," Bellatrix said, her wand ready. "Let me prove my love for you, my Lord!"

"Silence!" The Dark Lord sank to his knees and leaned forward, bringing his face close. "Severus, have you not worked out what is happening to you? Your bloody tears, your pain, your loss of will?"

Severus stared into his glowing red eyes as if there were an answer there, because he needed an answer, he needed a way to make it stop, to take away the ache and the fear and the agony.

"It's your soul, my boy. Your soul is riven." This time the cold fingers stroked his hair away from his forehead and there was no doubt, there was tenderness in the touch. "Albus had soul magic in his castle and didn't even recognise it, he was so blinded by the Potter spawn. And because he had no use for you, his pet Death Eater, other than for his own selfish means, he sent you to kill it."

With a smooth movement that belied his age and his infirmity, the Dark Lord rose to his feet, gestured at a chair and levitated it to join his. Another gesture, and Bellatrix and Narcissa fell back and Severus found himself standing, and then, unbelievably, the Dark Lord's tight grip on his elbow as he commanded him to join him on the low dais.

When they were seated the Dark Lord waited until the room grew silent. "How is it that I have set forth tasks for my followers, tests of their worthiness, tests that they all fail? How is it that at each of these tests, it is the Mudblood who excels? Whose grace and poise put the lovely Narcissa to shame? Who evaded Lucius as easily as if he'd been a house-elf rather than a Death Eater? Who avoided her own death and came close to scoring a great coup for the Light...had not her actions torn your soul, Severus, and might I add that whatever it is that you suffer, she suffers more severely, wherever she is?"

Severus jolted upright.

"Yes, indeed. In fact, I quite fear for her in the state she must be in, especially since she has no one to help her, no one who understands the intricacies of healing a damaged soul...."

She was suffering worse than he? He fought the roar, fought the surge of desperation, and fought for his wits.

He had to find her.

He had to save her.

"My dear boy," the Dark Lord said, his voice as low and as normal as Severus had ever heard it. "Let me heal you. Then we will find her."

"Yes." The word was out before the Dark Lord had finished speaking. He fell to his knees and raised the hem of his robes and pressed his lips to it. "Yes, my Lord. Please, my Lord." And then, because he was weak and unable to stop it from following, "Please...."

"Lucius, I need a strong red wine." As Lucius sprang to action, the Dark Lord's cold claw stroked the back of Severus's hand where it gripped the arm of the chair. "Narcissa, my personal crystal, if you will?"

She sprang forward, not even sending a house-elf on the errand. Her eagerness...her desperation...to regain her place in the Dark Lord's service was clear.

Minutes later she returned with a large wooden case in her arms. She knelt before the Dark Lord and, at his bidding, opened it. Nestled in black velvet, eight crystal goblets caught candlelight and exploded it in rainbow rays. When one was lifted to the light in that white claw, Severus caught his breath.

Elfin crystal.

He watched the dark garnet-hued liquid fill the eerily familiar goblet, and now with the addition of colour, the microscopic facets burst into their brilliance and glowed,

reflecting red back onto the Dark Lord's pale hand...a hand that spilled a black, glistening potion into its depths and then dipped one long finger in to stir.

"Take," the Dark Lord said, as Severus knelt before him. "Drink."

Severus raised the cobweb-like glass to his lips and gulped it down, as if gulping his own salvation, even though he knew what this had to mean, that he was accepting Dark magic, the Darkest of Dark magic.

He didn't ask what had been added. He didn't ask what it meant to his life, his death, his soul.

His gut twisted with the knowledge.

She'd thought him worthy, but he had never been worthy, never been worthy of what she had bestowed upon him, and his acceptance of evil if it gave him his heart's desire proved it.

His defection proved it.

Because he knew as the wine burned its way down his throat that he'd chosen, once and for all which side he was on.

He'd always turned to the Dark, to evil, when his heart was on the line, after all.

What good was a soul if his heart was missing?

He had to find Miss Granger.

He had to save her.

## Scented

*Chapter 54 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

I'm thrilled and honoured that Care of Magical Creatures has been nominated for four The New Library Awards:

Amortentia: Best SS/HG Romance

Gripping Charm: Best SS/HG Drama

Diffindo: Best SS/HG Angst

Engorgio: Best SS/HG WIP

I have also been nominated Best New Author.

More info and a fabulous list of nominated fics in all sorts of ships and genres here:

[http://community.livejournal.com/tnl\\_awards/4104.html](http://community.livejournal.com/tnl_awards/4104.html)

*As always, I must thank the lovely JKR for generously sharing her world with us.*

*As always, I must thank the patient and fabulous GinnyW for her outstanding hand-holding, bitch-slapping and other advanced beta techniques.*

*Again, I thank lifeasanamazon for her betawork on this chapter.*

*And last, I thank Juno Magic and Chenoah for being the last pairs of eyes to reassure a trembling author that, there-there, everything will be all right....*

### 54. SCENTED

She clung to the darkness of her dressing room because her stomach roiled and her body quaked from the Portkey in a way it never had before.

Then she clung to the refuge of her dressing room because to move, to breathe, to ever*think* risked revealing her presence to him.

Finally, she clung to the floor of her dressing room because she hurt, she hurt.... But if she held herself still, so very still...without moving or breathing or thinking...the pain would stop.

Stop.

She just needed it to *stop*.

Finally, she allowed the door to open just far enough...

Perhaps she only imagined it...but she could smell the ghost of his shaving soap.

On a gentle wave of eucalyptus and spearmint, she slept.

XX

He dreamed of her.

He rolled onto his side and pulled her against him, curl nestled into curl, and buried his face in her hair, her horrid, horrid hair, and cupped her breast with his hand, and sank deeper into sleep.

He slid his fingers into the snug, warm, fleshy place between her small breasts. He could almost feel the soft rise and fall of her chest, could almost smell the sharp tang of eucalyptus and spearmint, which would never be his scent again, but hers, all hers....

*Red musk.*

He winced, suddenly aware that he inhaled air, not horrid hair. That his hand clutched emptiness. That nothing of Miss Granger was there.

Not even her scent.

Especially not her scent.

*Red musk.*

His chest ached.

His eyes stung.

Something soft and wet dabbed at his cheeks.

"...*still pink...*" Narcissa's distant voice was tinged with concern.

He flinched, tried to get away from the cold cloth. Why was she doing this? Why wouldn't she leave him alone?

And then... she did.

Left him.

Alone.

With his dreams.

XX

She dreamed of him.

They lay in their bed, not on the hard floor.

They spooned the way they always spooned and she felt safe, so safe. The horrifying reality of what she had done only hovered; it didn't wash over her in a tidal wave of guilt and terror.

Her mind melted more deeply into sleep and her body settled more heavily against the hard, cold floor.

XX

*Patchouli.*

An ungentle arm raised his head and he struck wildly, but magic froze him and something poured down his throat.

He choked, coughed...

*Bellatrix.*

His mind flailed even though his body was held tight by magical bonds.

She raised his head higher. "Be still, Severus," she said sharply. "Unless you want this cold water poured over you."

"Wh...what?" His throat stung and he coughed as more liquid hit his throat.

"Water. That's all."

It tasted like water. But he didn't trust anything Bellatrix Black put in his mouth.

"It's water," she repeated. "Our Lord left me to give you water, so cooperate or else I'll...."

Her voice faded as he drifted back into sleep.

And into Miss Granger's arms.

Only to be roughly shaken back awake.

"Severus!" she hissed, holding a sweaty jug over his head. "Stay awake!"

He had the eeriest feeling that her dark glammers were dripping down, touching him, and he tried to knock her away but she had him secured.

"What did you do?" she asked, her voice a seductive purr. "What did you do to win his favour?"

He rolled his head away and closed his eyes.

His head finally hit the pillow as Bella jerked away from him with a snarl.

He felt the bonds melt away and felt an almost violent need to send the patchouli stench with them.

He fell back into blackness.

XX

*Vetiver.*

*Lucius.*

He clung to his dreams, but it did no good.

Again, he was hoisted. Again, threatened if he didn't cooperate. Again, had water poured down his throat.

"No house-elves to handle the menial work for you?" he grated.

Lucius simply sniffed in response.

Why were his eyes so wet? Had they spilled the fucking water on him? He tried to brush the moisture away from his face but Lucius caught his hand.

Soft linen wiped his cheeks dry.

"Clear," Lucius announced.

Severus shook his head, tried to make sense of it...

"The Dark Lord wants to know when your tears are clear."

"How long..."

"Two days."

He fought it, then. Fought the sleep, fought the bed linens that tangled around his legs, fought to get up...

But Lucius applied a firm hand to his chest and shoved.

Severus collapsed back onto his pillows again.

For a long moment Lucius stared down at him, his eyes cool and grey, his expression impossible to read. Finally he shook his hand free and wiped it with his linen handkerchief. Lucius gave a small nod and whirled away and out of the room, leaving him alone.

*...when your tears are clear...*

He'd been crying? In his fucking sleep?

Rage battled with despair within him, and the dull ache in his chest flared.

He picked up the half-empty water jug beside his bed and heaved it against the wall. It shattered with a satisfyingly loud crash and water and shards of glass went everywhere.

A house-elf popped into the room, fluttering in horror.

Lucius appeared at the door with Cissy close behind him, her distress obvious.

"Inform the Dark Lord I await his convenience," Severus said, leaving it to the three of them to work out exactly whom he was ordering about as his servant.

This time when he sat up, no one pushed him back down.

XX

Her eyes hurt.

Her face itched but her eyes hurt. They brimmed with tears and she rubbed at them, and it relieved some of the pain, but her face...something was wrong with her face. And...

*Oh, god.*

Humiliation burned her cheeks as she struggled to sit up in the dark.

She had no idea how long she'd been there, just that she felt and smelled the evidence that she'd wet herself.

*Oh, god.*

She shivered and listened tensely and heard no noise, no hint that she wasn't alone in her family's ancestral home. She allowed herself three deep, shuddering breaths and then tried to stand...

And fell back to the floor, her legs stinging and cramping.

Again she rose, this time, clinging to the doorjamb. She stood and pressed her cheek and ear to the cold wood, partly to catch her breath, partly to let her legs come back to life and partly to listen....

To the creak of the centuries-old structure settling in for the winter, to the soft and distant sound of wind whistling through a poorly sealed window.

She finally eased the door open. Her bedroom was almost as black as the windowless dressing room had been. And it was blessedly empty.

*He isn't here.*

She fought the despair, shoved it down, and instead strove to feel the relief that no one had discovered her hiding place.

She managed to get to her doorway and then through it to close the door behind her. Finally, she lifted her rucksack to her shoulder and prepared herself for the long, dark walk to her parents' wing.

Her limbs were weak and stiff. She dragged herself along the walls, carefully skirting the painted Gothic Revival cabinet that would have a silver urn displayed on it if the family was in residence, but now was empty.

Chest aching and hollow, when she turned the corner and entered the next wing, she froze in a shaft of light that spilled in from the window at the end of the hall. Someone



had left the curtains half-closed. She rushed forward and returned to the darkness where she felt safer, a little, at least.

With the muscles in her legs quivering and her thighs and soft tissue chafing from her urine-soaked jeans, she found her mum's door, opened it, and ducked through.

Her heart pounded as she fell back against it, gasping.

And finally, she managed to make her way through the large bedroom, across the thick rug, past the vast four-poster bed and into the adjoining room and...

The toilet and bath.

And the faint, powdery smell of her mother's Chanel No. 5 talcum powder.

At least here she could turn on the light, for this room had no windows to cast a telltale glow into the night, to alert a casual observer (or not so casual, as the case might be) that the house was not empty.

One glance in the mirror and she realized what caked her face.

Dried blood.

She reached for a flannel but stopped. Did she really want to leave a bloody flannel behind when she left?

She'd wash in the bath.

The pipes rattled; the icy cold water started as a trickle but eventually gushed into the bath. Shivering, she sat on the floor and clutched her knees to her chest, waiting for it to warm up...

And realised the boiler would be turned off.

She stared at the cold water and braced herself, then heard Ron's voice *Are you a witch or aren't you?*

Feeling relieved and foolish, she performed a warming charm with a flourish of her hand, then, clutching her chest in an attempt to still the sudden pang of pain, she scooped up some water to check it.

It was still cold.

She tried again. Again, the sharp pang.

Again, it was still cold.

She fought for air. It was because she was weak. She shouldn't even be doing such things in her current state. She should be reserving her energy, building it, saving it. Not squandering it.

And then a spot on her thigh burned. She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out one of two Galleons and breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't the DA Galleon. It was the one she'd charmed with Luna....

*PS gone. Nobody knows where.*

Professor Snape...gone?

She fell back against the wall, her eyes squeezed shut. Where was he? Was he still looking for her? Or had something happened to him?

*Oh god oh god oh god.*

The water was cold, so cold, but she stripped down and knelt in it and washed herself clean, her body shuddering at the assault of icy water and air. She rubbed water on her face until it was smooth under her fingertips and her cheeks ached with the cold.

Finally she wrapped herself in a towel and turned off the light and, dragging her rucksack behind her with hands shaking like leaves, managed to cross one last expanse of floor...

And climb into her mum's bed.

The covers were cold and heavy on top of her, but it was dark and nobody knew she was here....

Her teeth chattered and she rolled into a tight ball...

Trying to ease the hollow ache near her heart.

Searching for his arms.

XX

He struggled into his clothes without assistance. He didn't want anyone to know.

When he sank, trembling, on the side of the bed, he called out, "House-elf!"

At first it seemed he was being ignored but then a young female appeared, her eyes huge and entire body quaking.

He yanked his wand from his wand pocket and thrust out his free hand. "Take me to the Apparition Foyer."

She backed away from him, clearly uncertain, then reached tentatively for his hand. He stood, and she started for the door.

"No," he snapped. "We will Apparate."

"Mixte not supposed to..."

"Now!"

She gasped in a deep breath and...

They landed in the Apparition Foyer with a sharp crack.

He dropped her hand and didn't wait to catch his breath...that had been too loud and someone would be coming...

He stepped into a turn and...

Disappeared.

XX

He wasn't sure how long he sat in the chair in the dark room at Spinner's End breathing dust, fighting for coherent thought, fighting for any thought that wasn't how much he fucking needed her. How much he fucking needed to hold her, just hold her, that's all...

Just hold her.

And know she was still alive.

That was what terrified him.

The thought that she might not be, that this was what the hollow place in his chest meant....

His arm burned.

He jerked to his feet and only iron will kept him from staggering.

The wards at Spinner's End were being breached.

He peered through a shredded curtain into the garden and saw the dark figure silhouetted against the moonlight.

He dropped the wards immediately.

The Dark Lord entered without making even the softest *pop*.

Severus restored the wards with a flick of his wand and met the glowing red eyes without blinking for a long moment, before he bent carefully, took the cadaverous hand in his and kissed the ring.

He wasn't at all sure he could drop to the floor without totally collapsing.

"This is hardly awaiting my convenience," the Dark Lord said silkily.

"I felt a need to escape Malfoy hospitality." Severus reached for some semblance of poise but feared he missed it by a league. "Their attentions were rather... cloying," he finally managed to say with a curl of his lip.

He stepped aside and gestured for the Dark Lord to take the seat he'd vacated, then took the hard chair across from it. It would keep him attentive, at least.

The Dark Lord stared at him through narrowed eyes. "Have you worked out how imperative it is that you must find your bride, Severussss?"

Imperative. He knew that. He felt it in his blood, knew it on the most elemental level, but...what was he missing?

"When two are *joined* at the soul, they cannot be torn asunder without both dying."

Dying?

He was...

*She* was dying?

He lurched to his feet. He had to...had to leave, had to...

"Severussss." The claw closed over his arm. "You're stronger today than you were when you came to me with death on your mind."

A hard squeeze, and Severus forced himself to still, to wait and listen.

"I told you I'd take care of you, and I told you we'd find her. You must trussst me."

"You said she's in worse condition than I am."

"She is stronger, too. Through your connection, you are making her stronger. And yes, I told you I would help you and that we would find her, but you don't know what that means. You don't know what I expect in return."

"Anything."

"You can't speak for her."

"I can. I will. I do." He had to find her.

The Dark Lord's laughter was wet and rustling, like bloody leaves on a battlefield. "You forget, I have seen this witch, have tested her mettle and do not believe you can speak for her so easily, my boy."

Severus met his gaze without wavering. "The fact that you have seen her and tested her mettle proves what she is willing to do for me."

"Going to tea is not the same as sitting at your side when you attend me."

"Give me a chance to..."

"You will get your chance."

The vice squeezing his heart released much of its pressure. "Thank you."

"Sit."

Finally, he forced himself to sit again.

"Over the past two days I've pondered this situation and whether I dared trust her..." The Dark Lord idly pulled a piece of lint from his robes and then glanced up at Severus, almost casually. "Or trust you where she is concerned."

Severus froze.

"I've concluded that I have everything to gain and nothing to lose by allowing you to save your bride. Mudblood or not, she is a worthy partner for my... my most trusted servant. And do you know why I have found satisfaction in these conclusions?"

"Please. Tell me."

"With your connection comes great vulnerability," the Dark Lord said. He leaned forward and reached to touch Severus's chin with one long finger. His red eyes bored deep, and Severus didn't move. "Now that you are suffering so, now that you know the pain... neither of you will want to lose the other again."

Something lurched in his chest. Never. Never would he let anything separate them again, not if he ever found her, not if...

The Dark Lord leaned back into the chair and folded his claw-like hands and sighed almost happily. "And because, Severusss, as I was saying, with the link you have... if one of you dies, you both die."

Severus allowed his lips to twist in a bitter smile. "That seems to please you, my Lord."

"Oh, but it does, it does. It gives me the power to give you this gift, to give you your bride. What I thought was a terrible risk...too terrible...that I must let her live if I want you at my side...this becomes a weapon, doesn't it?"

"You will do anything to live so that she can live. I can make you happy and know that you have every reason to make me happy. And your wife... I believe she will have to choose my side, Severusss."

His mouth went dry. Surely, surely the Dark Lord didn't expect... "My Lord, if you think to turn her against Potter... she would die first."

"I have no delusions about that. But in the aftermath, when Potter and the blood traitors are all dead, when she has no hope... she'll accept the inevitability of my rule. I like to believe, for your sake, that the connection you have will ultimately make her share your triumph. And if not?" The Dark Lord shrugged, and even in his horrid snake-like state, that shrug had its own kind of elegance. "She will be more malleable when she knows that to risk her life with an insurrection means risking yours, as well."

Severus stared into the cold fireplace. His warrior... his glorious warrior of a wife... shackled to the service of the Dark Lord out of fear for him.

Could she ever forgive him?

Could he forgive himself?

Bile rose in his throat.

"Do you have any questions for me, Severusss? Or are we ready to return together? It is time for you to take your place at my side."

"I think..." Severus said idly, his well-practiced tone concealing his consternation, "perhaps I should be asking what it is you gave me to drink?"

"Ah, yes, I wondered when would you would ask. It was only a restorative. Yet, the image of the mighty Potions master at my feet, drinking an unknown substance from my chalice. If I ever needed proof of your loyalty..."

Severus forced himself to meet the red eyes without flinching. "You had recent proof of my disloyalty."

"Did I? You said things to Albus that a spy would say to gain the confidences of his enemy. Now you're telling me that you meant them?"

Was the Dark Lord giving him an opportunity to back out of his faux pas with dignity?

Or did the Dark Lord not recognise the betrayal when he saw it?

In a moment of lightning clarity, Severus recognised he was perched on a precipice and the wrong move could destroy him, and in destroying him also destroy her. His Miss Granger. His girl, his woman, his witch, his bride... his everything.

He stood and lowered his head with the respect a second in command owed his leader. "My Lord, you must summon your followers. It is time to plan our attack."

"Hallowe'en is still over a month away."

"Albus knows about Hallowe'en."

The silence grew between them, grew taugth and razor-edged.

The Dark Lord rose slowly and this time when he grabbed Severus's chin it was with anger. This time, his fingers dug in and his fingernails brought blood. This time he dived in with a vicious search...

And Severus offered it up like a tithe.

*The Order of the Phoenix renewing their blood oaths.*

*Miss Granger's valiant and foolish act of loyalty.*

*The announcement that the attack would come on Hallowe'en.*

The Dark Lord released him and stepped back.

"They are no match for you," Severus continued calmly, his heart slow and steady. "In number or in preparation. Especially when their preparation is for a date over a month away. We must attack, and soon."

"What kind of insult is this, to think you can betray me and then blithely tell me how to plan my battles? To think I should continue to trust you?" the Dark Lord snarled as he jerked the left sleeve up Severus's arm and jabbed the black mark with his gnarled finger. Severus almost convulsed as the pain arced from that spot on his arm throughout his body. "Oh yes, they are summoned; you can be sure of that."

Before he could prepare himself or brace himself in any way, the Dark Lord yanked him into a joint Apparition...

His body screamed as they tore through the wards.

XX

Hermione ate the first tin of beans standing over the sink, shoveling them into her mouth with a spoon, almost weeping with hunger.

The next eleven, she put into her knapsack along with the tin-opener. She heaved the knapsack to her back. With a water glass in one hand and the other hand available to catch her if she lost her balance...she was still so very weak...she began the long trek from the kitchen to her bedroom via the servants' stairs.

She had to stop twice to catch her breath and still her heart.

Finally, she reached her bedroom and entered her small dressing room. She had gathered all the candles she could find and had removed everything fluttry and flammable. All that remained was her dressing table (now a makeshift desk), the pillows and blankets she'd piled on the floor and, now, eleven cans of baked beans and a plastic bag for rubbish.

She lit a candle and firmly closed the door so that no light would leak into her bedroom and find its way through the windows and into the night.

She sat at the desk, uncorked the first pot of ink, and pulled the first blank parchment toward her. Her hands trembled less, now that she'd eaten. The hollow place was still in her chest, a low knifing ache, but she could...she must...soldier on.

Four coins were lined up in front of her, two Galleons, and the old halfpenny and a twopence her grandmother had given her so very long ago.

She didn't know how long she had.

She didn't know where he was.

She couldn't think about that. Not now. Not when she had work to do.

She lifted a finger to Summon the nearest pot of ink.

Then lowered it without trying.

Her heart pounded in her chest and she felt the walls of the small room pressing in on her.

*As if I can't just reach for it* she scolded herself, trying to ignore the empty aching place in her chest.

She lifted the small vial of wizarding shaving soap from the corner of the dressing table and inhaled deeply from its depths.

His scent...his eucalyptus and spearmint...surrounded her and eased into her, and gave her strength.

Clutching it in her free hand, she reached for the pot, dipped her quill into the blood red ink and began writing, "Dear Luna...."

It was a short note, and all too soon she had blotted it and was reaching for the Galleon.

She held her breath as she touched its gold edge to the surface of the small piece of parchment...

And watched with a sense of relief as the words disappeared.

The magic worked.

She tried not to think about the fact that Luna had charmed the Galleon herself, not Hermione. That the magic that worked was Luna's, not hers.

She was simply weak, but getting stronger.

That was all.

XX

The ballroom at Malfoy Manor echoed with muttering and anticipation as more and more Death Eaters entered. Their noise was a low roar, even in the adjoining parlour where the Dark Lord kept Severus firmly at his side.

The Dark Lord drained a goblet of water, then shoved another at Severus to do the same.

"My Lord..."

"Silence!" the Dark Lord hissed.

Severus bowed his head and placed the empty goblet on the tray.

His mind raced, darting from insignificant thought to vital detail without pausing.

The Dark Lord's robes were immaculate.

Severus wore the same he'd worn when he'd arrived two...three?...nights before.

The Dark Lord was frighteningly pale and smooth-cheeked.

Severus's stubble had gone untended for three days. The thought of his wizarding shaving soap that she loved so well was almost enough to take his breath away, but no, he couldn't think of it. Such thoughts only led to thoughts of her.

Knowing she lived should bring him more comfort.

Not knowing what awaited him, and thereby her, eliminated any comfort he might have felt.

Nothing about this felt right.

His attempt to wrench control of an impossible situation had gone awry and now, now he awaited...

He would not name what he awaited.

He drew in a breath and fought for calm.

And when the Dark Lord rose from his seat and began moving towards the doorway to the ballroom, Severus met his gaze without flinching and followed.

As one, all dropped to their knees when the Dark Lord entered.

Not until the Dark Lord had taken his place in his throne-like chair on the raised dais and allowed Severus to kiss his hem, did he announce to them all, "Rise."

Lucius and Narcissa stood nearest, and on the Dark Lord's other side, Bellatrix.

Severus didn't know where...or whether...to stand.

He remained on one knee, head bowed.

"I said rise," the Dark Lord hissed softly.

He stood, feeling eyes...curious and resentful...on him. He stared blindly at nothing and waited.

"Is everyone accounted for?"

MacNair stepped forward from his spot near the front of the crowd. "Yes, my Lord."

"Severus has come forward with a change in plans," the Dark Lord said coldly, his eyes mere slits of fire. "Perhaps you will honour us with an explanation, Severus?"

So. The Dark Lord intended to toy with him before destroying him.

"If I might ask Lucius a question," he said, straining for calm.

The Dark Lord gave a sharp nod.

He looked into those pale grey eyes and found not a touch of warmth. "What is being said at Hogwarts?"

Lucius gave a cool smile. "There's quite the uproar. The Gryffindors are outraged. It seems they think you've made off with their Gryffindor princess."

Severus turned back to the Dark Lord, a tremor of hope finding its way into his bloodstream for the first time. If he could convince them to move now, before Miss Granger was found... "My Lord. Now is the time. They're distracted and disorganised and they think she is with me. But if I offer to bring her to Potter... if I offer to give her to him... if he'll meet me alone at Godric's Hollow..."

He waited.

Confused murmurs sounded behind him. He heard the word, "Hallowe'en," mentioned more than once. Lucius glared at him through suspicious eyes.

Reading the tense silence, Bellatrix sprang forward with a flounce of her skirts. "Who is he to be changing plans, my Lord? He insults you and your wisdom!"

The Dark Lord allowed his gaze to swing from Severus to Bella. He smiled at her, beckoned to her, and when she drew near he stroked her cheek. "My beautiful Bella, so strong, so eager to defend me."

Bella leaned into his touch even as she slid a defiant glance at Severus.

"And you, Bella. What would you have me do?"

Even Bella recognized a minefield when it lay before her. After a moment's hesitation she finally said, "I would not presume, my Lord."

He let his fingers trail through her hair. "Then do not presume to interrupt when I am dealing with my subordinates."

She almost purred, then stiffened. Her eyes met the Dark Lord's with obvious trepidation, and she started to pull away, but the Dark Lord only patted her shoulder and indicated that she should seat herself beside him.

Severus's own muscles ached with weakness, but he stood stiffly even as he fretted inwardly. Did the Dark Lord expect a confession from him, an admission to those assembled that the reason for the change in plan was Severus's own breach of trust?

Was that what this was really about?

Was he to be torn to bits by Death Eater hexes?

He'd only thought to speed up the end, to force the final confrontation between the Dark Lord and Potter while she was missing, to keep her out of the middle of it.

What a fucking fool he was, to think he could reveal his betrayal without punishment. To...*fucking hell*...trust the Dark Lord's benevolence, his "twisted affection" as Albus had put it, and think he could survive.

"No one has ever questioned my tenderness for you, Bella," the Dark Lord continued, ignoring Severus completely. "They only had to look at you to know why I would elevate you to a place of respect amongst all others. Look at your beauty, your faithfulness, your loyalty."

Severus noted no reference to the husband who had an even greater claim on her beauty, faithfulness and loyalty. He struggled to keep his expression carefully bland...something that had never required struggle before.

"Many have wondered why I would bestow so much honour and respect upon my servant, Severus, however."

Fucking hell. This was it. He braced himself.

"Even you, darling Bella. Even you asked me why I wanted you to lure a gangling fourteen-year-old wizard into our fold when you were so much older, more sophisticated..."

Severus felt a ball of lead settle in his gut. Bella had approached him at the Dark Lord's bidding?

Bella's laughter was low and musical and filled with disdain.

Lucius was suddenly alert, his gaze darting between the three of them. This was clearly news to him, as well.

"I don't believe you found the efforts too distasteful, did you, my love?"

Bella seemed frozen between the desire to soak up the Dark Lord's tender words...so rare in public...and the fear of making a wrong move. She darted a glare at Severus and curled her lip, but remained silent.

Severus fought for control.

He didn't want to remember those times with Bellatrix, much less realise that it was all a ruse of the Dark Lord's to bring him into the Death Eaters by stroking his libido.

But why? Why had the Dark Lord even cared about a fourteen-year-old nothing with the stench of his Muggle upbringing still on him?

Warring scents suddenly made him dizzy, the worst of them all Bella's patchouli. His legs trembled.

"Bella, you asked me why, you even argued...yes, you dared argue...but you didn't *think*. You didn't recognise your opportunity. You didn't realise that if I wanted Severus you should simply do everything to bring him to me."

Bella's frown indicated she wasn't so sure of herself, but Severus took little comfort from that fact. What was the Dark Lord weaving with this long, circuitous ramble of reminiscence? What did he want?

More importantly, how could Severus give it to him?

"Would you believe, my children, that I once harboured a desire for the two of you to marry?"

They both recoiled at that, and the Dark Lord laughed. "Fortunately, I don't force my followers to my will in such matters. It was but a passing fancy I had, and it passed, but not without exposing some vulnerabilities of which I'd previously been unaware...."

"My poor Bella came to me distraught, in dire need, and I helped her, didn't I?"

Bella cast a nervous glance around and turned beseeching eyes upon her Lord. "Please..." she whispered.

"You were young, too," he said kindly. "I realised I couldn't hold it against you, even as it spelled the doom of my plans. You had no idea that you were ridding your body of my heir... the heir you'd begged me to give you."

There was a stifled gasp throughout the room, and Narcissa stared at her sister in horror. "You aborted the Dark Lord's child?"

"Never!" Bella cried. "Never would I and never did I!"

"Really?" the Dark Lord asked, his hand trailing down her throat. "You didn't ask for an abortifacient so that you could bleed Severus's baby away?"

"But that was his...not yours! He was nothing but an arrogant, fourteen-year-old brat that you'd asked me to teach a few things about..."

"I brewed your contraceptive potions," Severus spat despite himself. "There was no reason to need an abortifacient." Hadn't that been the way she had first approached him? Beseeching with flattery and temptation, luring him with the promise that she could teach him so much if he would share his skill with potions...contraceptive potions in particular?

Two days later she'd taken him to her bed.

Two weeks later she'd taken him to the Dark Lord.

"Bella has often been careless," the Dark Lord said dismissively, his eyes now fixed on Severus. "This was not her only mishap, simply the only one that caused me discomfort."

"But...you only needed to tell me to keep the brat and I would have," Bellatrix cried in deep distress, clearly grasping at straws. She plucked at her skirts, frantic. "I would have done anything for you...anything...I still would!"

"Calm yourself." The Dark Lord reached for his crystal goblet of water, and Severus found himself transfixed by those bony white fingers. "He hadn't yet proved himself. He merely intrigued me. I speak of might-have-beens to view the irony, not to cause you pain."

The Dark Lord drank deeply of the water. "But Severusss, not only does he have an innate sense of giving me what I want, he even on this night dared show me what I *wouldn't* want to see. He is a brave man, our Severusss, and perhaps, foolish. Perhaps... not."

Those fingers...those skeletal fingers curled around that goblet...those fingers that delivered death like candies...had offered him hope, had held the goblet for him to drink....

The goblets.

The elfin crystal goblets.

Severus felt his world begin to shift on its axis.

He tried to breathe, to think, he desperately needed to fucking think...

"What did you mean," Lucius finally said, astounded, "when you said she rid herself of your heir?"

The Dark Lord rose to his feet, his gaze never wavering from Severus. "Surely you can work it out, Lucius. I sent Bella to bring him to me. I even thought they might marry. I was disappointed when I discovered that she was pregnant with his child and chose to flush it away."

He drew closer.

"Surely you can work it out, can't you, Lucius?"

But he wasn't speaking to Lucius.

He was speaking to Severus.

"Can't you?"

He held out his hand.

Albus's voice echoed, taunted faintly. *Because, quite simply, if it were within his shredded soul to love anyone, he would love you, Severus.*

The room swam around him.

"My father...my real father...was in Europe with his family," Severus said, his voice a husky mimicry of its usual power.

"I had no family," the Dark Lord corrected. "But it was a kinder explanation than the truth."

No.

"She was not a beautiful witch, your young mother. Not like our Bella. But she was clever and she was powerful and the wind snapped to her will when she was enraged, and I found her erotic beyond all reason. But only for a season, not a lifetime. And only to bed, not to father a child. I wasn't pleased when she told me, and I left her with money and excuses and nothing else. And she repaid me by binding my son to a Muggle with nothing to offer, not even a respectable name."

No.

"But she had little choice. The Prince family was proud and had no tolerance for the shame she brought upon them."

Now he was close enough to touch, his hand still outstretched, waiting... waiting....

*No!*

He couldn't. He couldn't be. He fucking couldn't be.

He stared at the outstretched hand, frozen, when to refuse it meant certain death...death for both of them.

To accept it...to accept what was being said...meant losing her forever.

She, who with her innocence and her decency and her blind belief in him could never...never...belong to him again.

This then, was the death knell of his hope.

From this moment forward, he was alone.

Somehow, he'd find a way to keep her safe.

Somehow, he'd find a way to protect her.

Even if he could never touch her with his filthy hands again.

And then, the scent of eucalyptus... of spearmint...

It surrounded him and eased into him.

Into his very soul.

She wasn't here, but she was with him, in him, and for her, he could do it, he could take the final step that...this time...betrayed ~~her~~.

He would do anything for her.

Pain knifed up his legs as dropped to his knees yet again.

*For my wife.*

Pressed his lips to that sickly hand yet again.

*For my Miss Granger.*

And whispered one word.

*For my Hermione.*

"Father."

## Vows

*Chapter 55 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

I'm thrilled and honoured that Care of Magical Creatures has been nominated for four The New Library Awards:

Amortentia: Best SS/HG Romance

Gripping Charm: Best SS/HG Drama

Diffindo: Best SS/HG Angst

Engorgio: Best SS/HG WIP

I have also been nominated Best New Author.

More info about voting and a fabulous list of nominated fics in all sorts of ships and genres here:

[http://community.livejournal.com/tnl\\_awards/4104.html](http://community.livejournal.com/tnl_awards/4104.html)

*My deepest regards to JK Rowling, who created it all and added the magic.*

*My deepest thanks to GinnyW and Juno Magic for their beta work on this chapter.*

### 55. VOWS

*Power.*

It surged through him at the moment his lips touched the Dark Lord's hand.

*Dizzying power.*

It spiralled through him in an ever-widening coil until it vibrated from the soles of his feet to his scalp, from his fingertips to his eyelids.

*Power.*

Never in his life, not even as a helpless, angry child, had he dared hope for such as this.

He realised he was still kneeling but could not let the Dark Lord see his face, see into his eyes, because this thrill of knowledge was something he wasn't ready to share.

He rose slowly, mind racing, and found himself staring across...

Straight into Lucius's eyes.

Knowing that Lucius trembled with envy.

Severus allowed his mouth to twist into a semblance of a smile.

Finally, he turned his face to that of...no, not his father...he couldn't think of him as anything but the Dark Lord...and lowered his eyes in submission.

A rustle of silk drew his attention and suddenly he found a gleaming blonde head bowed before him. Robes of shimmering pearl silk billowed around Narcissa as she curtsied. She raised her icy blue eyes to him and smiled. In that moment, she appeared almost warm with her regard. "Severus. Our home is your home as long as you should choose to grace us with your presence."

Severus brought his hands together in three slow claps. "Well played, Cissy," he said softly, then held out a hand to her and raised her from the floor.

She raised her chin with pride. Slytherin to the core.

"But I regret to say..." he began.

"You fool!" Bellatrix sneered, her rage crackling from her pores. "You stupid fool! He is your Dark Lord," she hissed, jerking her head toward Lord Voldemort, "and you dare insult him by bowing to Snape? By offering him..."

"Nothing he doesn't already have," Cissy snapped back. "Our hospitality."

"Are you also ready to burn your fine linens after he ruts his filthy little Mudblood in your bed?"

Severus rose to his full height in fury, even as he felt the wave of approval that rippled through the Death Eaters at Bella's words.

They hated his position. They hated his wife. They hated him.

But before he could react, the Dark Lord placed a soothing hand on Bella's shoulder.

"Bella, my sweet," he said, his voice almost a purr. "Is this truly the day on which you choose to die?"

Silence.

Bella's face froze in a rictus of horror as she stared at her beloved Lord.

He removed his hand from her shoulder and wiped it carefully on his handkerchief.

"My Lord!" She burst into tears and flung herself at his feet.

He stared down at her for a long, tense moment, then raised his face to Severus and... waited.

It took Severus longer than most present to recognise the moment for what it was. He heard the distant murmuring, a mere rustling amongst those behind him, but shocked and fearful.

His gaze glued to those pulsing red eyes before him he slowly realised.

The Dark Lord was waiting.

Waiting for him.

For him to decide.

Severus lowered his eyes to the prostrate woman in black sobbing at her master's feet.

He held her life in his hand.

Something cold and delicious and dark surged within him.

*Power.*

XX

Hermione sat in the window seat of her grandmother's bedroom...the bedroom she'd moved to when Grandfather Granger had died...and stared through a crack in the curtains.

She was careful not to move it, not even to give herself a wider view.

So careful not to reveal her presence.

She felt oddly light-headed. How she could feel stronger and yet light-headed... it was odd.

Maybe she wasn't eating enough.

She was sure she wasn't eating enough.

Maybe that's why it was so difficult to focus on the words....



She'd written seven feet of parchment, and then, the words just faded from her mind....

Maybe she would sleep here tonight. In her grandmother's bed.

Or maybe tomorrow.

She stared through the crack in the curtains and saw a corner of the manicured garden. Not even her favorite corner, not even the Elizabethan knot garden.

She'd like to show the knot garden to him.

Would he scoff at it?

Oh, she was most certain he would.

And the very thought of him scoffing at it made him feel more real to her and gave her...perhaps...the slightest surge of awareness that he was still there, still with her somehow.

She would show him the garden someday. She would. They would have a someday.

She pushed away from the seat and headed restlessly back to her hiding place.

She knew which words she needed to write.

XX

Severus glanced from the Dark Lord's burning red eyes to Bellatrix. Drowning in a pool of black at the Dark Lord's feet, she didn't even see that her fate dangled from her enemy's fingertips.

"My Lord," Severus said, his voice silky with disdain, "we have more important issues at hand."

He stepped around her prone figure and, with a smirk, allowed the Dark Lord to take the lead as they left her quivering on the floor in her fear.

Not until the door closed behind him did Severus hear the ballroom burst into a roar of reaction.

Fucking hell, he hadn't even been allowed to have a reaction, yet.

And he could not allow himself that luxury now.

In the adjoining parlour a formal table had been set for five.

"You might later regret not killing Bella while you had the chance," the Dark Lord said conversationally.

"Please. Not on her sister's ballroom floor."

Behind them, the noise of raised voices swelled and then lowered again as Lucius and Narcissa joined them.

Narcissa flicked her wand and one place setting disappeared.

The Dark Lord took his place at the head of the table.

Narcissa approached the opposite chair, claiming her position as hostess.

The Dark Lord raised his hand. "I prefer to be alone with Severus."

"Of course," she murmured, bowing her head slightly as she backed away. She exchanged a quick emotionless glance with Lucius. Another flick of the wand and only two place settings remained.

Severus watched them walk to a door on the opposite wall. Clearly they would not want to reenter the ballroom and reveal their absence from the planning table.

Lucius paused in the doorway, his eyes narrowed as he considered his next move. Finally, he spoke. "My Lord, if I might..."

The Dark Lord nodded.

Lucius met Severus's eyes. "Potter is being... contained. He and the blood traitor attempted to sneak away from the castle yesterday in some sort of *heroic*," his voice sneered the word, "attempt to rescue the M... Madam Snape."

"Potter. Always the fucking hero." Severus gave a sharp nod of thanks and then turned back to the table, wondering how the hell any conversation they had could be private in the Malfoys' domain.

Finally, he took his seat, raised his wine glass...suddenly filled with deep red wine...in a mock toast and said, "I hope you don't expect me to call you Father."

The red eyes bored into him but he refused to waver. He drank deeply and immediately regretted it, but would not show even that much weakness. He lowered the glass, still meeting the Dark Lord's gaze.

"Is this a show of hostility or some belated adolessscent rebellion?" the Dark Lord queried as he tapped his bowl with a spoon and it filled with consommé.

Severus matched his action and his tone. "I have the same respect, loyalty and affection for you that I had prior to your rather dramatic revelation," Severus said, his voice calculating and cool. "I see no need to fake nor foster anything further. It's not as if you've been pining for a son's love."

"Indeed." The Dark Lord's smile was slow and as genuine as one could ever hope to see, considering the source. "Indeed. It was rather dramatic, wasn't it?" He clearly was pleased.

"But not well received."

"Ah, Severus, do you fear they'll think you haven't earned my favour? That the only reason I honour you is because of our... blood connection?"

"Am I supposed to care?" he sneered.

"Good." The Dark Lord gave an elegant shrug. "Besides, what they think will make no difference by the time we all leave here this night."

Severus stared at the soup in his bowl with absolutely no desire to taste it. He finally placed his spoon across the edge at a diagonal and watched it disappear. He had no appetite at all, and to pretend the Dark Lord had one seemed ludicrous. "Must we stay?"

"We must. I realize you might not like this venue tonight, but there are things that must be done before any who are here are allowed to leave. If you're worried about anyone overhearing..." The Dark Lord gave a graceful twirl of his hand and the sudden silence felt physical as well as aural. "We are in complete privacy. Now, tell me more about your Gryffindor bride. Hermione is her name?"

Severus froze when he heard her name hissed from between the Dark Lord's lips.

"You don't mind that I use her name, I hope?"

"That is entirely up to her," Severus snapped.

"I'm relieved to see that you're feeling better, my boy. But do not take my good nature for granted. It would not end well for any of us."

"My apologies, my Lord. I'm a little off balance still."

"Of course you are." The Dark Lord leaned back in his chair and examined Severus through narrowed eyes. "My life would be simpler if I could just kill you and be done with it, but alas, I do care for you, my boy, and I do have my own uses for you and your... Hermione."

This time the use of her name was deliberate and pointed.

This time Severus didn't react. He raised his goblet in a toast that held no mockery. "To your success, my Lord."

"And your future," the Dark Lord returned with a tight smile.

"Which I hope begins as soon as possible." Severus pushed the glass away and leaned forward on the table. "I want to send for Potter immediately. They won't be expecting it, and they won't be ready, even if they are suspicious, and they won't be."

"Why wouldn't they be?"

"Because they have alienated Potter. You heard what Lucius said. My message will be to Potter. I'll tell him I've rescued her and need her taken to safety."

"But if they have him restrained..."

"Nobody can restrain Potter." Severus allowed a sneering smile to curl his lips. "He'll come."

"And how will you get a message to him?"

"By Patronus. By Miss Granger's Patronus."

"How...?"

"I believe I saw Salina Nott in the ballroom?" At the Dark Lord's nod, he continued. "I recall from our Defense Against the Dark Arts class when we were in school together... her Patronus was an otter."

He took a slow breath and pushed for the kill.

"We must act tonight."

"That is impossible."

The fist that had been clenched around his gut now gave an angry twist. "But my Lord, the sooner we act, the greater our chances of a quick victory." And the more likely their ability to end everything before Miss Granger was discovered or decided to reveal herself.

Safe. He had to keep her safe.

He took a deep breath and felt the Dark Lord's eyes drilling into him. "All Albus has at hand are a ragtag group of elderly, of students, of witches who haven't held a wand in battle in decades, if ever. Teachers whose experience is theoretical and a handful of Aurors. Yet they have a sense of passion on their side and a misguided sense of justice that will empower them if you give them any chance at all to assemble and prepare. We must strike fast and hard and..." He paused and met the Dark Lord's eyes with chilling intensity. "Potter must die."

The Dark Lord continued to study him. Finally he nodded. "I am pleased and relieved to see that you remain as ruthless as ever."

"Relieved?" Severus asked, unnerved. "You had doubts?"

"Not doubts. So much makes sense, now. Of course you couldn't kill her. You couldn't kill a piece of your own soul. But it has not gone without my notice that when you stumbled, when you lacked the ability to be ruthless..."

Severus waited for him to continue, unable to breathe.

"Your bride was ruthless for you."

His lungs emptied in a rush.

"Ah, yes, she continues to amaze me, despite her blood status. Ruthless, the witch was ruthless. She drugged you, Severus, you! Who else breathing could manage that feat? She abused your trust and drugged you and then broke her wand and abandoned you...I can only stand back and be dazzled." He grew thoughtful. "And anticipate the splendid children you will have."

The icy fist twisted and wrung until he feared for his ability to stay seated at the table. "Might I point out, my Lord, that in this respect you're beginning to sound like the fucking Ministry, treating us as brood stock?"

The Dark Lord chuckled. "Allow me my daydreams and plans, Severus. For the first time they are beginning to be of dynasty, and I find that concept strangely to my liking."

"My Lord. The Death Eaters will not. When I no longer have your protection," he said delicately, "they won't accept me, and they certainly won't accept any children I might have with a Muggle-born wife."

"Your children...my heirs...will be born of a soul connection of immense power, to a wizard and witch of immense power. This is an unexpected boon, something I never planned for, and yet the very fact that you have made such a connection at a time when my power is about to manifest itself fully...does this not speak of destiny?"

This time the Dark Lord's smirk was an out and out leer. "And as for my followers accepting you and such offspring as my heirs...they have to, Severus. It is my wish, and they have no choice."

"But... my Lord." He felt himself on very shaky ground but the obvious had to be said. "They wouldn't dare reject me now, and not while you live. By that unhappy time when they would have to accept me, you will no longer be with us."

"Which is why, my son..."

Son.

"...all my faithful servants are gathered here tonight."

The Dark Lord rose to his feet and offered his hand.

"Tonight, they make their oath to you."

"To me?" His mind raced. "What oath?"

"You need ask?" The Dark Lord was clearly amused...and also experiencing some other emotional state that Severus preferred not to consider. Finally, when Severus didn't respond, the Dark Lord said, "*Voluptas Voluntasque*."

"But that's..."

"Appropriate. While I live, of course, their oath to me is primary, which should be for longer than anyone dreams... But when I am gone, their allegiance will transfer to my heirs. They will have no choice."

"Perhaps," Severus said, his throat tight and mouth dry, "I should change into something more... worthy."

He didn't wait for permission.

He walked quickly to the family wing, to his chambers, and to the toilet where he lost the little that his stomach contained.

And then heaved more.

XX

The words poured out of her, so fast, so heated, she had a smear of red on her arm where she'd dragged across the page in her haste to dip her quill.

Even that didn't slow her.

Now her hair was in her eyes, on the page, in her mouth, and still the words poured in a torrent, and she felt blessed release as she raced forward...

*My dearest Professor...*

*You'll probably never see this because I will probably never give it to you, because I'm sure you're...*

*Oh, god.*

*You're raging at me for being a fool, for breaking my wand, for running away, for all the things that made so much sense at the time and now...*

*What else was I to do?*

*Wait until you were summoned to the Dark Lord and never returned to me?*

*I'm sorry, but that was not an option.*

*But now I'm sitting here alone, not knowing, and have nothing but time and darkness to second guess and...*

*And then I think of the state I was in when I wrote the last letter to you and can see you sneering in disgust that I was soppy and...*

*So we're back to Professor because maybe I'm just not soppy enough or desperate enough to put into words the things I'd like to say to you, to call you my dearly...*

She fiercely scratched out the word *dearly* but kept writing, the quill flying across the page....

*But you see, writing to you is like having you here and I need you here, because knowing you're angry at me and sneering at me makes me feel like I can see you and hear you and touch you.*

*And smell you.*

*And taste you.*

She closed her eyes for a brief moment and felt her mouth suffuse with moisture and memory....

*I need you.*

*I'm crying again.*

*God, I hate the crying.*

*I have work to do. So much work.*

*Did I tell you that my magic isn't working?*

Her quill quivered on the page, and...once again...she scratched out what she'd written, and took a deep breath, and put the parchment aside.

She didn't want him to worry about her.

She needed him fierce and angry, even if it was aimed at her.

She needed his strength.

She closed her eyes and, hands trembling, drew in deep gulps of air.

She had to set the record straight. If she didn't do it, who would?

She pulled the next blank parchment toward her and began writing, and this time, her hand was steady and her resolve strong.

*If you ever see this letter, know that this letter is for me, not you.*

*If you never see it, you'll never know what I see when I look at you, will you? You'll never know that while others may see the mistakes you have made, the sneer and the rage...that when I look at you, I see everything I could ever honour and respect and love in a man.*

*Know that if I lived a thousand years, I would never find a more worthy husband.*

*Know that I love you.*

*Know that I adore you.*

*Know that I am yours.*

XX

He couldn't get it out of his mind.

He remembered finding her in the Room of Requirement, weeping because she thought he was rejecting her.

Rejecting *her*.

*"I thought you were here to take me home"*

Seeing her so broken had broken him, had torn his heart wide open.

He had shoved her away because he reeked of Dark magic and Dark pleasure and didn't dare let her near him...

And she'd thought he didn't want her.

Now they whirled around him, these Dark choices he'd made so long ago. They continued to drag him down deeper, deeper, down to depths where not even the bright shining light that was his Miss Granger could reach.

He had wallowed in the filth.

He had accepted the putrid.

And now, he would be the source.

*Voluptas Voluntasque.*

He would do it, he would do it willingly and eagerly because the Dark Lord was right; through this bond no Death Eater would be able to attack him or anything that was his.

Through this bond he could keep her safe.

He pushed up from the marble floor and stripped until he could stand in the hot shower and attempt to wash away three days' filth. When he re-entered his bedchamber, he found a fresh set of black robes waiting for him.

When he rejoined the Dark Lord, he was ready.

No words needed to be spoken between them. He followed into the ballroom and felt the tension in the room rise even as all present sank to the floor.

The tension rose, and he drank it in, their tension, their anger, their fear. Drank it in like a narcotic, for it would buffer him and fuel him through what was coming.

It would feed his power.

The Dark Lord uttered one word.

"Rise."

And when all were at attention, he smiled and spread his hands wide in benediction. "On this night, you will all have the honour of pleasing me. You will accept my wisdom in all matters. You will please me, my children. This is the night which will begin the end of the Wizarding world as we know it, for after the actions of this night, we will surge forward in strength and righteousness to finally defeat those forces who futilely plot against me."

Throughout the ballroom, eyes glittered with anticipation. This was what all had been waiting for, and finally, it was happening.

"Tonight," the Dark Lord continued, "we usher in my Dark Dynasty, because tonight, you will expand your forsworn allegiance to include my son."

The stiffening, the unease, the awareness, was subtle but evident. Faces, on this night without masks, betrayed anger, envy and even lascivious anticipation.

"Tonight," the Dark Lord announced, "you will make your *Voluptas Voluntasque* to my most loyal and faithful servant. My son. My heir."

"No!"

The scream was harsh, strident, and unmistakably Bella.

"My Lord! I accept any punishment you choose, but you must listen to me! You can't trust him!" Tears welled in her still-beautiful, always-mad eyes. "He will betray you! He and his Mudblood will betray you! Please, my Lord, don't do this, don't make us do this..." She broke off in a ragged sob and finally, begging so softly only those few near her could hear, "Please don't make me do this...."

"Bella, you have one opportunity to please me in this way. If you don't take it..." The Dark Lord turned his attention to Severus and waited.

"She dies," Severus responded.

The Dark Lord extended his hand tenderly. "Bellatrix."

The anguish in her eyes as she looked at him pierced Severus to the core. Mad, beautiful and...and certain.

She did not take the Dark Lord's hand.

She faced Severus and he knew. She was not going to submit. He knew he was about to kill her, this woman he had once...

"You think you've won, Snape," she hissed, "but you haven't. This doesn't end here. I can't kill you here. But Snape, I will find your Mudblood and she will die!" Her laughter was wild and cackling and would be recalled in many a nightmare. "Snape, you talk in your sleep!"

And with a loud *crack*, she was gone.

Severus lunged forward to fling a curse at empty air.

The Dark Lord roared, "How did this happen?" He turned on Lucius and raised his hand to smite, and demanded, "You said the Manor was secured, that no one could leave until you drop the wards!"

Lucius was as pale as his platinum hair as he stammered, "I set the wards myself. No one could..."

"My Lord...oh, my Lord, we didn't..." Narcissa babbled. "Bella is family.... The new wards wouldn't have affected her." She covered her mouth with an elegant hand, her horror and fear written on her features.

"She has to be stopped," Severus snapped. "I have to..."

"You will go nowhere and do nothing but what you must do here tonight," the Dark Lord responded.

Severus froze.

"However, you may send a deputy. You may send someone in your stead to track her."

*Someone who is not yet bound to me?*

"Who do you trust, Severus?" The Dark Lord smiled, and it was clear that this was as much a test as any other time the Dark Lord had toyed with him.

Who did he trust?

He would laugh if he weren't afraid he'd scream.

There was only one answer.

"Lucius. Stop her."

Narcissa and Lucius both stiffened. The glance they exchanged was nothing if not calculated. Lucius's mouth quirked in a smirk. "It will be my honour, Severus."

And with another *crack*, he was gone.

*You talk in your sleep.*

What had he said? What in fucking hell had he said?

A rustle of fabric, movement from the corner off his eye, whispers and murmurs....

He felt eyes on him, so many eyes, but most specifically he felt glowing red eyes watching him and judging.

He stepped to the front of the dais. He had to act. He had to...he had to proceed.

The Dark Lord handed him his wand.

He stared at it in his hand, felt the coiling surge of Darkness tingle through him.

The *power*.

And raised his face to see who would be the first to step forward.

Narcissa.

Of course, it would be Narcissa.

He wondered what devious way the Malfoys had already devised to subvert the bond.

He wondered what madness had possessed him to send Lucius.

Salina Nott and her sister joined Narcissa, aligned just behind her, braced and ready.

Narcissa offered her bare forearms and spoke the words, her voice smooth and strong. *Per voluptatem meam in voluntate tua ego Narcissa serva sum.* Her pupils darkened, her lips parted moistly, and she drew in a shuddering breath of anticipation.

And because he knew what was expected of him, and knew the power he wielded...

He turned his voice to silk and murmured in her ear, *Per voluptatem tuam in voluntate mea te quam servam meam vincia*"

He pressed the tip of the Dark Lord's wand into the Dark Mark on the soft flesh of her arm...

Felt the power surge through him...Merlin, the power, pure power. The candles glowed brighter; the colours were more vivid; the tingling danced through his body in a surge so strong he felt it could lift him off the floor...

And he watched as she fell backward and was caught by her friends, who eased her to the floor where she writhed in a paroxysm of ecstasy, her sighs and whimpers filling the silent room.

He tore his eyes away from her.

Away from excruciating images of twisted limbs in red sheets and soft whimpers and...

He turned back to the red glowing eyes. The thin smile. He knew. Of course he knew what new strength coursed through Severus's body and almost turned him inside out with a pulsing awareness of its force.

And then he turned to the faces, some expectant and some resentful but all obediently waiting...

Waiting for *him*.

~0~0~0~0~

A/N My utmost thanks to Juno Magic who (as she has so generously done before) provided me with the Latin:

"*Voluptas Voluntasque*" - Lust and Will

"*Per voluptatem meam in voluntate tua ego Narcissa serva sum*" - Through lust bound by will, I, Narcissa, am a slave.

"*Per voluptatem tuam in voluntate mea te quam servam meam vincio*" - Through your lust within my will I bind you as my slave.

This oath is first mentioned in Chapter 27, Gifted, and again in Chapter 42, Lost, then Found.

## Instinct

*Chapter 56 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

*I'm thrilled and honoured to have been voted Best New Author (Lumos) in The New Library Awards.*

***Care of Magical Creatures* won:**

*Amortentia: Best SS/HG Romance*

*Diffindo: Best SS/HG Angst*

*and was Runner Up:*

*Gripping Charm: Best SS/HG Drama*

*Engorgio: Best SS/HG WIP*

None of this would be possible without the support of two fabulous betas: GinnyW and Leigh-Anne,

and a trio of women who have stepped up and given last minute looks when they were desperately needed: Juno Magic, lifeasanamazon and Chenoah, and for this chapter, deemichelle.

And of course, none of this would be possible without the magical world of JK Rowling and her generosity in allowing us to continue to bring it to life now that her canon is complete.

### 56. INSTINCT

She knew.

Something was wrong, terribly wrong, and she knew it in her bones, deeper than her bones.

There had been times when she slept when she'd felt as if he were there, right *there*....

But this time, *this time*...

There was no doubt.

She felt him.

And he was afraid. Her professor, her fierce and powerful professor, afraid? The very idea struck terror in her. What could cause him fear, unless...

Unless the Dark Lord was angry.

He had let her escape. She left him to explain her absence, and what if it had backfired? What if he were, even now on this night, suffering the consequences?

Without thinking or reasoning, she snatched up her parchments, her quills, her pots of ink. She would sort them later. Now she just knew an unreasoning need to act and act quickly.

Now, she was infected with his fear.

If he was afraid, if he of all people was afraid, something was horrifically wrong.

Just as she'd earlier been frustrated by her inability to enlarge those items she'd reduced for packing in her rucksack, now she was frustrated by her inability to reduce the parchments. She flattened them as best she could with shaking hands and shoved them in.

Unease thrumming through her, she closed the door to her dressing room. She felt unable and unwilling to take the time to restore it to its previous state, but at least no

visual signs remained that she'd been sleeping and working there.

A half hour later she'd returned her mother's things...the Chanel dress, the boots and the rubies. Again, a bolt of fear shot through her, and this time she couldn't be certain that it wasn't her own. This fear was sparked by the memory that even in her frantic preparations to flee Hogwarts, she'd calmly cast a reducing charm that would end at her death.

Just in case.

If her mother were to come to The Grange on the first of November, would she find her things still in miniature?

Or returned to their natural state?

She shoved the wardrobe door shut and stepped back, fighting for air.

Again, driven by instinct she didn't understand and fear that was all too real, she crept from the room and into the hallway. The structure spoke to her in whispers and moans, the same sounds she'd heard all her life, but now they felt so ominous, so deadly....

Instinct.

She, who didn't do anything without research, without study, without lists and charts and much hemming and hawing, was flying blind, running on instinct.

Where were these instincts leading her?

After everything that happened, how could she keep acting on them, trusting them?

The answer to that was simple enough.

Instinct was all she had left.

More than ever before, she felt how alone she was in this draughty old manor. She thought of all those generations who had gone before her, who had fought for Crown and country, and wondered that none had lingered. No ghosts were here to lend her their strength or courage...

But that didn't mean they had left her defenceless.

The armoury.

Generations of Granger males had served England with stouthearted valour, and the weapons they'd carried with them were lovingly stored in the humidity-controlled armoury beside the wine cellar.

She refused to consider how inadequate a broadsword or sabre would be against magic and clung instead to anticipation of the weight in her hands.

She might be driven by fear, but she would not meet the unknown unarmed.

She took off down the stairs.

~\*~

He stared down at Avery.

The last one. The last fucking one. He stared at the expression of obsequious submission in his rheumy eyes, at the knobby wrist and exposed forearm.

He loathed him. *Is this how it feels? Do you loathe them even as they fawn over you, because they fawn over you? Is this how it feels to you, my Lord?* He touched the wand to the Dark Mark.

And watched the toadying fool fall away in rapture.

Before Avery hit the floor, Severus whirled away and turned his back on the room of bodies, each in their own private vision of euphoria. His mind raced ahead as he flew into the adjoining parlour, the voice in his head chanting, *You talk in your sleep. You talk in your sleep. You talk in your sleep.*

"Severussss!"

He stopped midstride to find the Dark Lord beside him, his claw-like hand extended.

He stared at it.

*You talk in your sleep.*

And forced his eyes up to meet the throbbing red gaze.

"My wand, Severusss..."

He released the wand, watched it land in the open palm and then reached for his own. He looked past the Dark Lord to the door, the door that led to the corridor, and the corridor that led to...

He pushed forward and flew down the corridor, past closed doors, into the entry hall.

*You talk in your sleep.*

A half step into the turn...he was struck in the back with a force that sent him flying against the wall.

"You will not leave!" the Dark Lord's voice echoed from the walls.

Severus spun to face him. "I did as you required," he snarled. "I accepted their puling vows, vows from your weak, disgusting Death Eaters, so spineless they got on their knees before me and vowed to obey me, even though they despise me! And I gave them their pleasure and watched them succumb to their lusts and now, now I am finished, and I am going to find my wife!" He ended on a roar, not caring that the creature he faced was frozen in rage, not caring about any of it, except that she needed him, she needed him, *she needed him*.

The bolt of red hit his left forearm, and for one frozen moment, he felt nothing but shock.

And then...

Agony screamed through his body.

~\*~

On the floor.

How did he get on the floor...?

The floor was for the bodies, the writhing bodies, the disgusting bodies....

*Agony.*

Red eyes.

"You cannot leave." This time, the voice was soft. "Severusss..." The hand stroked his hair and caressed his cheek, and he wanted to pull away, to shove it away from him. Yet, despite it all he felt soothed wherever it touched.

"Do you think I don't know what you're feeling? Do you think I ever receive obeisance that the power doesn't tempt me to go that very moment, that moment when I see the with it, to go that very moment and find the Potter vermin and crush him?"

Severus lurched to his feet, attempted to stagger forward.

*"Look at me, boy!"*

He tried not to...refused to...but felt himself turning despite it all until he was staring into the Dark Lord's eyes.

"This cannot happen again. I won't have my second in command distracted in this way, whether or not you can help it. When you find her, you will bind her to you in such a way that she will not be able to leave you again. But..."

His grip on Severus's elbow tightened, but all Severus could think is, *Bind her to me... yes. Yes.*

"...you're in no state to leave. You cannot function. You received more than their vows. You drew magical power from everyone in that room. It's racing through you, and if you leave, not only will you be incapable of rational thought but you'll waste it, you'll dispel it." The Dark Lord grabbed his elbow and forced him to retrace his steps back up the long corridor...

He fought it, he fought it with everything he had, but was unable to do anything save put one foot before the other...

*You talk in your sleep.*

"You must complete the process, Severusss. You must absorb it, for her...." The voice was a quiet hiss in his ear. "Remember what I told you, Severusss, your strength strengthens her...."

"Bella..." he managed to say. "I talk in my..."

"And what if you did? Could you tell her that which you didn't know? Think, Severusss. *Think!*"

He didn't know. He didn't know where she was....

Bella didn't know.

The Dark Lord led him into a room he hadn't seen before, as opulent as a king's chambers. "You will sleep. Nothing can harm you. But you must sleep...."

Severus sank onto the bed and reached into his robes for the phial of potion, and as he drained it, he heard the sibilant hissing of an incantation he could no longer understand.

Bella didn't know.

Hermione was safe.

He lifted the phial to his nose and inhaled and tasted and for a moment, she was there with him.

And then, the comfort, sweet comfort of the thought...

*Bind her to me. Bind her so she'll never leave again....*

~\*~

In her dream, he needed her.

In her dream, he cried out to her.

And she responded with a frantic ache deep in her chest, a need of her own to find him, to reassure him, to touch and hold him.

It started as a strange floating; she found herself hovering above a small body in a foetal curl with its back pressed up against a cold, hard wine cellar wall.

She'd learned quickly that sleeping on the floor provided comfort a soft mattress could not. The wall bracing her back could...in her imagination and dreams...become his body pressing against her. Even without his arms to embrace her and his breath warming her neck, she could almost, *almost* feel him there....

From her strange vantage point hovering above, she saw with a small lurch in her heart that he most assuredly was not there.

But his voice was.

She didn't hear it with her ears but felt it with her body; he murmured her name and sometimes called out to her, and so she must find him, because surely he was near, if she could feel him so strongly in her bones, her blood, her sinews.

Because it was a dream, she suddenly knew that she had merely to clutch the small phial of shaving soap to her nose and she could find him, soar to him on a gust of air that was warm and moist like the air in their bath, or like his breath on her skin.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply and felt sharp tears sting her eyes.

He needed her....

In that deep part of the night where exhaustion finally claimed her and she slept like the dead, it made sense to her that this was a sleep both deep enough and strong enough to carry her. She felt herself push off, push forward, and the dark cellar was gone and she was soaring, her eyes closed...



The better to hear him.

And to feel him... come closer....

She caught her breath at the glory of him.

Again, she knew it to be a dream, because her Professor would not be in a room of bronze velvet and green silk filled with golden light.

But oh, how beautiful he was, his naked body gilded in warmth, his musculature more sharply defined than she'd ever seen it, highlighted and contoured in light and shadow.

His face... oh, his face.

His features were twisted with despair.

He was curled around a pillow, clutching it to him, and she knew that in his loneliness, this was the closest he could come to holding her.

She dove down to him like a lark flitting on a breeze and would have laughed at such audacity of movement if she hadn't been so overwhelmed with an emptiness of her own.

What a splendid and horrific dream...splendid because he was here and she could see him and smell him and hear him.

Horrific because she could not taste him or feel him.

To be so close and yet...

She felt a fierce surge. He needed her and she would find a way. It was only a dream, but she could make anything happen in dreams, she knew she could...

She slid up his body until there was no pillow in his arms, only her, and if she pressed closely enough, she could see his arms wrapping around her and she felt a momentary victory.

But he didn't know she was there.

She reached up to touch his face, his beautiful face, to sweep the heavy fall of hair away, but her fingers went right through it.

Like a ghost's.

The ache in her chest grew.

*Professor*, she whispered, and the whisper came not from her but through her.

*Professor!* She cried out to him, cried for him, and stroked his eyebrows, pressed her lips to his nose, his beautiful, beautiful nose. Even though she couldn't feel the strength of bone and cartilage, the warmth and texture of skin, she stroked and kissed and reached out in desperation.

*Professor, please...*

What if she awakened without *feeling* him?

What good was a dream if she couldn't *touch* him?

And then, to make him scowl and sneer she let the words pour out that she could not say if he were awake...

*My love, my dearly beloved, please! Open your eyes. Give me your eyes. Give me your black, black eyes....*

Did he stir? Did those long, lush lashes flicker against his angel-white skin?

And with a rush, she whispered the words so fiercely they seemed to be real.

*My darling boy.*

His eyes flew open.

She was frozen in his arms, captured like a kitten trapped in a serpent's cold glare, and for a moment, a brief moment, she knew fear and pain and disgust...

But this was wrong. She would never feel those things, never, not in his arms, not when his gaze was on her.

This was *his* pain, *his* fear, *his* disgust.

He didn't see her.

*Oh, Professor...* Her sigh was born in pain and sadness as she frantically attempted to reach him.

Somewhere in those depths, he had called out to her, and she had done it, she had come to him...but he didn't know she was here.

*Look at me*, she begged, *Professor, see me!*

And he did, he did, only he was so angry, so bitter, and the way he tensed she thought he was going to thrust her away.

But instead, something softened, and he whispered, "Don't do that," and then, "That's my job."

And she realised she was chewing her lower lip.

And he could see her.

*Give me your eyes*, she said again and placed her palms on either side of his face *Give me your eyes....*

And they opened wider, and she fell into them, plummeted as deeply and fiercely as if it were his soul.

Joy bubbled up inside her, joy and triumph and delight, because...

They were kissing.

His lips were soft and his mouth tasted of potion.

And she could have stayed that way forever.

Except...she had to tell him, she had so much to tell him...

*Miss Granger*, he said, his voice a low velvet rumble that went right through her body *Is there anything you can't do?*

She lay there floating in the depths of his eyes and felt the sudden urgency of time running out.

There was so much to say, and yet, as happened so often in dreams, the words seemed beyond her grasp; she couldn't find them.

Time was running out.

She dug her fingers into his hair. even though they closed on nothing, and pulled him to her even though he was fading away.

*Professor, I will save you*, she said. Her eyes filled with tears, and tears clogged her throat but she forced the words out.

*I will save you.*

*And you will save me.*

And she awakened with her face wet and sobs wracking through her body.

She lifted the phial of shaving soap closer to her nose and inhaled.

And smiled through her tears, and laughed through her sobs because...

She could still taste his potion on her lips.

And it was real.

~\*~

He sat bolt upright, his heart hammering in his chest.

The tang of spearmint and eucalyptus clung to the air.

*I will save you. And you will save me....*

He wanted to roar with rage, but held back, held on, choked on the sound before it could escape but...

Save?

Why the fucking hell didn't she tell him where she was?

A house-elf *cracked* into the room and froze in fright.

"You is awake!"

"Where are my robes?" he demanded.

"Is...is being cleaned downstairs, s-s-sir!" The house-elf stammered, looking everywhere but directly at him.

"Find me some. Black," he clarified.

The house-elf disappeared with another *crack*.

He sat in the soft glow of candlelight and realised with a glance at the clock that he'd barely slept two hours, yet he felt alert and energised like he hadn't felt in... a very long time.

He flung the covers away, stood and stared blankly at the room around him. These weren't the quarters he'd used on those rare occasions in the past when he had stayed at Malfoy Manor. He'd never seen these quarters before.

She had looked safe enough. She didn't appear injured. In fact, she looked...

He couldn't bring himself to linger on how wonderful she had looked, *how right* she had looked. Had felt...

Enough of this.

Assuming she was safe could only get him so far. Safe for how long? That was the question. And where?

His options were few.

Find her...and how long would *that* take?

Or summon Potter and end this bloody war.

The house-elf reappeared with a set of black robes finer than any he'd ever owned. Severus stared at them without touching...at the silk lining, the snakes of silver thread twining and writhing around the upturned collar. "Who..."

"I did, Severusss...." The Dark Lord entered the room and took the robes from the house-elf, who seemed only too grateful to be able to disappear yet again.

Severus slipped his arms into them and felt the cold silk slither over his bare skin as the opening up the front closed with a magical hiss. "Thank you, my Lord."

"You should not be awake," the Dark Lord said, his eyes narrowed.

"I have slept enough. I feel quite adequate to the day."

"As indeed, you look," the Dark Lord agreed suspiciously, "but you shouldn't. It should have taken you three times this long to be in the condition you're in now. How do you explain this?"

*Is there anything you can't do?* he had asked her.

But he spoke levelly. "I have no idea." He dropped to the bed to yank on his boots. "I don't know the etiquette, sir. Do I awaken Narcissa or do I start ordering her house-elves around myself?"

"What orders?"

"First, to clear the air out of the ballroom. The stench of warring perfumes was making me ill, and I don't intend to deal with it again now. Second, to find Salina Nott and bring her to me. Third..."

"Severus... do not force me to prove to you yet again what it means to be *second* in command."

"My Lord." Severus rose and crossed the thickly carpeted floor until he stood before the Dark wizard, close enough to feel the Darkness creeping over him in waves. He dropped to one knee and raised the white hand to his lips and kissed the knotted emerald ring, then raised his eyes to meet the glowing orbs that glared down at him. "My Lord," he repeated, his voice low and even, "if you don't need me to launch the attack now, there is time for me to find my wife. It is certainly your decision, and I will do as you desire."

"My Death Eaters are barely functioning..."

"And you have three times the number of Death Eaters as there are members of the Order of the Phoenix, if the Order were to be there, which they won't because Potter will do this on his own."

"You are certain of this?"

Severus felt the knot of seething anger in his stomach. "I know Potter."

"Rise." The Dark Lord's eyes never left his, and finally they stood eye to eye. "Do not fail me."

~\*~

A loud, distant shriek pierced the air.

And was immediately silenced.

The burglar alarm...

Silenced.

She shot up, her pulse pounding in her veins.

Someone was in the house. Someone who could silence the alarm so quickly, they obviously hadn't needed to walk from the door to the panel on the kitchen wall to punch in the code.

Someone who could silence the alarm in a second.

Maybe less.

Someone with magic.

If she stayed still, like a rabbit in her hole, they'd never find her. She'd used no magic, had left no magical signature. If the professor couldn't detect her when only a door separated them, this visitor would never find her in this vast home, not when she cowered in a dark corner in a dark cellar, barely breathing....

She nestled more deeply into the nest of blankets and stared into the darkness, straining to hear....

The wine cellar had been a source of great comfort.

She should have realised sooner, shouldn't she?

It reminded her of the dungeon.

The wine cellar... the dungeon... the crypt.

Even before their wedding, she'd already looked to dark subterranean places for strength and comfort.

Places that spoke to her of him.

And now, it was a dead end trap with no escape that didn't expose her to...

Whoever was inside her house.

But she couldn't just cower.

The door was well-oiled, she could peek out and...

No, that was stupid. *Stupid.*

She would simply have to remain still and silent until they left. The alarm would shriek again and then quiet again, too quickly for mere human intervention, again. They didn't know the code; they couldn't open the door to leave without setting it off.

She was fine. She was safe. Nobody would find her in her snug corner and she'd know when she could come out.

Her pulse pounded in her temples, in her throat, in her heart, even in her wrists. She felt as if the very veins beneath her skin writhed with rushing blood.

She squeezed her eyes shut...stayed still...so very still, and heard her own harsh breathing.

Oh, god, she had to stop this, had to stop heaving in air like she was swimming the English Channel and calm herself, calm, calm, calm...

A very long time passed. So long that she almost could convince herself that maybe, just maybe...she had never heard the alarm at all.

Maybe nobody was there.

Maybe it was her imagination, and nothing else.

Maybe she'd dreamed it.

Maybe she was losing her mind.

And then the door opened, and a harsh wedge of light spilled across the floor on the far side of the cellar.

She froze.

And when she saw a shadow move into the wedge of light, she stopped breathing.

And when she didn't hear the snick of a light switch and the cellar didn't flood with light she knew....

So the glowing tip of a wand didn't surprise her.

Slowly, she eased to the right, tugging her blankets with her, cringing at the whisper of fabric sliding, and her last glimpse before she'd managed to move to safety was...

A sheet of long, platinum hair glowing in the wand light.

Lucius Malfoy.

She clutched a pillow to her face to stop from crying out, to muffle her breathing, to simply give her something to cling to.

Malfoy. Here. In the cellar with her?

It made no sense.

There was no way he could have even found her home, much less find her hiding place now!

She braced herself. There would be no more than a split second for her to act, not if she were to have even a slight chance against his magic.

And deep down, she was terrified. She'd never hurt anyone before, and this...this was violent and bloody and would take everything she had in her...

But he wasn't coming after her.

She heard a gentle *clink*...

He was...

*Clink.*

Standing near the door...

*Clink.*

Toying with her.

*Clink.*

Waiting for her to crack.

And now she knew without a doubt.

She knew why her Professor had been afraid.

If she moved quietly... she could get the jump on him.

She braced herself...

And yet, couldn't do it.

Couldn't bring herself to attack him, not when he wasn't doing anything....

Not when it would only take one tiny sound to alert him to her exact location.

*Clink.*

How familiar, that sound.

Why?

Because... she almost gasped at the realisation.

He was checking out the wine.

How many times had she played and hidden between the racks while her father examined bottle after bottle, selecting just the right vintage?

A soft scuffle of boots on stone, as he moved just a bit closer to her....

The shriek of the alarm...

Her own shriek, barely stifled.

The sound of Malfoy's footsteps as he dashed out of the wine cellar and into the kitchen and...

The sudden quiet as the alarm silenced, not as quickly this time...

Oh, god, please no, no, no...

Don't let it be a neighbour coming to investigate.

Don't let it be...impossibly, yet wasn't it impossible for Lucius Malfoy to be here?...her mother or father.

She leapt to her feet and took several steps forward and then, Lucius's voice.... "Bella. I thought you'd never get here."

Bella.

"For Merlin's sake, don't destroy it," he continued.

"That noise is fucking annoying," the woman's voice responded. "I'd just as soon put it out of its misery."

"Go ahead, then. You'll call down the local constabulary on us. So far, they don't seem to have noticed my little invasion of the Mudblood's property, but if you want to put the alarm totally out of commission, be my guest."

Hermione stood stiff, realising her error. Before, she was crouching and small in the deep, black shadows. Now she was standing, and though the light didn't hit her directly, any movement risked being seen by the two standing in the open doorway.

She could do nothing but stand, and hope, and pray.

"She isn't here," Lucius drawled. "I've already looked, but feel free to do your worst."

"She could be hiding..."

"Do you think my desire to find her is any less than yours?"

"That depends. Did you take your vow?" She spoke the last word...vow...with such hatred that Hermione's skin chilled.

"The day I drop to my knees and take an oath to Snape..."

To Severus?

"...is the day you can eat my kidneys for your supper. I must thank you, my dear, for giving me such a splendid opportunity to decline the honour."

"And how did I do that?"

"Severus was so distraught at the idea of you on the hunt for the lovely Madam Snape, he was forced to send me to..." His pause was eloquent. "Stop you."

Bellatrix Lestrange's laughter was a beautiful trill, echoing off the walls. "You? Stop me? From harming the Mudblood?"

"His faith in his old friends is quite quaint, is it not?"

"Pathetic."

"Indeed."

"But how did you know to come here?"

Lucius's voice was a low purr of satisfaction. "How do I know everything about the Mudblood Snape? I simply asked Percy Weasley. It seems he's had his eye on her for a very long time and knows things about her that no one else ever thought to consider... As soon as Severus mentioned her familial connections, I made it my business to find out more, and Weasley was more than happy to share his font of knowledge."

"You needn't sound so smug. You didn't get anything out of him I didn't get. All I needed was to know how and where to find... The *Grange*." She spoke the last word as if tasted of filth.

"But tell me, Bella, is it really as fun if you have to resort to Imperio?"

"Unforgivables are always fun," she snapped. "And now I'm going to look for myself, if you don't mind. You can't convince me that you have examined every square inch of this pitiful Muggle attempt at architecture and that she isn't hiding like a rat in a dark corner somewhere."

Hermione's head spun. If her feet hadn't been braced wide, she might have had trouble standing. Why were people taking oaths to the Professor? Why were Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy here?

What was she going to do?

"I do have one question, Bella... what do you intend to do with her if you find her?"

"Kill her, of course."

*Of course.*

"And thus, kill Severus," Lucius stated coldly.

*What?* This was madness, what were they saying?

"Of course." Again, Bella's laughter, this time a velvet caress. "Perhaps if we Apparate back quickly enough, we'll see it happen. What do you think occurs? Does he drop dead on the spot, or does he go into a slow decline, a long, slow *suffering* decline...?"

"Tell me, Bella, which one do you really want dead?"

"Whether it's by killing his Mudblood slut of a wife or an Avada Kedavra to his back or crushing his throat with my own bare hands, I will not only see Severus Snape dead, I will be the cause of it," she spat.

And at those words, Hermione realised, yes, she could kill.

"You are a wicked woman."

"And you wish you'd married me instead of my anaemic sister?"

"I'd rather marry Severus."

This time, they both laughed, but Hermione was beyond caring, beyond rational thought as...

She stepped into the open and raised the Webley revolver her grandfather had worn as he stormed the beaches on D-Day--

And cocked the hammer.

And in the flash of a moment saw Bellatrix Lestrange spin to face her, beautiful eyes narrowed, smile triumphant, wand raising...

Hermione pulled the trigger.

The ear-shattering blast threw her back a step and...

The world slowed down.

Bellatrix...falling back with the impact.

A small black hole in her shoulder.

Lucius Malfoy, behind her, splattered with blood.

Bella, shrieking, screaming, in pain and rage...

And dissolving.

Her beauty dissolved before Hermione's eyes.

Her elegant ravens wing hair...gone.

Her alabaster skin...gone.

Her full breasts spilling from her low-cut, tight robes...gone.

Malfoy seemed as stunned as Hermione to see the ravaged crone he now supported in his blood-soaked arms, robes hanging off her emaciated body, her hair limp and grey ...

Ravaged but not defeated, as she shrieked again and raised her wand...

Hermione shot again.

At nothing.

Lucius Malfoy had Apparated them both away.

She dropped to her knees, trembling, hands shaking...cradled the gun to her breast. She couldn't stay. They would return and she couldn't be here.

She grabbed her rucksack and clung to her gun as if it were her wand and reached deep into her pocket for the two pence she had saved for Luna's summons.

She could wait no longer.

She squeezed the two pence...

Felt the sickening tug behind her belly...

And within moments, was on her hands and knees outside the gates of Hogwarts, staring at the hand that had pulled the trigger.

She was afraid she had killed someone.

She was more afraid that she hadn't.

And as she stared at her empty hand, she was afraid because her grandfather's gun was no longer there.

~\*~

## Battle Plans

*Chapter 57 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*Without the amazing creative genius of JKR, none of this would exist. As it stands, anything you recognize from her books is not mine.*

*Thank you as always to the absolutely amazing GinnyW for her beta skills and to deemichelle for beta and cheerleading work along the way. And my most sincere thanks go to lifeasanamazon for Britpicking!*

### 57. BATTLE PLANS

Everyone in the ballroom froze at the *crack* of Apparition.

It was violent, uncontrolled, panicked.

Startling in a sea of black robes and silver masks, a nightmare vision of blood appeared.

Severus took one look at Lucius, at the crone in his arms, at the blood, the fucking blood...

And knew.

He knew who had done it and knew there could only be one reason why...and Bellatrix Black Lestrangle would not survive to try again.

He whipped out his wand and the "Avada..." had crossed his lips when...

The Dark Lord stilled his hand.

"Let's not be too hasty...."

~\*~

A cold wind ripped through her as she veered away from the main walk without thinking and found herself at the side door they'd used when she'd hexed Harry.

*Forget you've been here*, her professor had ordered as they entered, *because you won't see this door again*, and again she felt braced and steadied by the memory of that snarling, powerful man.

But he was wrong. The castle waited for her and opened at her touch, and enveloped her in warmth even as she followed the dark, cold corridor that took her to the Potions classroom. To his office. To their quarters.

Breath caught in her throat when she entered and was greeted by a tangle of red sheets, the faintest memory of scent and...

Her wand, broken, on the bed.

She dropped to her knees and dug the heels of her hands into her eyes, fighting tears, fighting despair, fighting the hollow ache that threatened to overwhelm her.

Instinct.

It was all she had left.

She staggered to her feet and snatched up her beautiful green robes, shrugging them on over her dirty jeans and jumper. She tucked her broken wand in her pocket. It might be useless, but it was hers and she wanted it with her, all the way to the end.

She took the photo from the mantelpiece, the photo that showed their wedding kiss...over and over and over...and the silver bonds that joined them. She slid it between her bra and her skin, next to her heart.

Because it had never failed her before, she grabbed a fistful of Floo powder, flung it into the fire and announced crisply, "Room of Requirement."

And stepped through.

Even though it was possible that this really was Harry and Ron, Luna and Ginny, and even Professor Dumbledore who had their backs to her in a room that looked much like the boys' dorm in Gryffindor Tower...

It was impossible for them to be listening to what they thought they were listening to.

That was not her otter Patronus standing stiffly before them and pleading in a soft whisper, "Harry, save me...you have to come, please save me. Severus is bringing me to Godric's Hollow, and you must be there alone to get me. Please don't let me down, Harry. You must be alone, and nobody can know. Harry...please...I need you!"

But before she could speak, Ron snapped, "Who are they trying to fool? That's not 'Mione. Her Patronus would never stand still and beg, it would be curling in the air and prancing and she'd be giving orders like a bloody general!"

"She doesn't call him Severus, either," Ginny said, and Hermione could practically hear the roll of the eyes that accompanied it.

She wanted to hug them, to grab them and...

A second Patronus joined the first, and even though the image was astoundingly absurd...a doe?...the voice was unmistakably his.

"Alone, Potter. Do not take this as an idle request. If you value her life, you will come alone."

"That bastard!" Harry's voice was harsh with anger. "I'll kill him. If he's hurt her..."

"Oh for goodness sake," Hermione snapped. "He would never hurt me."

And all hell broke loose.

She was crushed between Harry and Ron, both demanding explanation, and even Ginny managed to get caught in the midst of it.

Luna stood back with a placid smile, and Professor Dumbledore seemed more interested in the last lingering remnants of the otter and doe. She rather suspected he was avoiding her.

As well he should.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from him and was caught off guard when she realised it was Luna's soft hand that held her own.

Responding to a question that Hermione hadn't yet had the presence of mind to form, Luna said, "I knew you were coming, of course, as soon as you activated the Portkey. I fetched Professor Dumbledore."

The expressions on Harry's, Ron's and Ginny's faces expressed their silent astonishment, as well as hurt feelings. Luna had known? She'd told Luna and not them?

"So," Luna said in her matter of fact way, "clearly you know something we don't, or you wouldn't be here." And then, as an afterthought, she cocked her head. "Why are you trembling? Are you all right?" Luna asked, her gentle blue eyes crinkled in an uncanny frown. "You look..."

"Like hell," Ron finished for her. "Blimey, have you been eating?"

Eating? She didn't know whether to laugh that Ron's first thought would be food or to weep from hunger. When had she eaten last? She didn't even know.

They were waiting for her to speak. Even Professor Dumbledore seemed to be awaiting her answer when he finally turned his face to her and studied her through narrowed eyes.

"I...I just escaped from Bellatrix Lestrangle," she said, unwilling to give any other reason for her sudden shaky state. "She wants to kill me, and to kill Professor Snape, and I... well, I'd never hurt anybody before, and I think I'm feeling the aftershocks."

"You escaped from her?" Professor Dumbledore was certainly looking at her now. "You defeated Bella Black?"

"Mione's a regular secret weapon," Ron boasted. "You should see what she can do with wandless magic!"

"She's brilliant," Harry agreed.

Hermione felt a knot of panic tightening in her stomach. *Was*, she thought disparagingly, *I was*. She swallowed hard.

Only Ginny seemed less than pleased about the revelation, probably remembering her poor Harry, laid flat from that wandless hex.

Dumbledore shot Hermione an assessing look, and Hermione didn't dare let this conversation continue. "I did injure her, but...but she's going to try to kill him...Professor Snape. She...she said so."

"Why would she?" Harry demanded. "Now that the bloody bastard's joined Voldemort for good, she should be on his side."

"What are you talking about?" Hermione demanded, even as she heard the voice in her head, the voice saying, *The day I drop to my knees and take an oath to Snape...*

No. No.

"Who told you such nonsense?" she demanded.

"Pansy Parkinson," Ginny replied. "She said her father intended her to marry..." She broke off and avoided Hermione's eyes.

"Whatever you want to believe, Snape's gone over," Ron said. "He's a traitor. He's been with You-Know-Who since..."

"That's a lie!" Hermione seethed with frustration. "He is not a traitor! He's a spy, and you know it, so of course he's with the Dark Lord, but..."

"If he's not a traitor," Ginny said angrily, "why would he send a false Patronus to lure Harry off alone?"

"Because he assumed you wouldn't be dense enough to believe that Patronus!"

"I figured it out," Ron said with a glower. "But that doesn't mean he expected me to."

"Ron!" Hermione almost shouted in her frustration. "He fully expected you to figure out that..."

"That it's a trap," Harry said softly.

"Yesss," she breathed her relief that somebody understood. Their eyes locked. *Harry* understood.

Hermione watched Harry who remained pale and silent, watched his face, watched him as no one else did.

She reached for him and touched his hand, and his eyes...oh, those green eyes...met hers.

"Harry," she said softly, "he's on our side. You know that, don't you? He's everything to me, my entire life, but more than that...*he's on our side*."

Harry's eyes slid away from hers and he didn't respond.

She dropped his hand.

~\*~

Red eyes fixed on the bloody tableau before them, he tilted his head in question. "Ssstay," he hissed and then dropped to his knees.

"Bella, my Bella..." he crooned. "Look what happens when you defy me."

His grip on his wand tensed as Severus watched, watched the Dark Lord reach to stroke the wrinkled cheek.

Belatedly, Cissy realised what was happening and cried out in alarm.

But the Dark Lord silenced her with a flash of his hand and bent over the injured witch. "Who did thissss?" he asked thoughtfully, raising his eyes to Lucius.

"The Mudblood!" Bellatrix spat. "With a..." She broke off in pain. "A Muggle gun," she finished, her eyes black and blazing as she tightened her grip on her wand.

Again, Severus raised his own wand. There could be only one reason Hermione would attack Bella, and that was self-defence.

"No," the Dark Lord commanded.

Severus dared not defy him, even as the Killing Curse trembled on his lips.

"I told you that you would regret not killing her, did I not?" he asked silkily as he stroked a long, coarse strand of hair from Bella's wrinkled face. "My beautiful Bella, what have you done to yourself by defying me?" he crooned.

"I will do anything to protect my beloved Lord," she replied, her voice hoarse with pain. "Even defy you."

"Release her," the Dark Lord ordered Lucius.

With only a moment's hesitancy, Lucius allowed Bella to slide to the hard marble ballroom floor. She lay there, twisted in pain and covered in blood, the wound at her shoulder a horror of tissue and shattered bone. But her eyes never left those of the Dark Lord as she awaited his verdict.

"You are my Bella, my loyal Bella..." He raised her bloodless fingertips to his lips and bestowed a most gallant kiss. Then he dropped them and rose. "No one is to touch her," he said. "No one is to heal her."

Narcissa stood like ice, her eyes trained on the Dark Lord's face, clearly fighting an internal battle. Lucius stood and took her hand in his bloody one, and their fingers clenched together told it all. She never glanced down.

"The hour draws near," the Dark Lord announced with a twist of his thin lips that was meant to be a triumphant smile. "Prepare yourselves for our future!"

He turned his back and offered a hand to Lucius without casting even a glance at the woman on the floor. "Lucius, Severus, I believe you have some business to conclude," he said and whisked back to the parlour, leaving them to follow.

Severus trained his eyes ahead, mind racing, thinking of Bella bleeding but not dead, and Lucius very much alive and not beholden to him.



~\*~

The hidden door in the far wall opened, and Lavender Brown, Terry Boot, both Creevey brothers and Parvati Patil burst through in various states of half-dress; it was very early morning, after all.

Clearly, Ron and Harry were as startled at their arrival as Hermione was.

"And to what do we owe this honour?" Professor Dumbledore asked, his smile genial but his tone definitely not.

Several began to speak, but Luna raised her Galleon. "I summoned them, sir, and I'm sure the rest will be here quickly." She blinked her large eyes, and her slightly unfocused gaze held a subtle challenge. "Dumbledore's Army... Aren't we going to war?"

*Oh, god.*

She'd known it. She'd known it since Bellatrix Lestrange had tried to kill her.

She'd known what this meant.

But until Luna actually said the words...

She looked at her friends, saw the reality hit, saw it reflected in their eyes.

"But...Halloween," Ron protested weakly, as if voicing the words could make them real. "We were supposed to have until Halloween...."

She saw Harry's eyes burning, the tension in his jaw and his clenched fists and knew what he knew: This was it. This was the day he'd dreaded since he was eleven years old.

The room fell silent, as Padma and Dean Thomas came running in...

And the Floo fires flared green.

Angelina Johnson stepped out, tall and confident and with a cocky grin. "Well, it's about damn time," she said, ruffling Harry's hair. "I've been itching for a fight."

Finally Professor Dumbledore spoke again. "Indeed, Miss Lovegood, you're exactly right. Though I'm not at all willing to have students step into the fray, I've already summoned the Order of the Phoenix, and they should be gathering at Headquarters, even as we speak, awaiting orders."

"We're all of age," Ron said firmly. "You can either let us know what you've planned, or you can let us show up on our own. It's your decision."

"And Ravenclaw," Luna added. "I need to let them know. Even though we don't have many fighters, everyone who is of age has been practising Side-Along Apparation to the cemetery and will be able to take anyone who hasn't been there before."

"You've been Apparating into Godric's Hollow with it possibly being watched by Death Eaters?" Professor Dumbledore asked, astounded.

"Under Harry's Invisibility Cloak," Ginny replied. "Luna had a schedule. They took turns."

"You seem to have organised this very well, Miss Lovegood," Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

"Hermione did," Luna replied. "I just carried out her plans."

Hermione felt Professor Dumbledore's gaze burning into her, but she stared at a fixed spot on the wall, avoiding all contact with him, not even willing to meet his eyes.

"Perhaps you should have them gather in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, Miss Lovegood," he finally remarked.

And Hermione knew he'd intended them to be involved all along and only put up token resistance to preserve the illusion that he attempted to keep his students out of harm's way.

"Professor Dumbledore," she said, keeping her voice cool, "if I might have a word with you in private?"

She dared his eyes to twinkle, dared him to patronize her. Instead, he gave her a crisp nod and gestured to the Floo. "Harry, I suppose this ends your stay in the Room of Requirement. Be sure to get everything you need before you leave."

"Incarceration's more like it," Ron muttered, but his eyes glowed with anticipation as he snatched up his wand. "Can't leave this place fast enough to suit me."

Hermione turned her face resolutely to the fireplace and followed the Headmaster into the green flames.

Professor Dumbledore was waiting for her when she stepped out.

"Miss Granger," he began, and this attempt at solicitude was equally as successful as his earlier attempt at geniality, which meant not at all.

"Madam Snape."

"Ah, of course." He cleared his throat.

"The last time I was in your presence, sir, you were doing your best to get my own husband to kill me...without ever coming right out and saying so, of course. You think it would bloody well have served me right, because as you pointed out to me, you don't know that you can trust a Severus Snape who has everything to live for, and I made the mistake of coming between you and your weapon."

She raised her chin and dared him to deny it, and when he didn't, she continued. "It seems that you and I are the only two who know without a doubt that he is not a traitor, that he is not a Death Eater, and that he spent the past seventeen years living a self-destructive life with *one goal*...and that is to destroy Voldemort."

"For seventeen years, he has been your man and has carried the burden that others dared not. You know this, and you've given it lip service whenever it suits your purpose, but today is the day when you prove exactly what kind of man my husband has devoted his life to serving, because today is the day when it is up to you to protect him. To protect not just Harry, but to protect *him*. To make it perfectly clear in terms that no one can misunderstand that if Severus Snape is to die today, it will be at a Death Eater's hands, and that any member of the Order or DA who attacks him does so against your explicit and direct orders. And if you, for one moment, think that this isn't a priority, and that I'm meddling in things that are beyond my ability to understand, or worse...that once again I'm attempting to ruin your carefully laid plans..."

She drew in a deep breath and said in a voice saved from shrillness only because of her deep terror, "Might I remind you that if I hadn't interfered with your plans, *you* would be dead? You would be the one sacrificed to prove my husband's loyalty, and he would be on the run and a murderer?"

The mighty Albus Dumbledore flinched, and she knew her barb had struck home. "I can assure you..." he began.

"I don't have time for your assurances, sir. You will either do what is right or not." She slid her hand into her pocket and stroked her broken wand. "I'm on my way to

Godric's Hollow to save my husband."

And as she dived back into his Floo, she felt a tiny tingle in her fingertips and realised...this was the day in which she would find him, and after this day, they would never be parted again.

~\*~

If Lucius was at all uneasy, it did not show.

Not that Snape had expected it to. Nor did he bother to cloak his own seething rage as he spun and challenged, "Where is she?"

"At her family's ancestral home, the last I saw her, though I think it likely she wouldn't remain under the circumstances," Lucius replied.

Snape froze. He had missed her? She had been there and he hadn't known? "And she's..."

"Quite all right, unless the mere firing of a Muggle firearm has consequences beyond my ken."

Relief flooded through him, and he knew as he stood there that he hadn't managed to cloak that reaction, either.

The Dark Lord glanced from one wizard to the other. "Severusss? What do you plan to do now?"

Severus met Lucius's cool grey eyes. He offered his hand. "Your word, Lucius. That's all I need is your word."

Lucius nodded with a slight smirk. He had known he was safe. They all had. To demand the Vow would be to put one of the Dark Lord's most powerful Death Eaters out of commission for hours and they all knew it. Lucius accepted Severus's hand. "My loyalty, my faith, my friendship," he said smoothly. "Upon my word." And with a gracious nod to the Dark Lord, he added, "If you'll excuse me, I'd prefer clean robes before the festivities begin?"

He made a quick exit, leaving Severus alone in the Dark Lord's presence.

She'd shot Bella with a gun.

A Muggle gun.

The irony was beyond bearing, but...why? Why hadn't she used her wandless magic? Something was wrong, violently, horribly wrong.

"Your heart must be light now that the end is near and you will soon have her back with you." The Dark Lord reached forward and stroked a hank of hair out of his eyes, a gesture strangely and uneasily like the one he'd bestowed on Bella as she lay in her agony.

"I'm not sure light is the operative word, my Lord," he said, his chest aching with the need for her.

"Everything rides on our success today. Everything. If we lose...either you will both die today, or you will both waste away in Azkaban, separated for the rest of your long lives. I rest easily in the knowledge that you will do everything within your power to avoid that outcome."

"Indeed, you may," Severus replied, the agony of such a separation too close to the surface.

"Your soul is still wounded despite your new strength, and I am not comfortable having you enter into combat. However, our blood connection gives you a special power that is of even more importance to me than your skill as a warrior. The shield you cast to protect me will be that much stronger because you protect your own blood."

"As you wish, my Lord."

"Of course, I'm also aware that your... connection... to the girl could cause unforeseen problems."

Severus stared at him, not blinking, not breathing.

"Or could if we didn't anticipate and plan for them."

The Dark Lord raised his wand, the wand that had a few short hours before sealed the futures of almost all his Death Eaters to Severus's command, should the Dark Lord fall. "But I'm not one to leave such things to chance."

And then he gave a quick flick of the wand and uttered one word.

*"Imperio!"*

Severus didn't have time to react. He felt it hit him, the force, and then...

Peace.

An utter and total peace unlike anything he'd ever felt.

He met the Dark Lord's glowing red eyes and felt a distant rage, a distant protest, but wanted nothing more than to thank him for his grace, his release from the pain....

*Peace...*

"But remember your hatred, Severussss. Remember how much you hate them."

And it was there, coiled and hard as real as his wand, a ball of hatred that encompassed all of them, all of them who had taunted and reviled, who had used him and taken him for granted, who had ignored him and then when it mattered most...

An image formed in his mind.

The old man, the fucking old man and his orders, his orders to do what must be done, even when that meant killing her.

And he gloried that he could be filled with such peace and heated with such rage at the same time.

And that he could make them pay.

"Follow me," the Dark Lord said.

And he followed.

They re-entered the ballroom and as one, all present dropped to their knees and bowed their heads in obeisance.

A bloody smear lingered on the floor where Bella had been.

"What happened?" the Dark Lord demanded.

"She...she healed herself," Narcissa gasped, and Severus could sense the wincing that accompanied that, the shudders of distaste.

Bella was no Healer.

What atrocity had she inflicted upon herself?

"We will deal with her later," the Dark Lord announced and raised his hand for all to rise.

Yes. Severus allowed the flame to uncoil and wrap him in heat.

There was hate enough for Bella. He would deal with Bella.

He would end this war no matter the cost, and he would end it quickly.

And he would find his Miss Granger if he had to move heaven and earth to do so.

And he would bind her to him so she would never leave him again.

He closed his eyes and allowed the hate to swallow him whole, and rejoiced in its power.

"Severussss."

"My Lord," he said, dropping to his knee and kissing the hem, and willing to follow this wizard into battle and shield him from hell itself.

He felt the affectionate hand on his head and wondered if this was what it was like, to love a father.

"It is time."

## Godric's Hollow

*Chapter 58 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*All due respect, honour and adoration to JK Rowling, who created the universe and allows us to share it.*

*As always, more thanks than I can express to the remarkable beta, GinnyW, and to deemichelle for her extra assistance, and to lifeasanamazon for her Britpicking.*

### 58. GODRIC'S HOLLOW

The first time Hermione took the moving staircase from the fourth floor to the third and ended up, instead, on the fifth, it barely registered. It was, after all, a moving staircase.

The second time, she was exasperated.

The third time, she took it personally.

It was as if Hogwarts didn't want her to make it downstairs at all.

Her last few weeks in Hogwarts had numbed her to its eccentricities as the castle had seemed to ease her way and almost embrace her at times. But today the castle was blocking her every attempt to leave.

What had she done to anger it? Why didn't the castle want her to...

Unless.

She moved slowly to the Bewildered Balcony and peered carefully over the railing and down at the Entrance Hall five floors below.

At first it seemed the usual breakfast bustle of students moving into the Great Hall, until she noticed the occasional seventh-year who peeled away from the others as they passed the Gryffindor shield, at which point they would duck behind and not emerge again.

Yes. She felt a mixture of relief and satisfaction. They were sticking to the plan. One by one she knew the students were being put under a Disillusionment Charm and were then emerging and carefully making their way to the designated spot near the oak double front doors.

And she should have been there.

The great doors were opening...Dumbledore's Army would begin making their exit unseen and she needed to be at the Apparition Point, to be ferried to Godric's Hollow, herself. She had worked it out so carefully, what to say, how to say it so as not arouse suspicion. "I don't want to use magic until I get there. The Aurors would know and would turn up to arrest me, you know."

And then, as if she'd Summoned them, two Aurors stepped through the open doors and into the centre of the flagstone floor. "Is Headmaster Dumbledore in the Great Hall?" one asked a passing student in the suddenly silent Entrance Hall.

Professor Vector stepped forward from her spot at the Great Hall doors. "I'm afraid he's not on the premises. May I help you?" Her voice was clear despite the distance, the Entrance Hall being open all the way to the roof of the castle.

"Is Deputy Headmistress McGonagall available?"

"I'm afraid not. Again, I am Professor Vector and am in charge today. May I help you?"

They'd already gone. She wondered what other members of staff were gone, and which of their number had stayed behind.

"We are here to arrest one Miss Hermione Granger who, at 6:32 this morning..."

The Floo.

She'd used the Floo.

"I'm sorry," Professor Vector interrupted, "but Madam Snape is not in residence at this time, which apparently is regrettable since were she here there isn't a member of this faculty who wouldn't assist her in evading the continuing machinations of this most corrupt Ministry of Magic."

Hermione's knees almost crumpled beneath her.

"Perhaps," the Auror said, his nasal voice slicing through the silence of students frozen in morbid fascination, "you should hear the charges before you are so quick to cast the professional reputation of this institution in such a light. At 6:32 this morning Miss Granger attempted to smuggle an illegal and dangerous Muggle artefact through the protective wards of this magical community with the intention of using it as a weapon..."

"I don't believe you. She would never do such a thing." Professor Vector's response was sharp.

"...thus posing a danger to the health and lives of underage wizards and witches at this location, a crime punishable with life imprisonment in Azkaban or the Dementor's Kiss."

Once again Professor Vector drew herself to her full and impressive height. "I do not believe you."

Hermione eased away from the balcony bannister and fled to the stairs leading up to the fifth floor...where Hogwarts had been trying to lead her all along...and had made it around the landing, and almost out of sight, when she heard what evidently was the other Auror's voice call out, "There she goes, sir. I'd recognise that hair anywhere!"

~\*~

"We will meet him at the war memorial," the Dark Lord had said.

War memorial. The words had meant nothing to him.

Until now. Now he saw it and recognised the irony and horror of it, because he was sure somehow that there was irony and horror in meeting the boy here.

At the war memorial.

The statue.

He hadn't known, hadn't heard, and now he stood before it, alone, transfixed in the same floating peace that had sustained him for the past hour.

James Potter, with his arrogance and wild hair and a baby,*the* baby...

And Lily.

Even as stone, her sheet of hair seemed to ripple in soft shiny waves as the breeze caressed it. Her face was serene and beautiful as her eyes gazed fixed in adoration, forever, on the man beside her.

A statue.

And he hadn't known it.

Somewhere, he thought perhaps he felt something.

But staring at it, he felt only mild curiosity that there was a statue.

And wondered why his heart was pounding in his ears.

He heard the crack of Apparition but didn't turn, only rolled his wand between his fingers, readying it for... nothing. He wouldn't kill the brat. Couldn't.

Hate.

The heat warmed him.

"Snape. Somehow I wouldn't have suspected even you of sinking this low."

Finally, he glanced back over his shoulder. Alone. The fool.

"You don't like the choice of venue?" he sneered.

"Enjoying the view? The memories?" Potter was rigid with emotion as he clearly tried not to look at the statue. "Remembering the night you watched them die and left me to..."

"You know nothing of that night," Severus snapped. His mind was suddenly full of it, and a fast, hard flashback to the first time he could have killed Bellatrix, when she mocked him and hexed him until he was writhing in the graveyard dirt, as she taunted him for mourning the death of his Mudblood.

*Mudblood.*

So many memories floating in his mind while he watched them dispassionately.

Now he knew without question that he should be a mass of emotion.

Instead, he was hollow.

The Dark Lord was wise.

"You know she's not with me," Snape said casually.

"I know you're a liar and a traitor."

"Yet you came alone. What's the matter, Potter? You don't recognise a trap when it's laid out before you?"

Potter's gaze was steady as he, too, rolled his wand in his fingers.

Snape nodded, and at that signal, the shimmer of Disillusionment Spells dissolving filled the perimeter of his gaze. Black robed, silver masked Death Eaters...two score of them...stood watching, their placement deliberate to provide best coverage of the open areas of the small village. It was an impressive sight.

Potter smirked.

*Interesting.*

Potter raised his left hand and flicked his fingers forward. Ron and Ginevra Weasley were suddenly revealed.

And then...the scent.

Faint.

But there.

Eucalyptus and spearmint.

He strained toward him, nostrils straining, and yes, it was definitely there, her scent, on this boy who had been with her *touched* her, recently.

The heat flared within him and he embraced it, wrapped himself in it as he glared down and wanted to take the brat and snap him in two with his bare hands...

He felt the hand close over his shoulder in warning, and relaxed.

"Three against forty?" he asked silkily. "Feeling a little cocky today, Potter?"

But Potter's eyes were fixed on his shoulder and without even looking he realised that where the Disillusioned hand gripped him, his robes would be crumpled. He smiled, then. Smiled and licked his lips.

And whipped out his wand and in an instant, he, too, was Disillusioned, leaving Potter for all intents and purposes alone with his friends, surrounded by Death Eaters.

It was time to flush out the enemy and see if the Order had responded as quickly as he'd anticipated.

A moment later...a streak of colour zoomed from amongst the trees and before anyone could react, a Weasley twin snatched the raised wand right out of the senior Crabbe's hand.

Crabbe roared in anger but the top-of-the-range Nimbus streaked into the sky, only the sound of Weasley laughter lingering behind to taunt him.

And then the sky filled with them, on brooms and even on thestrals.

Students.

He scanned the sky and could name them, every one of them, and saw not a single senior Order member amongst them.

It was going to be a slaughter.

Somewhere inside him, he thought perhaps he felt something.

The hand stroked his shoulder and he welcomed the peace.

~\*~

She raced down the corridor below the prefects' bathroom, her lungs near bursting. She had never been an athlete but now it seemed as if her limbs were weighted down by the terror in her heart.

She prayed that they were gone...the professors and the students...and that they were at Godric's Hollow with Harry and with...she choked back a sob...Severus, her Severus, and that they would all be safe and...

And the foolishness of her thoughts and prayers struck her breathless as she skidded behind the tapestry that hid the narrow staircase, the shortcut to the second floor, and ran down to the shallow landing where she stopped, gasping, frozen in indecision.

Who were the Aurors? Had they gone to Hogwarts, and if so, did they know this shortcut, and was one of them waiting for her at the bottom and...

She collapsed against the wall, her arms outstretched in an attempt to either embrace it or be absorbed by it or maybe both, and sobbed, "Help me!"

The sudden *crack* behind her brought a scream to her lips, but it died there as she faced large brown eyes and a nose even more tomato-like than usual, and the stench of stale Butterbeer swept over her.

"Missy comes with Winky!"

Without hesitation, Hermione grabbed her hand and...with a sickening lurch and tug of the navel, she found herself in the middle of Hogwarts kitchens.

"Harry Potter's friend needs water," one wizened old elf decided, and a mug was thrust in her hand. She stared at it blindly, not wanting water at all, but Winky shoved the mug to her lips and she ended up drinking because drinking was easier than thinking, than arguing.

Drinking, gulping, suddenly desperate to fill her parched body...her soul, it felt as if even her soul was parched and desperate for water but where did such a thought come from, such a thought...?

She drank until she thought she might burst, and only then realised that the mug had no bottom and that she could drink gallons without running out. She lowered it to the tabletop, heaving in great gulps of air.

"Missy can't stay," Winky announced, nervously twisting her filthy apron in her hands. "They is come here to find you."

"Where's Dobby?" Hermione demanded.

"Gone to where Harry Potter is," Winky wailed. "Dobby left Winky. Dobby said the Hollow is no place for womans!"

"He did, did he?" Hermione felt an absurd rage that even amongst house-elves, sexism existed.

Unless, of course, it was just Dobby's way of keeping the highly erratic Winky out of harm's way.

Winky hung her head. "Winky would fight for Harry Potter. Winky would fight for Master Crouch...."

"How, Winky?" Hermione asked.

Winky reached into her small apron pocket and pulled out a cleaver almost larger than her torso. "I has ways."

Hermione tamped down the hysterical laughter that threatened to erupt, sure that if she allowed herself to laugh she'd soon be crying and once crying, would never stop.

"Can you take me to Godric's Hollow?" she asked.

Winky nodded fiercely.

"All will," announced the ancient elf. "All house-elves will fight."

"You would fight for the wizards that subject you to..." Hermione began in astonishment, and then clamped her mouth shut. This ~~was~~<sup>was not</sup> the time. "Who will take care of the students upstairs?" she amended.

If words were exchanged, they were exchanged silently as the house-elves glanced rapidly from one to another and finally the women stepped back.

The ancient house-elf announced, "Men will take you."

Winky emitted a broken sob.

Throwing caution to the wind, Hermione grabbed her hand. "Let's go...after you put that cleaver away."

It disappeared into the apron pocket, and as Hermione wondered what weapons the other house-elves carried and fretted that she was leading them into horrible danger, she felt the awful tug behind her navel and was ripped away and flung into it herself.

~\*~

He felt the words begin deep in his throat and finally emerge a low growl.

"We must end it *now*."

Cloaked in Disillusionment, he felt a new heat deep in him, unlike the hatred that roiled there. A gnawing heat that urged him to action, as he saw Dolohov slowed by the previous night's vows and felt his own power tremble within him and thought, "I can take him. I can take all of them...."

Watching the students...*his* students...was laughable as there wasn't a single one he couldn't disarm and send home snivelling. But somehow they held their own, and now the Order had arrived...he'd known they would, known they would be fast...and despite his glower and swagger and horrifying swirling magical eye, Moody was flagging, and he could take him, he knew he could take him.

It was dark and delicious, this power that writhed within him, aching for release, throbbing with desire, power that could end it all...power lusting to attack them all regardless of allegiance, attack them *now* and bring her back, bring her back to where he could keep her safe, where nobody would dare touch her, where Aurors and the fucking Order of the Phoenix had no power, where...

"Not now, Severusss." Again, the hand on his shoulder, the cool oily peace that drove away the throb and made him want to shake it off, shake off the peace and...

The hand stroked his shoulder, calmed him, and he took a deep shuddering breath.

"Better, better... soon it will be time. But not before they are crushed, Severusss. You yourself said that if the Order doesn't suffer with their defeat, even the death of Potter may not stop them."

Yes, his plan. His plan. All was going according to his plan.

But his plan had never included hiding behind a shield.

And then... disaster.

The brooms had been like midges, annoying and biting without inflicting any real damage, and it had taken him a period of observation before he realised this was an attempt to keep the students, the pawns, in the game without sacrifice. His mind scrambled for sound footing. Miss Granger or Weasley? Somebody with intent to keep the Death Eaters distracted and off balance with as little risk as possible...

Except, he watched with a strange annoyance brewing, the fucking twins didn't know how to annoy without risk. On their wicked fast brooms they were a force to be reckoned with, twin forces joined as one, first diving into the cluster of Greyback, Rookwood and two others he couldn't identify, all fighting back to back, a ring impossible to broach...

Until two brooms streaked down from the sky and they could do nothing but dive for safety, too slow to roll and fire back.

The Weasleys had swung back up into the storm-black sky when a bolt of green shot forth.

Severus stared in fascination as he saw it spring in slow motion from the end of Greyback's wand and sweep forward closer, closer, closer...

And hit a twin in the back.

His fall was graceful, like a dance of wind-whipped robes and streaming, long ginger hair as he spun, arms outspread as if ready to fly.

But he didn't fly.

The twin...which one?...he had a hard, sharp memory of George in the Headmaster's office, glowering at Miss Granger and at him for daring to touch her...replaced by this new awful image of a body hitting the earth, and then a body no longer, nothing but limbs at odd angles, the robe, whipping in the cold wind, the hair a flickering flame against the bloody grass....

He wanted to shout his outrage, to roar it.

*No Weasleys.*

He'd told them, the Weasleys were off limits; do not kill a Weasley,*whatever you do don't kill a Weasley....*

Nine Weasleys fighting for the Light were a force unlike any the Death Eaters could mount, and yet they were individuals and as such could be managed.

Now there were eight Weasleys united and out for blood vengeance.

He watched their reactions from across the battlefield of Godric's Hollow and gnashed his teeth in rage. Molly was the first to attack the werewolf, hexes flying from her wand as she bared her teeth in anger and anguish. The dragon keeper was right behind her, his wand a vicious weapon of destruction as he blasted through Dolohov to get to his mother. And then...

The other twin screaming out of the sky.

No ancient deity had ever launched such an assault and when he was mere yards from the earth and hadn't slowed, even his own ginger-haired family were diving for cover.

Fenrir Greyback, frozen by a hex and unable to move, provided an easy target for the Gryffindor Beater who picked up speed from his freefall and struck with a blow that shattered the broomstick and sent its jagged-edged shaft straight through the werewolf's body, leaving him gaping into his own death.

As George...because yes, it was George...grabbed his head by the hair and with one sweep of the wand, opened his throat and watched the blood spill.

For one long moment there was no sound, no fighting as those on both sides stared in horror at the carnage.

Weasley threw back his own head and aimed his face at the sky, into the wind that was getting sharper, angrier, and howled.

And Potter, his face white with anger, thrust his wand in the air and sent forth a spray of red and gold fire that reached into the clouds, and as one, Dumbledore's Army and the Order of the Phoenix thrust themselves forward into battle, and in every corner, a head of flaming hair seemed to be at the centre of the frenzy....

Dobby...what was he doing in the midst of this?...appeared beside the broken body of Fred Weasley and lifted it into his arms. His face streaked with tears, he Apparated him away. There would be no bodies for Death Eaters to desecrate.

He'd told them not to kill any fucking Weasleys.

His fists clenched until he thought his wand might break, until the voice whispered low and cunning in his ear, "We will now reveal ourselves. The statue, Severussss. Destroy their statue."

The statue.

He felt the Disillusionment spell shimmer from the surface of his flesh and dissipate with the wind, and heard the sharp inhale of breaths as people spotted them standing in the shadow of the statue that represented everything the Light believed in.

The Dark Lord stepped forward, his thin lips twisted in a smile that chilled, and was met by gasps and stares.

The shield that now shimmered clearly for all to see, the shield that enclosed them surreally with the frozen Potter family, encompassing them in a throbbing shimmer that pulsed in a steady, throbbing beat, a sheer shield yet tinted the with the colour of rich, dark blood.

It was a startling revelation of a blood connection to those who recognised its significance, and understanding followed by disgust and dismay flared in many eyes.

"The ssstatue, Severussssss!"

With his wand steady to sustain the shield, Severus raised his free hand and flung a spell from his fingertips with a shout of, *Conflo!*"

And watched, numb and awestruck, as the power from his own hand hit the nearest figure in the statue, and the wild-haired and conceited James Potter began melting in waves and rivulets of liquid bronze. First the hair, then the face, with the glasses dissolving into it...

And the cry of fury when the Potter brat saw.

Another fling of his hand and another shout, and shoulders and torso streamed in great gushes of molten ore, and the power within him rose.

Watch this, he wanted to taunt, but instead watched the infant melt away, and finally, with a great rending deep somewhere inside, the thing that wasn't Lily was not even the image of Lily any more, but a flow of ore pouring toward his feet.

The cries of outrage broke through the haze of his efforts and he knew his actions were sparking furious reactions. Yet, he did not regret it, did not regret the show of his power...the power they must accept and respect at last.

He cast a nonchalant "*Protego*" to protect his feet and almost as an afterthought, included Potter, who was farther downhill and in the direct path, and patently incapable of thinking fast enough.

Merlin forefend the brat should fall to the Dark Lord because his feet were burned to stumps.

But one glance at Potter's eyes, and like a blow to the solar plexus, it hit him.

His need for her, for her to stand with him, beside him, for them all to see, for them to see not only that she was with him, but that she wanted him, she chose him, she was his and would be forever and...

A jolt flew from deep inside him through his arm, from his fingertips and to the molten ore at their feet...

And turned it to silver.

~\*~

They landed hard.

Winky went tumbling and ended up braced against a fence, and Hermione fell into a gate...a kissing gate...that led into a graveyard. Beyond that, a stolid village church with a Norman tower, and above the church...

The sky, roiling with black storm clouds, was host to enough brooms to field three Quidditch teams, maybe more, zipping about in wild abandon with streaks of red shooting toward unseen targets on the ground.

And in her heart...no, deeper than her heart...a pulse, raw and sweet and painful...throbbing.

She grabbed her chest and staggered sideways. She could feel him, she could feel him, she could feel him inside and her soul cried out in pain.

It hurt.

And she didn't know why, but her eyes were drawn to a pulsing red glow just above the trees, matching the rhythm of her own heart.

*Professor.*

*Severus.*

She took a step forward and would have kept going but...

Streaks of red at unseen targets.

Cries of anger, of agony.

It was a battle, *the* battle, and she had no wand.

Her eyes were drawn to the church. Hand still clutched over the place on her breast that pulsed with sweet agony, she made a quick decision. Seek shelter. For now, she simply needed to get her bearings.

She took off running through the kissing gate, past the tilting gravestones and found the church door unlocked.

She entered and felt one word ease into her heart.

*Sanctuary.*

She scanned the windows, even on a dark day they glowed with the colour of gemstones. She couldn't see through them, couldn't see what was happening.

Suddenly, she felt trapped. This was a mistake. She spun to return to the door but...

Someone was approaching.

Had they seen her? Had they followed her?

She flung herself on a pew and stretched out, the back hiding her from the door, her heart pounding.

The door opened with the sound of wind and distant cries of battle and then shut again.

The voices...oh god, those voices...were cool and unmistakable. "I would prefer your mother not know you're here."

Lucius Malfoy.

"Yes, Father."

And Draco.

"Stay safe...protect yourself and..."

While her friends were fighting.

"You know your role."

"I'm proud of your faith in me, Father."

"I hope it doesn't come to this, but if it does, know that you are special amongst us, my son. You alone have neither taken the Dark Mark nor have you made the *Voluptas Voluntasque* to Severus. You alone can act without restraint or compulsion. You alone."

She lay stretched out on the hard pew and bit her knuckles to hold back her angry cry *Bastards!*

She lay here in a church wanting to kill, wanting to destroy, as the door opened and closed again.

She had to leave. She had to remove herself from this place where she and her hatred didn't belong, a place that now housed Draco Malfoy, who would have no compunction about taking a life in a holy place.

But there was only one door and unless her ears deceived her, Draco had not left his post beside it.

She slipped to the floor...cold stone bit into her knees, even through her jeans...and crept along the north wall of the nave. She paused beneath a window of jewel-like medieval glass flanked by posters created by children of the village promoting the upcoming Harvest festival. A gurgle of hysterical laughter rose in her throat at the glimpse of normalcy in the midst of madness.

Thunder crashed overhead and she flinched and stifled a gasp.

Suddenly rain, blessed rain, came down in torrents to muffle any sound she made. She eased up closer, closer to the door, to Draco still in his school robes, straining to see through its narrow opening...

He jumped back as it swung open wide on a gust of wind and rain and noise.

*Oh god.*

*Oh god oh god oh god.*

"Aunt Bella," he said, bowing quickly.

Frozen, Hermione watched the blond head lean over the elegant hand...the elegant hand belonging to the stunningly beautiful woman who looked nothing like a crone.

Hermione fell back against the wall with a silent gasp.

How powerful was she?

"And what brings ickle Draco to such a dangerous place?" the witch cooed. "Shouldn't the pride and future of the Malfoys be tucked away safe in his little bed with all the other children at Hogwarts?"

He stiffened. "I have orders."



"Ah...to hide? And then emerge at the end of the battle so you can claim glory? How Malfoy."

"Please do not force me to cease being a gentleman," he said stiffly. And then he added, "Aunt Bella...what's wrong?"

Hermione allowed herself a quick glance. Bellatrix was braced against the wall inside the door, supporting herself with her wand arm. The other arm...the injured arm...hung loose at her side. "Nothing is wrong," she snapped. "Since you're here, make yourself useful to me. Have you seen the Mudblood? Find her for me, lead me to her, and I will give you a reward."

"No. Granger is mine."

*What?*

"I have orders," he said, as snide and arrogant as ever.

Hideous laughter echoed. "And who trusted you to such a task? Don't be a fool."

"Father..."

"Don't be a fool!" And as Bellatrix tossed her coal black hair and fell back against the wall breathing deeply, the open door gaped behind her, rain still pouring and drowning out the sounds Hermione made as she shuffled closer, gauging her window of opportunity.

She stretched one leg out and dug deep in her pocket until her fingers closed desperately over the halfpenny.

This would not be the place of her death.

~\*~

Severus stood staring at the molten silver pooling around his feet and watched with numb fascination as it spread to Potter. But beyond the numbness he felt a tug...a sweet and manic tug deep within him. A pulse, a distracting and desperate pulse...

Amidst the driving rain and chaos, with no discernible pop of Apparition...

Albus Dumbledore was suddenly and simply...

There.

Wearing a grey so soft and pearl-like he glowed in the surreal darkness.

He stood a short distance away and his eyes quickly assessed and recognised the pulsing red shield. And upon recognizing, his expression filled with compassion. "Oh, Severus."

Pity? He dared pity? Severus stiffened with outrage.

But it was the Dark Lord who spoke. "Headmasster... am I to believe that I truly had secrets safe from your scrutiny?"

"It would seem so, Tom," Albus replied, his gaze darting between the two of them. "Just as it seems tragic that of all the times that the boy might have needed a father, it was only when you needed him that you chose to reveal the truth."

"And that is where you are mistaken, where you judge me by your own methods. To you, Severus was little more than a tool you needed..."

"That is not true. It has never been true."

"Severus is at my side not because I need him, but..." He touched Severus's shoulder with cool comfort. "But because I want him."

There was a softness, a gentleness in his voice that struck straight into Severus's core. Was this it, then? Was this the truth that kept him bound to one master over another? That the Dark master looked into him and saw something to want, something to value, something to protect with Dark vows?

His eyes met those of the Light master...eyes that held no twinkle but great sorrow...and he saw that even as the Dark Lord had clutched his shoulder protectively...

Albus had his hand on Potter.

And a shimmering golden shield began forming from the ground up...

And suddenly without warning Albus's mouth opened in surprise...a soft o...and he crumpled to the ground, and behind him stood that rat of a bastard, Pettigrew, his wand trembling in his hand as he grinned. His wild maniacal wheeze of a squeal pierced the air.

"I got him, Master! I got him for you!"

~\*~

The halfpenny flew through the air, its arc a high and graceful sweep as it soared across the nave and struck metal on the other side of the church.

Clank.

"Draco..."

"I've got it, Aunt Bella." Draco already had his wand in hand and took off down the centre aisle at a quiet trot.

Bellatrix shoved away from the wall, her attention focussed firmly into the dim recesses of the church.

Hermione took one last look at the open door beckoning to her with rain and freedom...

And ran.

~\*~

Everything slammed into him at once.

Hexes, blurred, on the outside of the shield as the battle raged on.

The crumpled grey form on the ground at Potter's feet.

Potter's face, frozen in rage and horror.

The Dark Lord's laughter.

And overriding it all...

The pulsing pain that said, over and over again...

*She needs me. She needs me. She needs me.*

He didn't realise his wand had loosened in his fingertips until the claw-like fingers closed around his hand. "He's not dead. It would take more than an Avada Kedavra from that little annoyance to take Dumbledore down, but it has slowed him, yes, it has...." The voice ended on a loving note, but quickly turned to command. "Bring him inside, Severus. Bring the Potter spawn inside the shield. It's time to end this charade."

~\*~

Hermione slammed into a wall of rain and kept running. She didn't hear pursuit behind her, but didn't dare trust her ears in this downpour. Instead, she lunged quickly to the east, around the corner and through the gravestones, following the pulsing red glow.

~\*~

Severus whipped his wand and the shield shimmered and expanded, and suddenly...

Potter was inside.

And too stupidly Gryffindor to show fear, as his mouth formed a snarl and he thrust forward, wand extended, and shouted a fierce, *Avada...*"

Only to have it wither on his lips as the Dark Lord froze Potter in place with a hiss and a wave of his wand.

Then, with a flick of his wand toward his throat, his voice carried across the square and the battlefield.

"After today, Godric's Hollow will be known as the birthplace of my reign...*of my dynasty!*" He shouted, and beyond the shield fighting came to a standstill as witches and wizards froze in place and stared.

This was it.

This was what they'd all feared and anticipated.

*This.*

~\*~

Hermione skidded in the mud, fell to her knees, grabbed a crumbling, lichen-coated stone to pull herself to her feet, and kept going.

*He needs me. He needs me. He needs me.*

A wall...a low stone wall...in front of her...

She lunged forward and heaved to the top of it and was ready to leap to the other side when she saw...

*Him.*

Her professor.

And her heart leaped within her breast.

And the pain pierced through her.

Because his wand.

Was trained on Harry.

And he stood at the Dark Lord's right hand.

And something deep inside her ripped open and she knew pain like she'd never known before.

Everything she'd heard, she'd heard and denied, the things she refused to believe and couldn't believe because he would never do this, not Severus, not her beloved professor...

Came true in a split second of brutal certainty.

Followed hard by the knowledge that she had done this.

It was all her fault.

And then...there was no thought at all...

Just a hard, quick stinging wrench as a fist closed in her hair and yanked her off the wall and backward...

And she landed in the mud at the feet of a wildly snarling Bellatrix Lestrange.

Rain pounded her face, stung her eyes. She couldn't breathe; the impact of the ground had robbed her of air, of the ability to inhale...

*He needs me.*

It was a horrible little whimper in her head, and she could only stare blindly into the rain, into the horrible and beautiful face leering down at her, a face unmarked because of water repelling charms that Hermione had lost the ability to perform.

She rolled sideways, coughing, sobbing...and found a wand jabbing into her throat as Bellatrix bent over her.

"Filthy little Mudblood whore, thinking you'll foist your nasty spawn off on my Dark Lord!"

"I don't...don't know what you mean," she gasped.

"No one loves him like I love him!" Bellatrix shrieked. "No one! And if I have to die to protect him..."

Love? Love Professor Snape? Nausea twisted her stomach as she fought the images that filled her mind.

Bella shoved her face into the mud until it clogged her nose, her mouth... Hermione fought, twisted, but the witch had the strength of a madwoman.

The witch had magic.

And Hermione had none.

"If I must, I will die to protect him, but not before you die, and when you die...Severus Snape will go with you!"

Overhead, lightning split the sky, followed by a crash of thunder nearly on top of them.

Hermione tried to rise...

And got a boot in the head that knocked her back to the ground. Her mouth filled with the taste of copper, with the grime of earth, and she thought she was going to vomit. She whipped her head sideways.

Another kick, this time to the shoulder, and Hermione sprawled on the ground, coiled in a futile attempt to protect herself.

"So this is the way Muggles do it, eh? You thought you'd get me with that gun, but I was too strong for you, and now you will pay, filthy little Mudblood, you will pay!"

Hermione's fingers stretched, fighting for purchase in the slick mud. A cold wind whipped over her. Water drenched her with its chill. Blood filled her mouth.

And one word...one single word...pulsed through her like a blood-red heartbeat.

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

*No*, she would not die grovelling in the mud.

*No*, she would not shrink like a coward.

*No*, she would not, she would not, she would not.

She lurched to her feet and despite everything, saw what she hadn't seen before.

How thin the glamours were now that Bella wasn't in the dark interior of the church. How thin and pathetic the glamours were, how inadequate, how ridiculous and pathetic and feeble.

For now she saw through the glamours and saw the woman and saw a mass of burned flesh and bone where the bullet had pierced her shoulder. Stringy white hair where there had been hair the colour of coal. A frightening twisted horror of a face where beauty had once lingered. Eyes that were tormented with grieving and madness and without understanding why, Hermione felt a tug at her heart, for grief rose within her and recognised its kin.

Then, the face twisted in a horrifying grimace of a smile.

"And now I'll see your nasty, vile blood spill back into the mud where it belongs!" A wild cackle, and a shout of, *Sectumsempra!*

Hermione staggered back as it hit her, as the spell sliced into her opened her chest and she saw her own blood...

And she opened both of her fists and showed the mud she'd clenched in them. "This earth..." She choked, and gasped in pain, "is in my blood...the blood of my line soaked into this earth to protect it, and you and your kind...you will never win!" And fighting for breath, she finally said those words that meant the most to her, that kept her strong when all else would drain away, "And you will not live to kill my professor!"

Bella whipped back her wand, and then stabbed it forward with a curse and a scream...

And Hermione closed her eyes and felt the elements of the storm...the wind whip through her, the rain pound her, the earth smeared upon her and then...and the fiery pulse filled her...

And she heard him.

*Him.*

Her beloved professor.

*Fight like hell, Miss Granger.*

And with a cry that came from deep in her soul, she felt a surge of power and knew it for what it was, the most elemental of magic, the magic that would save the one she loved...

*Fight like fucking hell...*

The word ripped from her throat.

*"Confringo!"*

The curse flew from her fingertips and she heard the shriek of horror and opened her eyes to see Bellatrix Lestrange...

Disappear in an explosion of red vapour.

And as Hermione fell back to the earth, the solid earth, the earth of her forbears...

Hot blood rained down upon her.

Cold rain washed her clean.

And the pulse within her grew weaker... weaker.

Not until strong arms yanked her up from the ground was she finally able to open her eyes, and for one moment, for one wild and desperate moment, she thought she knew joy.

And then she saw.

Her body tensed. It wanted-she wanted...to fight again, but there was nothing left to fight with.

Never had she felt so empty.

She closed her eyes and blackness overtook her, blessed blackness that robbed her of that last image...

Of Lucius Malfoy.

~\*~

Potter. Frozen in mid-curse.

The Dark Lord. Glorifying in his power.

Severus felt the pulse through his wand, the shield that kept them all from outside help or intervention, and he thought, he should feel something, but he didn't, and it was such a relief to feel nothing.

Except the pulse, and the undercurrent of fear and need and desperation that seemed to speak with her voice...

He gave his head a hard shake.

It was almost over, and when it was over, they would be together and no one would part them, no one could part them, his father had seen to that with a Vow that bound the loyalties of all who would otherwise harbour ill thoughts toward them and...

He should feel something.

*I will save you.*

*And you will save me.*

How crisp and clear her voice sounded in his ears, despite the howling wind and roaring rain.

He closed his eyes and saw her joyous smile as she came to him that night, came to him in his fucking sleep...there was nothing she couldn't do, and she was his and they would all know that, that she chose him, *him*...

Her eyes. Her eyes the colour of hot, sweet tea.

*Give me your eyes.*

It hit him with hard, sharp certainty.

Suddenly, like a knife to the heart, he felt it all, everything, and he could barely hold his wand up to sustain the shield, because...

He would never see that smile, those eyes again.

Not if he kept his place at the side of the Dark Lord.

His gaze snapped to Potter, to Potter, whom she loved. Whose death would grieve her. Whose cause, and its failure, would rock the foundation from beneath her feet.

He closed his eyes and saw her face...wrenched with pain and anguish, and he could see it so clearly because he had fucking done that to her, time and again, and now, he would be doing it to her again only this would be worse...

And this was not saving her.

Saving her meant not condemning her to a lifetime under Dark dominion.

Saving her meant going to Azkaban, because after this day's actions...this shield, this fucking shield...he harboured no delusions about his future without the Dark Lord's protection.

And suddenly he understood what had driven her to snap her wand, to sacrifice everything.

*I will save you and you will save me.*

And he knew his next act would change everything.

It would change the world.

It would destroy them...him and his Miss Granger.

And she would understand.

He took one last look at the Dark wizard beside him and their eyes met.

Red eyes burned with sudden understanding and rage because...

He was feeling.

He was feeling *everything*, and the Curse was gone and he felt her, he felt her and something was wrong and she was here...his Miss Granger ~~was~~ *here* and...

Severus yanked his wand down, dropping the pulsing red shield, and aimed it at the glowing pool of silver at his feet.

Silver.

Silver bonds wrapping them as they kissed a kiss that never ended.

Silver...the spirit.

The fifth element.

And he saw the power flare between him and Potter and he shouted.

"Now, Potter, *now!*"

The air split between them with a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder and the boy with the beautiful green eyes and the lightning bolt on his forehead screamed with fury.

The bolt of green that shot from his wand felled the Dark Lord.

And the world fell silent in its awe.

~\*~

The rain turned gentle and warm.

Severus found himself on his knees, gasping for air and realizing...it was gone.

The red pulse was gone.

The Darkness was gone.

He fought for the strength to perform one last act.

He touched his trembling wand to the exposed Dark Mark on his left forearm and whispered, *Surrender.*"

And across the battlefield, all who bore the mark dropped to their knees in submission, their wands on the ground before them.

~\*~

But.

Something was still wrong.

He raised his head to the air, as if sniffing it would reveal this new danger, this new horror. It was only moments before someone would show up to arrest him, but suddenly, moments were vital and he couldn't just wait.

She was here. And she needed him.

He stumbled to his feet and saw that Potter was gone, and wondered how long he'd been there like that, how much time had he wasted?

His heart...his very soul...was calling to him.

She was calling to him.

And he realised he hadn't saved her yet. It hadn't been enough.

Something was still wrong.

And then, a shout, an angry shout from near the church.

And another voice, a girl's voice. "No, Harry, don't! Don't do it! It's over!" And then, through sobs. "Please let it be over."

And a third...the youngest Weasley son. "Malfoy's not fucking worth it, Harry. Leave him to the Aurors."

He took off running.

~\*~

He froze when he found them.

He knew this place too well.

Draco lay on the ground, bloodied and weak, but defiant as he held his wand aimed at Potter. "Don't come one step nearer," he snarled. "I'm warning you."

And Severus knew the insult, knew what burned in Potter's blood.

"Get off my mother's grave!"

"Not until..." Draco began, and broke off with a gasp. "Not until you get Snape."

Potter jerked his wand arm free of Ginevra Weasley's grip...

"I'm here," Severus said, his voice raspy with fatigue, even as he felt something new and resonant vibrating deep within him. "Who did this to you?"

Draco's arm fell to the ground and his face grew even paler. "Aunt Bella. I was in her way."

"Get him help," Severus snapped, "he's injured!"

"Severus..." Draco fought to raise his wand one more time. "I couldn't leave. I couldn't... Father made me promise... not to leave her... until you..." He rolled sideways and aimed his wand behind him, at the double stone and its inscription, and he gasped, "*Finite Incantatem*."

The Disillusionment Spell shimmered away.

And Miss Granger, her rucksack on her back, was curled in a bloody heap beneath the words, "Lily Evans Potter."

Her shirt was splayed open and a recently healed wound ran the length of the torso.

"He told me to find her and... protect her. Not to let anybody else near her, no matter who won," Draco said softly. "Only you."

And if anything else was said, Severus didn't hear it.

He sprang forward, his heart in his throat, and pulled her into his arms, bloody and muddy and battered...and breathing.

Breathing.

She filled his arms and his soul and the world went red and he knew this time, these bloody tears were not of sundering but of joining, of rejoining, and the pain in his chest was the sharp pain of reunion.

Of a piece of his soul returning.

And the rest of the world fell away.

From a great distance, he heard him.

He wanted to tell the bastard to go away, to just... go away.

But Albus was persistent.

And finally Severus raised his eyes to the old man but couldn't find the rage he knew he should feel. He kept his arms wrapped around her and felt her heart beating against his chest and whispered, "Help her, Albus. Help her."

"My boy," Albus said, his eyes filled with anguish. "What did I do to you?"

A sudden crack split the air, and another, and another.

"Aurors," Ronald Weasley said in disgust. "When it's over, they bloody show up."

*Aurors.*

He buried his face in her muddy, horrid hair and rocked her against him. Would she know? Would she know he'd spent his last moments of freedom holding her to his heart?

Albus said. "Ginny, go and get help. Draco needs medical assistance. Ron, you move him...carefully...under that tree."

Voices grew nearer, voices Severus didn't recognise.

"Harry," Albus ordered. "Delay them. Don't let any Aurors near this place until I tell you."

And then Albus was kneeling beside them both, and his wand danced down Miss Granger's body as he muttered a soft incantation.

Finally, Albus's eyes met Severus's and he knew true fear.

"It's her magic," Albus said softly. "It's completely drained."

"You've...you have to save her," Severus said. "You have to..."

"No, my boy." Albus patted his shoulder gently. "You have to."

Another wave of the wand, and Severus felt the dizzying lurch and the graveyard was gone.

The world went black.

## Care

*Chapter 59 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*My deepest admiration goes to J.K. Rowling, who owns everything you recognise and allows us to take her creations a little further than she ever intended. Thank you, Jo.*

I'm reaching the point where there simply aren't enough words to express my gratitude to the fabulous GinnyW for her gentle hand and astute advice. Again, I thank lifeasanamazon for her Brit-picking and beta-work, and last but not never least, deemichelle for her sharp eyes and reads. Ladies, I owe you all so much!

### 59. CARE

They landed on the hard, cold floor of the dungeons where the air still smelled faintly of spearmint and eucalyptus.

He had to—he had to—

He couldn't think—couldn't wonder how Albus had sent them to a place where they couldn't be sent.

He allowed himself to rest his back against the bed, *their* bed; he did not allow himself to loosen his hold on her in any way.

Her face was smeared with blood and mud and streaked with rain. The hand he used to wipe her cheek clean trembled, but his touch was gentle. She had shadows under

her eyes like bruises; her face was drawn and tight. Did she feel pain?

He pressed his lips to her temple and felt the throb of her pulse and drew in a deep breath and whispered a spell.

And it wasn't until that moment when he felt her soften in his arms and mould more completely to him that he realised how depleted his own powers were, when he felt how much that simple spell had taken out of him.

He could only clutch her more tightly to him and relish the warmth and fragility and comfort of her weight against his body.

But—pain.

What was causing her—his Miss Granger—pain? Even as he slipped his wand out and began repeating the series of diagnostic spells he'd numbly watched Albus perform, his mind was already frantic, rushing ahead. If Albus had missed something—if she needed a Healer—what would he do? What *could* he do? Was Poppy here? Could he even get her to Poppy without being seen?

But he found nothing.

The wound—Sectumsempra, his own wretched hex—was already healing. He knew who must have cast it, and he knew who must have healed it.

Lucius, despite his popinjay airs, had always been a dab hand at Charms.

Lucius. Why?

He couldn't think about that now. And what did it matter? Lucius had saved her for him, and that was all he needed to know.

Cradling her in one arm, he continued the diagnostics and felt a tension he hadn't known he carried ease out of his body.

Not even a glimmer of Dark magic clung to her.

And with his relief came a ridiculous thought and fierce pride.

Nothing Dark would dare cling to her, nor would it cause more than a glancing blow. Not to Miss Granger, his Miss Granger, who was all that was Light and pure and—

*Something* had caused her pain.

And then he saw it.

So small as to be almost insignificant.

On her left hand, on her little finger, at first disguised by caked on mud.

The small, perfect nail, ripped from the nail bed.

Even as he lifted it gently and began casting cleansing spells and healing spells, his mind overran with an old Muggle expression. More power in her little finger... more intelligence in her little finger... more compassion and love and—

Love.

The word wracked through him. How easily she used that word.

He cupped her hand in his—now cleansed, now missing a nail but no longer bloody or swollen—

He squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face in her hair.

"Can you hear me?" he whispered. "Listen to me. Hear me."

Her breathing continued, slow and steady.

"You need to sleep," he said, desperate to reassure himself. "Go ahead and sleep," he crooned. "We'll sleep, and then tomorrow..."

Tomorrow, what?

He didn't know.

He lifted her fragile body and carried her to the bed, and with one last gasp of lucidity, Vanished their clothes and surrounded her with his body and his skin and his warmth.

Exhaustion overtook him, but even as he slipped from consciousness, he was aware that she was his, she was alive, and she was in his arms.

Nothing else mattered.

"Sleep," he murmured in her ear, and then, his eyes drifted closed and he joined her.

XX

He slept through tomorrow. Perhaps two tomorrows. He wasn't sure of anything but that her hair clung to the rasp of his beard, and he hadn't had this much hair on his face since—

Since she'd cared for him after he'd spent days recovering from Lucius's retribution.

A lifetime ago.

He rolled her onto her back and checked the pulse at her neck—steady—and the bruises under her eyes and the mud and blood flaking from her and cursed himself for his own exhaustion.

His mouth tasted of rot and he remembered how much she loved his potion, and he hadn't given it to her, and she was dirty and—

He needed the loo. Desperately.

He didn't want to leave her. He didn't want to let her go.

But this was ridiculous and he needed the loo and—he forced himself from the bed and lurched toward the bathroom and the toilet, and as he relieved himself he trembled. Lack of food, lack of water, and any number of things could have caused it but he knew better, he knew he shouldn't have left her; he should never have left her—

By the time he got back to the door he was running—running those few steps, and when he saw her—

He lunged for the bed, for her body.

Sweat beaded her hairline; her skin was cold and faint tremors danced across her skin.

"I'm here," he said hoarsely, "I'm here, I won't leave you, I'm here...." And flooded with relief when she relaxed back into his arms, her breath a soft sigh.

"Hermione..." he breathed softly into her hear.

*Bind her to you sssso she'll never leave you again.*

The voice hissed in his memory, and he thought of the mockery. They were bound beyond reason, beyond anything rational, and he didn't care, he only knew he needed her more than air and water and by some cruel twist of fate—

She needed him, as well.

She, who should never be bound to anyone so Dark, needed him, and he didn't know how to save her.

"Shhh..." He soothed her, but truly, was trying to soothe himself, as she was already at peace. "I'll wake you up. I'll find a way, my darling girl...."

And a flash of memory—of her eyes, dark and frantic—when he'd called her that and she'd scrambled away from him on this very bed, away because he'd startled her, frightened her.

*"You don't say things like that to me. Call me insufferable."*

She'd come back to him—oh, so relieved—when he'd done so, and the memory choked him with shame.

"My darling girl," he repeated in ears that might not hear. "I'm calling you that until you wake up and make me stop, do you understand me, Miss Granger? Do you hear me?" He rubbed his rough cheek against her soft one and added softly, "Insufferable little fool." Just in case she could hear him. Just in case.

When his heartbeat had slowed, he rolled over, keeping her in the crook of his arm, and Summoned a series of phials from his cabinet. The first took no thought at all. He poured a liberal amount of his taste potion onto his fingers and slipped them into her mouth, coating her tongue and inner cheeks.

He tossed back a swallow himself and then leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers, simply because he had to—

And felt something within him, something that could only be his soul reaching out and finding and sighing... and when he gently ended the kiss, he found himself watching her eyes, her cheeks, her mouth, for any sign that perhaps Sleeping Beauty had been more than a fairy tale.

He watched much longer than was sane.

And seeing no response, he still felt compelled to press his lips to hers once more, to feel the touching of their souls again, to convince himself it wasn't delusion, and to hope she felt it, too.

Finally he lifted one eyelid and hoped—

But hope died quickly. There would be no Legilimency, not with the fog swirling through her mind.

He felt weak, disoriented.

He needed food.

Immediately, he smelled food.

He turned his head, and there on the table beside the bed was a tray of roast chicken cut into pieces, with bread, with water, with pumpkin juice, with fruit. All things he could eat with his hand without letting her go. He grabbed the goblet of water first and drank deeply, then a chicken leg and tore into it, ravenous, wondering how he was ever going to feed her. And when the worst of his own hunger and thirst was slaked, he cleansed his hand and pulled her more snugly to him, reaching for clarity of mind.

More clarity than *maybe if I kiss her she'll wake up like a fucking fairy tale*, at the very least.

XX

He lowered her into the bath and wondered if she felt it, the warmth seeping into her, the gentle rhythm of the water agitating around her, and finally, he wondered if she felt his free hand as it swept the flannel over each square inch of her skin, washing away the blood and grime.

He wondered whether she smelled the eucalyptus and spearmint, whether somewhere deep inside it brought her comfort.

He wondered how the bloody hell she dealt with all this fucking hair and stifled more than few curses because...

He wondered if she heard him.

And so he murmured soothing nothings and continued working the suds through her hair until it rinsed clear, and finally, he lifted her dripping from the bath and wrapped her in a large towel and carried her back to bed...

And tried not to remember the first time he'd bathed her and dried her so.

XX

Seventeen. His first cursory listing of any potion that might possibly be used to strengthen (he refused to use the word "recover") magical stores came up with seventeen formulae. Two he had in stock; the stronger ones would require brewing.

Seventeen.

He didn't need to write them down. He knew them; he knew their compounds and their strengths and weaknesses and which ones were most likely to be of benefit and which ones (most of them) were unlikely to do any good at all to an individual whose magical stores were so low (not depleted, he refused to use the word "depleted") as to seem absent.

Seventeen potions, and he had no fucking idea how to get them down her when she was... unable to cooperate. Unable to swallow.

And so, with her sleeping body (she was sleeping, he refused to use those other words) curled into the crook of his arm, he took the first potion and measured it out into a glass then, using his fingertip, painted it on the inside of her lower lip and gently closed her mouth and counted to...



Seventeen.

It seemed as good a number as any.

And then he dipped his finger again, and slid it along the silken skin of her gum again, and closed her mouth again, and counted again.

XX

He didn't know whether it was night or day. He only knew he was half-asleep on his back, with her body stretched out on his, wearing the white shirt, her cheek resting on his chest.

He'd pulled on a ridiculous cashmere jumper the Malfoys had given him years before, just so it would be soft against her cheek.

Idly he ran his hand up and down her side in a manner that had once made her sigh in contentment.

Could she feel it? Did it bring her comfort? She had to know he was there, didn't she?

He pressed his lips into her hair and felt her breath fanning across his neck, soft and steady.

She would come back to him. She had to.

And in the meantime, the first potion had been in her system for almost twenty-four hours with no discernible improvement, and it would soon be time for the next attempt.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the flare of green. He snatched his wand from beside him and aimed it at the fireplace.

He waited.

Twice more, the flames flashed green.

But nothing happened.

He kept his grip tight but lowered the wand.

Someone was trying to Floo, but wasn't getting in.

And they were growing impatient.

He didn't delude himself. It had to be Aurors intent on arrest if he was lucky or an unfortunate "accident" if he was not.

But against all odds, the wards were holding.

Again, he nuzzled her hair, wild and coarse against his face. He'd done something wrong when he'd washed it, because as horrid as it had been before, it had never been awful like this.

Merlin, he loved her horrid hair.

Hunger...

How long had it been since he'd eaten?

Since she had?

He didn't know. He knew that touching her brought her comfort and that if he left her for even a few moments, they both suffered. He knew that he had only to think of food and it appeared. But he didn't know how she was supposed to survive without sustenance.

Again, he thought of Poppy, and again, he knew he didn't dare.

If it was magical depletion... well, Albus just had to be wrong, that's all there was to it, he had to be wrong. But if he wasn't... there was nothing Poppy could do, anyway.

His gaze slid sideways to the table, to the pot of tea, the mug (only one, and that haunted him) and the pile of sandwiches that hadn't been there minutes before.

Carefully, he slid her sideways, his hands gentle as he shifted her to a comfortable position beside him, but still within reach, within touch. He cupped her hand in his and waited, relieved that she didn't react.

The scent of tea wafted toward him, and before he had time to think, he'd snatched up the pot with his free hand and hurled it into the fireplace.

It hit with a loud crash and the fire sizzled and danced.

"No tea," he said. "No tea."

He squeezed his eyes shut and fought the panic growing inside him... and slid down beside her, facing her, stroking her cheek and tickling her eyelashes. "Hermione... please..."

Please what?

The aroma of coffee drifted to him from the table, and he braced himself, grabbed a sandwich and wolfed it down without tasting.

It was time for her next potion.

XX

"Fucking hell. I knew you were an insufferable little swot," he muttered to the sleeping girl in his lap, "but your audacity truly knows no bounds."

There was no way to brew and hold her at the same time unless... well, unless he did exactly as he was doing and perched cross-legged on his worktable with her cradled in his lap. Two cauldrons simmered with stirring rods working on magical timers; a third was already cooling.

He had spread the contents of her rucksack, with parchments piled on either side of him and one pile in front where he could read it.

Many were magically reduced; he'd left them so. He'd attack them later.

But the ones that had been thrust haphazardly in and were crumpled enough to prove it—those were proving to be most illuminating.

Miss Granger had taken it upon herself to write her own entries for some future edition of *Hogwarts: A History*.

"Unwilling to rely upon the vagaries and prejudices of history and historians, I am recording the events I have witnessed, beginning with..."

And record, she had. Beginning with that fateful day on the Hogwarts Express when she had met the self-important Boy Who Lived, she'd moved forward, year by year .

He'd alternated between annoyance and belated terror (holding her so tightly he wondered if she could possibly not feel him) as he read her crisp, no-nonsense memories. He flew past things that would have once annoyed him (they had been his oldest robes; it wasn't as if he'd wear something fine to a Quidditch match) but found his mouth dry every time her loyalty to Potter landed her in the middle of danger.

How much did the wizarding world owe this beautiful creature in his arms, this creature who had spent the last of her magic in one last valiant effort to rid the world of one of its many evils?

"Insufferable," he repeated, rubbing his cheek against her hair. "Annoying and insolent and—" He broke off, unable to speak, and simply held her, held her....

When he could think again, breathe again, he glanced at the cauldrons and saw everything was in order. He then flicked a finger and watched as one parchment levitated to the side and the next was exposed.

And froze.

The disclaimer at the top of the sheet of parchment was enough in itself to give him chills.

*Charmed to prohibit publication until after the deaths of Severus Tobias Snape and Hermione Granger Snape, and only if both parties have signed the accompanying permissions and releases.*

She'd written about their marriage.

She'd started, of course, with a scathing and detailed recounting of the Marriage Law.

Her description of the moment when she knew—she knew—she must marry her Professor, Severus Snape, was only marginally less breathless than the letters she'd written him at the height of her distress.

No fucking way he'd ever sign anything that allowed these documents to see the light of day.

He couldn't stop reading.

She even brought in the possible effects—both negative and positive—of Muggle magic, and got so caught up in one theological loophole after another that one sentence finally drifted away without ending.

Frowning, he sent that parchment sailing aside to find one last addendum, and it stopped his heart.

*"Professor, if you are reading this I must assume it's because I did not survive to complete it. I'm actually rather horrified that you would see such an early draft (I never let anyone see the first three drafts of anything I write) but I am leaving this for you because I hope—I do dearly hope—that you will finish it. I realise that any account you write will be very different from what I would write, but I trust you and only you to tell our story. I beg you to tell our story. I cannot bear the thought that others will tell it, and say wrong things or awful things or—"*

It's not just that the facts are important. I remember what happened to that other professor and the girl who loved him so and that their story was lost.

I want people to know the truth. Our truth. And it's not about having souls that joined despite us; it's about what happened because of us.

That in the midst of all the evil and horror that came out of the Dark soul of Lord Voldemort and the Ministry of Magic's machinations, we—you and I—found love.

That no matter what else happened, the love we found—we made from nothing—was profound and good."

That place—that place behind his heart—it was aching, and he thought if he looked there, he might see blood weeping from deep within him.

He couldn't write those things.

He couldn't do it.

He tried to speak, but the words were stuck in his throat. He swallowed thickly and finally managed, "You bossy little swot, you think you can order me about from beyond the grave? Well, Miss Granger, my darling girl, you're going to have to live and do it yourself. Do you hear me? If you want our story written you'd fucking better wake up and write it yourself."

And hoped to fucking hell she could hear him.

He pulled her closer and rocked her gently until he was forced to stop to complete the potions that might—may it please Merlin and may it please the Muggle god—heal her.

XX

*She was bleeding.*

She was in his arms and she was split open and she was bleeding.

Lucius stood over him, cool and immaculate in the midst of war, and sneered, "Where were you, Severus? How did you let this happen?"

He held her, begged Lucius to heal her because he didn't know how, he didn't know how—

And he knew with sickening pain that Lucius had never let anyone hurt Cissy, never, never, never, and—

Lucius was gone, and the battle was gone, but she was still bleeding, bleeding....

Albus stood over him.

"Save her," he begged him, "you have to save her!"

But Albus shook his head sadly, as if he already knew she was doomed, and said, "You have to, my boy, you have to."

But I don't know how!

He wanted to rage, to hurl fire and venom, but he couldn't move, he could only hold her, hold her....

I'm asleep. This isn't real. I'm asleep.

She had come to him in his sleep.

She had found him and she'd brought him relief and release and solace.

He called her name—Miss Granger, Miss Granger, Hermione, Miss Granger—until his throat felt hoarse even in his dream, but even though she was in his arms, bleeding, she didn't hear him, he couldn't break through, she didn't hear him.

I will save you and you will save me.

But he couldn't find her.

He didn't know how to heal her.

She was dying.

While he slept.

He wrenched awake with a jerk and a cry.

She was in his arms; he was holding her curled against him; she was breathing; she lived.

She was bleeding.

He was covered with it, with her blood, with this sign that she lived and her body was still fighting to live and... fighting *Merlin*, he remembered before when she'd raged at him as if it were his bloody fucking fault that she'd bled all over the bed, all over him, all over her white shirt.

He pulled her tighter to him and inhaled hair and the scent of her blood. *Rage at me*, he thought. *Blame me. Make it my fault.*

Come back to me.

"Come back to me," he snarled into her ear.

But she didn't.

She was bleeding all over her red sheets and her white shirt and he had to help her.

"*Lumos*." The candles in the wall sconces flared with flickering yellow light and he rolled her over to face him, so pale and drawn. He stroked his hand down her stomach and felt tension there. Even in her state, she felt it. He murmured the soothing incantation, cupped his hand over her flat belly and eased relief into her.

She softened in his arms.

He ached.

He did a quick cleansing charm to take care of the worst of it. He needed to bathe her, and then figure out something to do about her red sheets—she needed her red sheets—and he needed to find her feminine care items....

Her trunk.

He pulled her with him to the edge of the bed. When he slipped over the edge and crouched low to bring out her trunk, he nuzzled her hand, constantly whispering the words she needed to feel, to hear, so she would know he was there.

The box slid out, heavy, and he opened it.

Her red box was still in it, the box of the items she'd used before, complete with her inadequate potions.

He lifted it free and saw the books beneath it, reduced in size but not in weight. No wonder the box had been so difficult to move and...

So many books. So many *things*.

Her entire life, it seemed, reduced and packed into one trunk.

He looked around at bookshelves crammed with his own books, at the Spartan room with the single floral chair, two photos and a couple of knick-knacks on the mantelpiece and nothing else of hers.

This girl, this woman, who had become everything to him, had become his very heart and soul—and he hadn't even made room for her. Never once had she complained. She hadn't even asked for space for her things. She'd accepted this non-life, this hole in the bottom of the dungeons, she'd accepted it and never once complained and he'd allowed it, and now it knifed into him, the rage.

This was no way to treat any woman, but certainly not the woman who was his world.

He remembered the scornful face Lucius turned on him in his dream—his nightmare—and thought of how precious Cissy was, how pampered, how protected.

And he had not made room for his Miss Granger. He had left her to find the little corners, the edges of his life and worm her way in, despite his every effort to keep her out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into the palm of her hand, wanting nothing more than for her to move it, to caress his cheek, to slap his cheek, to rage at him for not being what he should be, what she deserved.

A few small parchments were wedged between the books and the side of the trunk.

He lifted them out.

Her study schedules.

The first was the one she'd devised when she'd started taking private tutorials, when she'd withdrawn from the fucking school.

Beneath it was her original schedule, the one with her classes scheduled in.

And meetings with the ungrateful berks who didn't deserve her, but had won her unwavering loyalty...

And—in green ink, no less—ten minutes here, two hours there, a schedule of events that ranged from, "Prepare Professor Snape's tea" to be waiting for him when he came out of class, to that particular Friday night which had been blocked off with the single word, *BREWING*.

She'd worked her schedule around his, around *caring* for him.

One small parchment slipped out of his hand to the floor. He reached for it and saw the title, "Ways to Make Professor Snape's Life Easier."

And the knife twisted in him and he was the one who was bleeding.

He pulled her into his arms, heaving in great gulps of cold air, rocking her and holding her and willing to do anything, anything to save her, to bring her back, to be what he should have been, what she deserved.

And she was still bleeding.

He carried her to the bath and started it filling with steaming water. He sent a couple of fists full of her bath salts into the water and remembered how proud she'd been when she'd used wandless magic to do the same herself.

He knelt by the tub and removed her shirt and her knickers, both blood-soaked, and Vanished his own clothes. And then, holding her in his arms, he stepped into the bath lowered himself until he was cradling her between his legs, and he held her there, simply held her as the water and steam surrounded them with the comfort of their scent and the comfort of memory of another night when she'd pulled *him* into the bath for healing.

And as he held her against his body, he felt how thin, how frail she was.

The words from his nightmare returned to him.

*She was dying.*

But even as he felt the panic growing, he felt something deep inside unfurl, and recognised her soul touching his.

She knew him.

She felt him.

She needed him.

He squeezed his eyes shut and reached for calm. There was a way to bring her back and he would find it, he had to find it.

But in the meantime—he remembered her schedules, her ridiculous fucking schedules—and Summoned the N.E.W.T.-level Potions text from her trunk.

And as she curled in his arms, soothed by lapping water and the strength of his arms around her, he levitated the book before their faces and watched the pages flip to the last page she'd studied.

And with Miss Granger sleeping in his arms, he began reading aloud.

Somewhere, she might hear him.

She might.

And with that small comfort, he rubbed his cheek against her wretched, horrid hair and held her more tightly.

XX

He shifted his left leg and the stack of books slid sideways, spilling across the bed. Parchments surrounded them, some hovering in the air for easier reading. If there was anything he hadn't tried, any charm, incantation or even charlatan's tricks, it's because it didn't exist in his vast library.

And he was running out of potions.

He squinted at the list in his hand though he'd long memorised it.

Fifteen potions attempted and failed.

Number sixteen was in her system now.

He tugged her closer into the crook of his arm.

There was no sign it was working, and every sign it was not. Had the blue veins on her eyelids always been so pronounced, her skin so delicate and papery thin? Her clavicles jutted as if they might pierce their way through, and her fingers were almost like claws.

He closed his eyes and shuddered, chasing away the memory of those other claw-like hands.

Her hair had grown duller and drier despite his attempts to keep it clean and healthy.

Her body, despite her brief monthly flow, was loosening its hold on life.

And yet, the stab of pain that thought brought him was matched by a deep pulsing reaction that could only come from her. From her soul. From the very essence that made her everything he lived for and everything he fought for.

He rolled sideways and pulled her body against his, cupping her head in one hand and her hips in the other, and whispered roughly into her ear, "You've got to help me. I can't do this without you."

But she had no answer for him, and he could only stare into nothing, his mind tumbling from one thought and image to a dozen others, with one memory that he kept shoved down, refused to acknowledge, refused to accept, and yet on this day it refused to be denied.

*It's her magic. It's completely drained.*

Which couldn't be true, couldn't be true, because if it was true—

She was wasting away and he couldn't stop it.

She had chosen this, this end to her life, rather than live without her magic.

He knew this; he knew this had happened, had often happened when a wizard or witch lost their magic. He'd even thought it himself, that he'd rather die than—

*"Professor, would you have ever chosen a wife who might not give you magical children?"*

"No."

She flinched away from him.

"And it's a moot point. This conversation serves no purpose."

Or had it? Had it served to convince her that she would be better off dead than without magic herself, that he wouldn't want her that way?

"No," he snarled, grabbing her fiercely. "Don't you dare—don't you dare give up on me, don't you dare—" He broke off with a choked gasp, pressed his lips to her temples murmuring the wildest, most desperate incantations, and broke off again. "I need you, Miss Granger. I need you. I need you alive and in my arms and my life and the magic—the magic means nothing, do you understand? Nothing. I'd give it up myself if it would bring you back, just come back, come back."

And still, she didn't answer.

XX

He had dressed her meticulously. He'd found his black shirt, the one she'd worn at the fateful Order meeting, and carefully eased it on her, followed by one of her ubiquitous pairs of jeans that now gaped at the waist. He'd taken his own green dress robes and reduced them to fit her, hers being bloody and shredded after the final battle.

But finally he had her dressed warmly with thick socks and shoes.

What he was about to attempt was sheer madness.

And yet nothing else had worked. He had nowhere else to turn but to her own—

Muggle magic.

He held her in his arms and counted on the fact that the wards would do nothing to stop him and that they were going somewhere at a time when nobody would see them.

He flung Floo powder into the fire, stepped in and announced, "Winchester Cathedral."

He stepped into the flooded crypt, icy water lapping at his feet without getting him wet. He walked through it, past the odd statue of a man and a book, and deeper into the crypt to that place where this had all begun.

Torches lit the black cavern with amber light reflected in the ripples of water. The stone altar was still there. The place where they had stood, where everything had changed.

He turned in a slow circle and felt like a fucking fool.

What had he expected?

And then he heard a gentle cough and turned back to the steps to see a man step into view, the man who had worn a black cassock before but now wore a tatty fleece dressing robe and was stifling a yawn with his fist.

As he drew into the light, it was clear from the vague blur of his eyes that he was more than a trifle confused, but even so, he quickly took in the situation and hurried forward, his brow creased with concern. "Is that Hermione Granger? Dear God, what happened to her?"

"She was—" What? What to say? "There was a battle," he began lamely.

"She should be in hospital! I must call for help—"

"No, she's already been," Severus lied smoothly, desperately. "It's not physical. Her wounds—her condition isn't physical. That's why I thought maybe you...*I'm a fucking idiot*, he thought, looking at the wizened old man in his rumpled hair and nightclothes, looking more useless than Binns.

Father Gadbury shot him a sharp look that Binns might not have matched even when he was alive. "You took her into a war zone?"

"She—she followed me."

"Africa?"

Severus stared at him. What the bloody fucking hell was he talking about?

Father Gadbury shook his head and smiled wryly. "She talked of going to Africa, of 'making a difference', even when she was eight years old."

"She would," Severus muttered.

Father Gadbury touched her forehead gently and frowned. "Let us go to my office. It's warmer there."

And so Severus found himself trailing after the priest through the cavernous dark structure, under the suspicious eyes of stone effigies and night-blackened stained glass figures, with only the Father's torch to light the way.

Severus refrained from using his wand. Barely.

Eventually they wound their way to a small cubby-hole of an office, which was immediately lit with a glare of electric light. Father Gadbury took a well-worn desk chair and indicated the only other chair for Severus.

He felt the old priest's eyes on him, and a rivulet of unease trickled down his spine.

What was he doing here? What was he thinking? Weren't these the people who had attempted to wipe his kind—her kind—from the face of the earth?

"There now, isn't this better?" The doddering old fool plugged in a kettle of sorts and fluttered about, readying tea bags and two mugs, and Severus noted with frustration that he, too, used PG Tips. By the time he had things sorted out, the kettle shrieked, and the priest poured the boiling water into the mugs and then sat back, seemingly satisfied.

Satisfied because he had his fucking tea made when Miss Granger was dying before him.

His fingers twitched with the urge to hex.

He shifted in his chair to rise, to leave, to put this insane act behind him—

But the priest surprised him by managing to stop him with nothing more than a gentle hand on his sleeve. "You're here for a reason."

Severus sank back into the chair ungracefully. "I'm not sure what I was thinking," he snapped.

"Then why don't you let me do the things I do best?"

Severus braced himself.

The priest who rose to his feet, who then extended both hands and placed one on Hermione's pale forehead and one—

On Severus's. Before he could jerk away, the old priest was speaking softly.

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Severus found himself waiting, his breath caught in his chest, staring at her frighteningly immobile features.

"Grant to Hermione and Severus and all who seek you the assurance of your presence, your power and your peace. Lord, hear us...." He raised his pale blue eyes to Severus. "You can join me, here, when I say, 'Lord, graciously hear us.'"

"No," Severus said shortly.

Father Gadbury just gave a slight nod before continuing, "Grant your healing grace to Hermione and Severus—

"Not me."

The old man fixed him with a hard stare and continued more forcefully, "—and all who are sick, that they may be made whole in body, mind and spirit. Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us."

And then he pulled his hand from Hermione's head and placed both on Severus's and said, "Grant to all who minister to the suffering wisdom and skill, sympathy and patience. Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us."

It was all Severus could do to restrain himself. He wanted to knock the hands off his head, off his skin. This wasn't about him. This was about her, saving her, and he'd come to the old man on the last desperate chance that he could do it, save her, and instead, the old fool was throwing it back at him, making him the healer—

"*You have to, my boy, you have to*"

Finally, he raised his hands, palms heavenward. "Hear us, Lord of life. Heal us, and make us whole."

He continued softly, but Severus was no longer listening, his mind racing.

She wasn't responding.

Whatever this Muggle magic was, it wasn't working and he was wasting time and—

The priest rubbed a small dab of oil on her forehead in a small cross. It smelled of olive oil and balsam.

To his shock, he felt the flutter, the softest of reactions—but he felt it, deep in his soul. Was it the scent? She responded to scents....

Balsam. He'd try balsam in her bath, or perhaps a massage oil or—

"Milk?" The old man held a small plastic carton over a mug of tea.

"No. I really must—"

The old man handed him the mug, then took his own mug and settled back, it would appear, for a chat.

"I don't believe in your drivel," Snape said abrasively. "I only came because—"

"Why does anyone come to a church in the middle of the night? Because they are desperate. As for believing... I hope I didn't offend you, but you asked me to help her, and it's my experience that helping her means helping you, or at least trying."

Snape stared from the witch in his arms back up to the priest.

"Indeed," Snape sneered. He took a deep drink of tea, despite the manner in which it scalded his tongue, and the strong brew seemed to infuse him with a bit more strength than he'd had a moment before. He set it on the desk with a clatter, and demanded, "How can you be so calm when she's—she's dying before your fucking eyes?"

The old priest cocked his head and looked at Severus with great curiosity. "You realise we're talking about Hermione Granger?"

"Who the fucking hell else would—"

The priest chuckled softly. "This is what I know about your Miss Granger. She appeared before me, the most intelligent and curious child I'd ever been graced to know, but with an incredible gift matched by few of my acquaintance."

*A gift.*

"Faith. She came into my office the first time and peppered me with questions, and walked out with a stack of books to read because she needed answers. She knew something... something. I don't know what she knew, only that she knew it, as surely as I know you are sitting there and you are not like me, and by morning... I don't think I'll know any of this at all."

Severus remained unspeaking, his arms curling around her more tightly, holding her more securely, raising her in his embrace until her cheek was pressed to his neck and her breath warmed him, and the one word repeated, *faith*....

"She didn't question. She didn't doubt. She knew. And she was determined to do whatever it took to get to the bottom of what she knew, but never doubt, it was all about faith. Faith, the belief that something exists even if you can't see it, can't hold it in your hand, can't prove it. And if I were to act in any way tonight but in faith that she will recover, I would be betraying the greatest gift she gave me, her faith that I could lead her to answers even as I grew to doubt it myself. I cannot betray that faith."

He took off his spectacles and wiped them on a corner of his fleece dressing gown, and Severus realised that the old man was blinking away tears. But by the time he put his spectacles back on, his voice was smooth again. "And if my faith is misplaced, I will grieve her loss, know that, I will grieve. But tonight, her need for my faith is more important than my need to grieve."

"So you're telling me this—this thing you did, the incantation—it won't work?"

"Of course I'm not saying it won't work. I'm saying that this is prayer, not magic," the priest snapped back at him.

Faith. Magic.

*"I had no magic. I would know if I did, and I never had that kind. Until—" Finally, she looked at him, her eyes haunted. "Until you gave me yours. With all my earthly goods I thee endow." She shivered as she spoke. "You gave me your earth magic." Again, she looked away. "And I—I gave you nothing."*

His grip on her tensed as pulled her closer, finding it difficult to inhale.

She'd claimed she'd given him nothing.

But it wasn't true.

From the moment she'd entered his office, even before, she'd charged forwards believing in what couldn't be seen or proven or was even rational.

She'd bestowed her faith in him without hesitation, had hurled it at him when he'd batted it away, had given it to him hand over fist.

And he'd given her magic in return.

*This is prayer, not magic.*

But he still had magic.

He had no faith. That would have to be someone else's problem.

But he had fucking magic and if he didn't have an answer, he'd create one.

He stood abruptly and was almost out the door when he caught himself and looked back to find the old man wiping his eyes, now that his need to show a stiff upper lip had passed. Severus felt a momentary tug of compassion and said gruffly, "I felt something. When you did what you did, I felt something. It may have... it may have helped."

The old man smiled. "I can't say that I'm surprised. That was the point, after all, but—" He nodded genially. "Thank you for telling me."

Severus nodded in return.

He raised his wand and spoke one word. *'Obliviate.'*

And then he swept down the narrow hallway, into a wider corridor, and finally into the nave where he stepped into a turn and Disappeared.

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And so it had come to this.

Potion number seventeen had failed.

All his attempts had failed.

His attempts to get someone better qualified to save her had failed, and in fact had resulted in having the impossible task flung back at him.

*"Grant to all who minister to the suffering wisdom and skill, sympathy and patience"*

Hadn't that been all he had done for more days than he could number, not knowing how many had been slept away before he'd even begun the attempts *Wisdom, skill, sympathy, patience*. What he had to offer hadn't been enough, not anywhere near fucking enough, and now he had nothing left except his own instincts—instincts which Albus knew had been bloody Dark and caused all sorts of evils and yet Albus had refused him, had refused her, had said—

*"You have to."*

He tasted something bitter in the back of this throat, and it wasn't the Firewhisky he drank from a smoking tumbler. It was rage and perhaps knowledge that as usual, Albus was hiding behind a veil of platitudes and irreproachable stature and leaving Severus to dip back into what might possibly lead to the darkest act of his very dark life.

Her breathing could no longer be termed "gentle" on his bare shoulder.

It was thready.

He kicked the book—her ludicrous book on magical children, on elemental magic—off the bed with a snarl.

He cupped her cheek and stroked it with his thumb and the reciprocal swelling in his breast told him that her soul was strong and sound and reaching out to him. And he would answer, he would grasp her and pull her back from the brink if it took every fucking bit of his own power to do so but—

At what cost?

If he failed... this life might drive him insane.

He thought perhaps it already had.

But worse—if he half-failed...

There would be only one thing left for him to do.

He fingered the dark green phial of poison on the table beside the bed.

His hand slid a few inches to the left, to the other phial, the one he required for this last action, this last anguished attempt.

He wanted to reach for the bottle again, to reach deeper into its depths, to numb himself completely, to buy blissful amnesia, but he knew exactly how much he could drink without diminishing the effects of the bright blue phial now cradled in his hand.

Deep within him, his soul trembled.

He had to try.

Clutching it tightly, he turned his head and thought—one last attempt, one last mad attempt—and pressed his lips to hers, his dark half-prince lips to those of a sleeping beauty, and waited for a pulse of recognition, of awakening, and then fell away with a burst of scorchingly bitter laughter.

He popped the cork out with his thumb and braced himself for the disgust, the self-loathing that he knew would follow.

"Miss Granger," he spoke into hair, her ear, with all the ferocity at his disposal, "they did the worst thing they could do to you when they left you to my mercy..." He stroked her hair away from her face, from her sunken cheeks, and wanted her eyes, her beautiful tea-sweet eyes to dive into, to drag her back out if necessary, or stay there with her forever, but behind those fragile lids lingered nothing but enlarged pupils and fog, and he drew on his rage because without it he could not move forward. "If you hear me, if you fucking hear me, come back, wake up, forget the fucking magic and just come back to me, because I'm doing all I can, more than anybody else would—and I think he knew it, he knew it the fucking bastard, when he left you with me, when he left you in the hands of a Death Eater...."

These weren't the words to bring her back. But they were the only words he had, threats and anger, because if she didn't come back to him, if she chose not to—

He squeezed his own eyes shut.

And then, it was time. Time to remember the incantation that would probably do no good and do the things that might ultimately result in their deaths.

He dredged up enough magic for one simple spell.

"*Nox*."

XX

Hour after haunted hour passed.

Not even the lure of forgetfulness he could find in the bottle of Firewhisky tempted him.

Instead, he stared into the darkness, the cold, cold darkness, with moisture leaking from the corners of his eyes.

He had failed.

He held her because he had to, because to let go was to lose what few threads of sanity he had left.

But he had failed.

She would die.

And finally he realised the blessing that being soul bound to this most magical of creatures had given him.

He would not have to live without her.

He pulled her gingerly into the cradle of his arms, determined to hold her until the end, wondering how quickly his own end would come, clutching his precious poison in his palm, ready to hasten it if need be.

The strong pulsing ache within his chest threatened to swallow him whole. He did his best to envelop her in his warmth, his touch, to stroke her hair and to reassure her with a low crooning litany of words he now knew she could not hear.

Would never hear.

And the pain deep within him was a ripping of his soul, a horror without end, because she was leaving him, leaving him, and—

"Miss Granger—" he gasped, the words torn from his throat as the pain turned to swelling, a swelling glow that filled him with sweet agony as he felt her essence touching his, her sweet, pure soul reaching out and joining his—

And a stirring in his arms, a pressure against his chest, a hand on his cheek—

And a voice.

A clear, soft voice.

"Professor... are you crying?"

And his world fell apart and was remade.

## Leap of Faith

*Chapter 60 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*There are not enough words in the universe to express my admiration for and gratitude to J.K. Rowling for the magical universe she created and for so graciously allowing us to take it in directions she never intended.*

*As always, I must heap praise upon the marvelous GinnyW. Additional thanks go to Annie Talbot and DeeMichelle, and to Shug for last minute alpha duties! You all rock!*

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### 60. Leap of Faith

"*Lumos!*"



One frantic word followed by the sudden flickering flare of candlelight...

And she was alive, in his arms, her eyes bleary, blinking and desperately scouring his face as she cupped his cheeks and gasped, "What's wrong?"

And he couldn't answer. He couldn't form the word *nothing*, or any word. Not when he was torn between anguish and joy, between despair and shock.

She was alive.

She was in his arms.

She had said, "*Lumos*," and now there was *light*....

He closed his hand over hers and drew it to his mouth, his lips...

And the tingling shot through him, a jolt of magic like gentle lightning on his lips, and he gasped. Something inside him broke loose, leaving him with a hot lump in his throat that he couldn't swallow around, that wouldn't let him speak.

"I'm sorry!" She tried to yank her hand away. "I'm...I'm out of practice..."

He clung to it, his own hand so heavy, so weak, but he couldn't let her go. The ache...the pulse deep within him...it roared.

"Severus," she whispered, her eyes large enough to swallow him whole, "what have they done to you?"

He clung to her fingers and stared at her luminous eyes with an unholy mix of joy and terror. Not just her eyes, but also her skin, now peachy with colour where it had been wan. Her arms, almost as toned and beautiful as before she'd left him. Her body, lithe and strong and pressed against him, not limp but brimming with life.

She almost... glowed.

*What have I done to you?*

And he inhaled a deep, shuddering breath at the sheer sensation of her moving...*moving*...in his arms.

XX

Oh, dear god, to just see him was bliss. Too thin, almost wasted, hollows like bruises under his eyes and sunken cheeks...

But *alive*.

And in her arms.

"What have they done to you?" she repeated, dimly aware of muscles behind her heart that swelled and ached, almost overwhelming her with pain.

But it wasn't her pain...not *her* pain, but *his*.

Because her heart, her very soul, was filled to bursting with a silvered glow she could taste and smell and almost hold, it was so real and new....

His cheek was like silk against hers, smooth and scented with the tang of his wizarding shaving soap and slick and wet. She rubbed her face against his, found the hard bridge of his nose...his beautiful nose. His body shook with harsh, shuddering sobs, and she pulled him tighter against her, running her fingers through his hair, over his bare shoulders, down his back and up again. "Don't cry," she pleaded softly.

He was so thin, his bones so sharp, his skin stretched so tight...

She was burning inside, burning with fierce joy, but he was suffering and she couldn't bear it.

Fear as frantic as her joy struck her.

"Who won?" she gasped.

His eyes, his black, black eyes opened and her breath caught in her throat and everything else faded. He stared at her as if she were a vision he didn't trust, and his lips parted as he finally said, "We did."

She couldn't breathe, but she forced the word...one word...out. "Harry?"

"Alive."

The vise squeezing her released.

It was over.

And being over faded to insignificance because what was here, what was now, was everything.

He nuzzled the palm of her hand and she sighed at his touch, but then ...oh, god...he sucked her fingertip into his mouth, suckled it like a nursing babe, and the tingles...oh, god...the tingles...it was as if he was...oh, god, oh, god...sucking her magic into him with hot, wet desire, and she thought if her chest swelled any tighter she would burst with the euphoria.

Because this was shared joy, shared exultation...shared, as the pulse of pain receded and she could only stroke his hair with her free hand and sigh into his throat.

And then some instinct, some strange instinct, led her to ease higher, revelling in the sensation of his skin against hers as she shifted until...she slipped her fingers from his mouth and with just a nudge against his chin, a twist of her torso...his lips closed around a nipple and for a long moment, froze. She thought he would pull away, but she remained still, so still, stroking his cheek as her eyes drifted closed, and then a soft tug at her breast and magic as she'd never felt it, glorious and singing, and all she could do was sigh, "Severus... my Severus."

XX

At some point they had shifted, maybe more than once, maybe many times. *Reality* and *now* were concepts that had no meaning for him. All that existed was flickering candlelight and gentle breathing and their hands, sometimes stroking and sometimes clutching, but always soothing, as if they both needed constant reassurance that they were there, really there.

He felt her rubbing against his cheek with hers, every bit the cat she claimed not to be, and had he even the slightest bit of wits about him he would have kept the silence, never risked breaking the bonds that twined between them, but the words spilled out without caution in a gasp of incredulity. "Miss Granger... are you licking my face?"

She went rigid in his arms and he actually *felt* a blush suffuse her skin; he wanted to snatch his words back.

But, ever his brave Gryffindor, she stroked her tongue along his jaw line once more and said, "Yes, I believe I am."

"Why?" he breathed.

"I need to," she whispered, just as softly.

He pulled her closer and tilted his head back into the pillow to give her better access. He didn't even try to understand. Had she wanted to sink her teeth into his jugular, he would have done the same.

He could deny her nothing.

XX

How odd, she mused, tracing his ear with her fingertip and watching his eyes flutter shut on an indrawn breath. How odd that she of the many questions found herself not asking, not caring about answers.

She only wanted to press her ear against his chest and hear his heartbeat...how solid and comforting. How familiar it seemed, as if it had haunted her dreams.

She wanted to taste the tears on his cheeks or smell his skin or feel the coarse, black hair of his shins against her satiny smooth calves, as she rubbed them up and down, up and down... and tucked away another question for someday... why were her legs so smooth?

She wanted to gaze on the angel-white planes of his chest or the ebony of his hair or the shadows beneath his eyes... not quite so deep and bruised as they'd seemed before.

How odd.

And a question that wouldn't wait.

"Professor," she said, her voice strong and demanding, "what is wrong with you? *What did they do to you?*"

"They didn't do anything." Again, he drew her fingertips to his lips and they both caught their breath at the sensation. "I gave you my magic."

With his words came a surge between them, and for a brief moment she couldn't breathe, and then, it eased. "Again? You did it again?"

He nodded.

She stroked the shadow beneath his left eye with her thumb. "It didn't do this to you before."

And this time, the shadow was in his eyes, a cloud crossing over them as he tried to pull away. "This time was different."

She crawled closer into his arms and nuzzled in his neck. "Is there anything you can't do?"

His strong hand cupped her cheek, and she allowed herself to drift... drift... She could drift because he held her and kept her safe.

XX

*Brine...?*

*Salt...?*

He turned his head and was hit with three thoughts at once.

Olives... along with nibbles of cheese, fruits, a bowl of clotted cream and a pot of tea beside the bed.

Which could only mean she was dreaming of food.

Fucking bugging hell, she had to be literally starving and he hadn't even thought to feed her.

He took a small strawberry and brushed it against her lips, watching them part, the tip of her tongue assessing, even before she was fully awake. She bit into it and moaned, and her eyes flew open as she chewed and swallowed.

"Olives!" She was reaching for the bowl when he caught her hand.

"Olives seem a bit much on an empty stomach..."

She turned wide eyes on him and he cursed himself...she was starving and he was telling her no? He snatched up a small brown olive and fed it to her, almost losing a fingertip in the process. He caught his breath as she stroked her tongue down his finger. Did she want his finger, or just the salt?

A bit of cheese, more fruit, and many more olives... and then he carefully lifted the rose-spangled teacup and offered it to her. Despite the obvious strength in her body and glitter in her eyes, she gave a small half-smile and said, "You hold it."

With a catch in his throat, he nestled her closer and held the cup to her lips while she sipped and savoured and finally sank against him with a sigh.

As he reached to replace the cup she stopped his hand with hers and sat higher in the bed. And then, her eyes never leaving his, she brought the same cup to his lips and held it for him.

And as he stared at her delicate hand, the delicate teacup...

He saw a flash of memory.

A claw-like hand.

Elfin crystal and blood red wine.

*Take... drink.*

She didn't know. She didn't know he...

"Severus..." Her voice was soft. "You need this, too."

*Need.*

"Please... I need to give it to you."

His eyes flew to hers. Was there pain there? Fear? Because of him?

And all the echoes of *wrong* echoed in his mind, but he couldn't refuse, had to accept, had to...

The tea...hot and sweet and all that was goodness and light...slid past his lips and into his mouth and...

He grabbed her hand desperately, closed his hand around hers as she held the cup and drank until it was empty, and all that was left was the memory of the sweet, hot tea...

And then the cup fell to the bed beside him as...he should stop her, but he couldn't, couldn't...she leaned over him and touched her lips to his and...

He couldn't stop her.

He couldn't say no.

He could deny her nothing.

His lips parted and she was kissing him and his soul leapt within him, leapt and soared and there was no simple clicking into place, but a recognition that transcended thought and mind and space as he recognised...

Peace.

Peace.

*Peace.*

XX

Since when had one of their kisses...their magical, soul-deep kisses...ever led to sleep?

Hermione stared down at him, stroked his cheek and gloried in the feel of his moist breath on her shoulder and thought...no, knew...what must be done.

"Professor..." She touched her lips to his again, stroked her tongue across them again, and felt him stir against her. "Professor..." she repeated, and when his eyes fluttered open, continued, "I think you gave me too much."

"No," he growled. "Never too much. Never enough..." And then, as if to prove his point, he waved a languid hand toward the fire and it flared with more light, more heat.

She sighed with relief and arched her neck as he nuzzled. "...I have this theory..."

"Too many fucking theories." But instead of continuing to nuzzle, he turned his face away from her.

And she followed him, eased across him until once again, their noses almost touched. "Kiss me," she said.

"I shouldn't..." He broke off, swallowed, and she found the movement of his throat fascinating.

She leaned closer and traced it with her tongue, tasted the salt of his skin, felt the surge of desire to absorb and be absorbed, to be joined and never parted, to be one with this man, this fierce man.

"Hermione!" he gasped, as she ground against him, and she felt his need hard and hot between them, and attempted to cut off his words again..."I can't let you...not until you know..."

"I know *you*."

And then it was his eyes...his beautiful eyes filled with pain and fear and it slowly sank in...he feared ~~her~~.

"Don't...don't despise me."

And everything else fell away. "Severus..." she whispered. "I could never...there is nothing, nothing you could have ever done or could ever do that would make me despise you."

"I don't deserve..."

"Everything," she said fiercely. "You deserve everything."

"You deserve..."

"You."

"I can't..."

"You don't have to." She took his trembling hand and placed it over her heart. "Do you feel that? Do you feel it? I'm... I'm glowing. Inside."

And then, when he still didn't answer, she said, "You did that. You did that to me."

To her astonishment, he paled and yanked his hand away in what seemed almost to be...dismay.

"Professor?"

But before he could answer or she could push for more, the fireplace flared green, and to her horror...Albus Dumbledore stepped through.

"No!" The scream tore from her throat. "You can't take him!" And without hesitation, she flung a curse from her fingertips, and only after the fact realised that she'd shouted, "*Confringo!*"

The curse that had turned Bellatrix Lestrange to bloody rain.

XX

Holy fucking hell.

He flung himself over her, crushing her body into the soft mattress and covering it with his own as he flung up a shield, though whether he really thought he was protecting her or simply hiding her nakedness he couldn't have said.

He only knew that this first instinct was to cover her, then fling up a shield, then take his wand in a death-grip, his mind racing.

Why now? Why had the wards dropped now?

What awaited them on the outside?

He closed his free hand over hers when it twitched as if to curse, to hex, again.

He raised his head slowly to find...

Albus, slumped on the floor, his head cradled in his hands.

No surprise that he'd blocked the blow, but had it truly taken that much out of him?

Severus eased up and reached for his trousers. He pointed to the precisely folded clothes at the foot of the bed and watched as she snatched the black shirt and began buttoning it hastily.

When they were both dressed, he pulled to his feet, gesturing to Miss Granger to remain where she was. Severus calculated. If Albus was here, who was close behind? If the castle wasn't protecting them, how could they escape? He shot a glance at the fireplace.

Albus raised his ashen face from his trembling hands. His spectacles were knocked askew but did little to hide his red-rimmed eyes. "You're... alive."

Severus gripped his wand more tightly. "Why are you here?"

"I thought...I was afraid...I was blocked for so long... everyone was blocked. And when I saw the Floo open to your rooms I thought..." The old man's voice broke. "I thought I'd lost you... I thought you were dead."

Severus felt Hermione rise behind him and curl her arm around his waist, her tension radiating from her in waves.

His eyes were wide as he seemed to drink the image of the both of them in. "I thought I'd lost you, my boy, and that you'd lost the only thing you loved...."

"Not yet," Severus said succinctly.

"Not ever," Hermione shot quickly enough that Severus found himself reaching for her hand again.

The tingle of her fingertips against his palm was gratifying and terrifying at the same time. He raised them to his lips, never taking his eyes from the other wizard.

"Will you help an old man to his feet?" Albus finally asked, holding up a gnarled hand.

"It's a trick," Hermione hissed softly.

But Severus released her and crossed to assist Albus, and then the rheumy blue eyes were almost at his eye level and it didn't take Legilimens to read the emotion there.

And then the old man turned his focus onto Hermione, and his expression softened in relief. "You did it. You... you found a way."

She tossed her wild mop of hair and sniffed. "Of course he did."

As if there was never a doubt, as if he could simply pull miracles out of his arse on a whim, as if he hadn't...

He stepped between her and Albus, cutting off any opportunity for closer examination. "What do you want?"

"There's not a lot more I can want, now that you're both...oh, so many people will be so happy."

"And the Aurors?" Severus asked.

Albus started. "Oh!" His hand was neither too trembling nor too weak to make an elegant spiral motion, and then capture the small stack of *Daily Prophets* that appeared from thin air. "I've been saving these for you." He reached for the one on the bottom, and then shot them a worried look. "Perhaps we should start with the most recent...this morning's."

The newssheet opened and hovered in the air, a headline flashing.

### ***INNOCENT BY ASSOCIATION***

In a unanimous decision unprecedented by this gathering of illustrious witches and wizards, the Wizengamot ruled late Tuesday that Severus Snape is cleared of any and all charges relating to his activities leading up to and during the Battle of Godric's Hollow.

After days of expert testimony (not to mention worldwide attention focused upon the results of these proceedings) Chief Warlock Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore announced, "With the overwhelming evidence presented by our esteemed friends from The National Wizard's Congress of Magic in China, The Royal Swedish Academy of Magics, the Office of the Chief Researcher and Historian of the National Magical Library of Ireland, and...the others will all be listed in the official documents, of course...ahem, in the face of all the evidence presented to this body, it is my immense pleasure to announce that these proceedings have no reason to continue. The soul-binding of one Severus Snape and Hermione Granger Snape proves beyond any doubt that his intentions and actions could not under any circumstances be construed as Dark or in furtherance of the goals and aims of Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort. Therefore, let it be known from this day forward that this matter has been put to rest, never to be reopened and that Severus Snape is now eligible for consideration for any and all awards and rewards commensurate with his service to the Light."

He felt light-headed. He didn't understand it. His eyes flew back to the headline *Innocent by association*.

And then, to the powerful and passionate young witch as his side.

Her eyes flew over the words as she clenched her hands over his forearm, tighter and tighter, and then...on a choked sob...covered her mouth with her fist and slumped against him.

"Perhaps..." Albus said gently, a bit of a twinkle returning to those thrice-cursed blue eyes, "we should sit down?"

Somehow they managed to sink onto the floral seat, tightly wedged together and neither complaining, as Albus pulled a straight-backed chair and sat across from them. He lifted the next newspaper, and the headline flashed as large and demanding as the previous.

### ***SOUL-BOUND!***

"Even the Dark Lord acknowledged it," testified Madam Narcissa Malfoy under wizard's oath and with Pensieve testimony to back up her assertions. Combined with

Pensieve memories of her husband, Lucius Malfoy (currently residing in Azkaban awaiting his own trial, a fact which cast doubts on the validity of any Malfoy testimony prior to their release of their Pensieve memories), and those of her son, Draco (Seventh Year Student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry).

"If this claim is substantiated and upheld by experts, it will make any further proceedings unnecessary," announced Chief Warlock Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Albus straightened his spectacles more securely on his nose and began flipping through the remaining newspapers.

"Please, sir," Hermione spoke quickly, urgently. "May I?"

Albus released the newspapers to her. "You might find *The Quibblers* of special interest."

"*Quibblers*?" Hermione repeated, aghast.

"Fucking hell," Severus muttered.

Albus gestured with a twirl of his finger and *The Quibblers* found their way to the top of the stack. "They've done a series on soul-bindings and what they entail. More accurate than some of their more... creative articles, shall we say? Xeno Lovegood got an exclusive interview with the Chinese representative..."

"Why Chinese?" Severus broke in, trying to make sense of at least some small part of a process that was spinning out of control. "What did you mean...expert testimony from the Chinese? And the Swedes? And..."

"Oh, yes, well, soul-bindings don't happen every day, as you must realise. The last one in England was eight generations ago and was between two Prewitt cousins...second cousins, of course, which was certainly acceptable at the time. But the Chinese have had several more recent. Sheer force of numbers, it would seem; they have more of everything. And they've done much research on the phenomenon. In fact, they..." he reached into his pocket and pulled out a pouch stuffed with parchment missives, "they are only one of many who are offering the two of you a great deal of money and honour if you'll consent to being part of ongoing studies in..."

"Fucking hell!" Miss Granger announced quite clearly. "Over my dead body!"

"Indeed," Severus added silkily.

She tucked herself more closely to him, and he realised that she was even tenser than before. After a moment of relief, she was now rigid with suppressed emotion.

Albus blithely cast the parchment covered with columns of Chinese characters aside and lifted the next from the pouch. "Ah, yes. You'll find that *The Quibbler* articles also have a number of quotes from various Weasleys, all defending your union and, it would seem, vying for the honour of being the first to recognise the truth of it. They feel perhaps they were the most predisposed to see it, because of their Prewitt heritage. In any case," he offered a rolled parchment to Hermione, "Molly is already planning your wedding, which she insists upon hosting..."

"Is she insane?" Hermione snapped.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Severus sneered.

Miss Granger blinked up at him, her lower lip trembling. "We already had a wedding, and it was perfect." She caught her lip beneath her teeth, and he gently pulled it loose and soothed it with his thumb.

"Of course you did, my dear, but when you broke your wand, you ended your marriage and..."

"She did no such thing."

"According to statutes enacted to support The Marriage Law, by breaking her wand she was relinquishing her rights as a witch and ending all connections to the wizarding world, including her marriage to you. Of course a lot of people want to see this rectified, even to the point of doing it posthumously..." Albus broke off and cleared his throat. "Thankfully, that is not an issue."

Severus lifted Hermione's left hand. The battered silver ring with its small emerald chip caught the candlelight. "We are married according to Muggle magic," he snapped.

And when she stared at him...turned her glowing eyes up to his and stared...he shrugged. "Once was surely enough."

"Indeed," she said, and clasped his ringless hand in hers and presented a united front to Albus.

"Well, I'm not sure how that idea will be greeted... but it matters little," Albus hurried on. "I don't think either of you can comprehend what you have given us. The list of casualties and injuries from the Battle of Godric's Hollow was tragic, and yet out of that sprang not just a triumph over evil but..." He smiled gently. "A marvel. Something exciting and wondrous for people to ponder, something that brought the rest of the world to our door in support and enquiry after years of caution because of our struggles with the Dark."

"A... a marvel." Miss Granger's voice was flat. She shoved the newspapers away, allowed them to scatter across the floor. "So what you're saying is that everyone...everyone has been talking about us, analyzing us? And we're supposed to consider this some kind of honour?"

And suddenly Severus understood her crackling energy, her brittle composure, and felt it tremor through his body, as well. She...his stunning Miss Granger...was sitting at the Head Table again, being stared at again, only worse. She'd lingered on the edge of death, and the wizarding world that owed her so much had turned her...them...into a source of fucking speculation and gossip.

"And are they saying," she continued, her voice quavering, "are they saying that we're suffering from some sort of compulsion, that...that what we have isn't real? Because if they are...if they are, I'll move to bugging China to get away from the bloody bastards!"

Albus caught his breath in a wheezy gasp.

Severus caught Miss Granger up in his arms and buried his face in her horrid frizz, wanting to hide her from the world and show her off to the world and claim her to the world and tell the world to go to fucking hell...and mostly to soak in the overwhelming reality of all that was vibrant and alive and so very much her. His heart pounded in his chest as if just having her clutching him so was overloading it with sensation.

"Madam Snape," Albus asked, clearly astonished. "Whatever would make you think the world doesn't think what happened between you was real?"

She sniffled loudly and wetly and, without letting go...*don't let go*, he wanted to tell her, to beg her, even though he didn't want the old bastard there witnessing her distress...she turned her face toward Albus and said, "Because they think it happened *to* us, not between us."

He felt his heart break a little at that, at the knowledge that the truth...that what had happened, was not of their doing and beyond their control...hurt her so. "It makes no difference," he whispered into the delicate shell of her ear. "It makes no difference what they think."

And suddenly, fucking Albus Dumbledore's fucking twinkle came back in all its glory. "My dear, dear witch, surely you don't believe that."

She sat up in defiance, the thrust of her chin sheer belligerence. "I know it's not true."

"Of course you do," he beamed. "Just as Severus does."

What was he playing? What stupid game was the old coot playing with her fragile state of mind?

"Of course Severus chose you, and you chose Severus. The binding couldn't have happened, otherwise."

"I never...I never said he chose me," she said, shrinking back against the floral upholstery. "I realise it was all my doing but..."

"Of course he chose you, that very night in my office when you had George Weasley..." he broke off and looked a little sad, but then braced himself and continued, "young George Weasley ready to marry you on the spot, when you had so many other offers, oh enough to turn most young girls' heads, and yet Severus snatched you out of their grasps and claimed you. You were chosen just as surely as you chose."

Severus sat there, stunned, unable to form words.

"But we...we had kissed. The binding had already happened," she said nervously, staring at her hands...her perfectly formed hands with one small fingernail missing.... He wondered if she'd noticed....

At that, the old man beamed. "Oh you're going to enjoy reading the testimony from the Chinese delegation, Madam Snape. So much for you to dig your teeth into. Not the least of which is...the reason why bindings are so rare is because people turn away from them."

"But...but how could they?" she gasped, and with that she flung herself back against his body and he clutched her to him. "How could they bear it?"

"The soul knows no logic and pays no attention to personal preferences. Such bindings are rarely convenient or comfortable, or with someone you would choose for yourself, my dear. Most people shy away from them, dismiss the first attraction, deny it, and send it on its way. Most people, dare I say, are afraid when it happens." When she didn't respond, Albus chided her, "Surely you're not going to claim that what happened to the two of you was easy? The very thing that makes it remarkable is that it was not. Anyone who knows either of you...even by reputation...recognises that. Madam Snape, you are soul-bound because of the choices you made, again and again, and with each one, your binding grows stronger. And now...with whatever has happened here in this room where I feared I had sent the two of you to die...I am staggered to wonder at the strength of your connection, and dare I say, your love."

She trembled like a bird, her hands clasped in front of her, until he thought she would fly into a million pieces if he didn't get rid of Albus and pull her back to him, give himself over to her again. He groped for words, and finally managed only, "We need our privacy."

"I am more than happy to give it to you, as much and for as long a period as you need and desire. These quarters are yours with no need to fulfil any duties, teaching or otherwise. In fact, this fine old castle has made it clear; she would not have it any other way." Albus stroked the stones with his long, gnarled fingers. "But I would be remiss if I didn't ask one last favour before I leave... there are many who will have questions, but the question that needs most to be answered is this one. May I do a cursory magical examination to ensure that you are both well and stable?"

Alarm seized him. He tightened his grip on his almost-forgotten wand and glared a warning. "No."

Albus looked taken aback and then, casting a sympathetic glance at Hermione, nodded. "Another time, then. Soon, I hope."

And when no further words were forthcoming, he tossed a handful of Floo powder into the flames and stepped after it, his thin-voiced, "Headmaster's Office," echoing after him.

"They have no right!" she cried. "How dare they? How dare they meddle and prod and probe and..."

He swept her into his lap and she...she stiffened. She didn't sink against him and allow him to hold her. She drew back, and he felt as if she'd stabbed him.

"It's all right," she gasped. "I know he's...he's just trying to put a pretty explanation on things, to say the things he thought I wanted...needed...to hear, but he's wrong, I'm not a stupid girl who needs fantasies, not when I've got..." She closed her hands over his and squeezed her eyes shut. "He didn't have to say those things."

His own mind roiled with all that Albus had said, but it was her face, her voice, her strength suddenly so fragile, that broke him. He jerked her to him, wrapped his arms around her, breathed her scent in and held on until his lungs were bursting. "They're all guessing," he finally said. "They're on the outside looking in, and they're guessing."

And with that, she sank against him with a relieved sigh. "Yes," she breathed. "They don't know."

"They can't know. I don't think...I don't think we can even know." How to quantify it? How to define it? To claim one truth was to deny two others. To credit her faith...her unbelievable and incredible faith...was to rob her of her choice. By definition and experience, soul-binding seemed to remove choice, and yet Albus had said.... He gave his head a shake. He only had one thing to offer her, and that was the truth. His truth. The only truth he knew.

He lifted her face until her glistening eyes were locked with his. "I don't know what was choice and what was gut reaction and what was compulsion and what was sheer greed. All I know is that when you walked into my office and demanded that I marry you, I knew in an instant that I was going to mark you as mine, and everything after was mere gamesmanship. And when you offered to marry Draco and be a spy in the very house where the Dark Lord lived...did you realise that at the time? I thought not. But the point is, my fierce Hermione, that you would have been brilliant. You would have been miserable, but you would not have been mistreated, because that is not the way of Malfoy men." He felt his own guilt gnaw at him, remembering the things that had happened to this gift of a girl in his arms that he should have prevented, should have somehow protected her from, and forced his mind to lurch away from the horrors and back to the things he must tell her, that he must make her understand.

"Draco would have been spiteful and an arse, never doubt that. But you would have been safe enough. You would not have been abused, despite what I told you that night. You would have been safe until...until the Dark Lord was ready to see you dead, but don't think for a minute that when I lied to you, when I lied to you about what would happen to you at Malfoy Manor...do not think for a minute that I believed I could ultimately protect you from that final fate. Not if the Dark Lord wanted you dead. But in that moment I lied to you because I knew I could not let them have you, that you were mine, and were going to be mine even if I had to lie and risk the wrath of the Dark Lord to secure you. I made that choice more deliberately than any other choice I have made in my entire, miserable life. I could have let you go to Weasley and be protected by an entire family who loved you. I could have let you go to Draco and, with my guidance, you would have been a spy with access I hadn't even achieved. I could have even given you the truth, opened your eyes to the realities and allowed you to make your own choice. But in that moment, I did not. I chose you, and defied anyone to stand in my way."

"But...but you despised me."

"Yes."

"And you hated me being here."

"Yes."

"And I complicated everything and made your tasks so much harder and..."

"Yes, and yes, and yes," he snapped, exasperated that what had begun as an effort to bare his soul to reassure her had turned into this.

"...and you hated yourself for your weakness and hated me for making you weak," she announced as proudly as if she was acknowledging a declaration of love, and he wasn't sure what to do with her, this maddening wife of his. "And you chose me."

And then she took matters out of his hands by claiming his lips with hers.

And his world blazed with silver.

She melted into him, her lips soft and slick with the taste of potion still on her tongue. If his kisses were insufficient to awaken her from her near-death sleep, her kisses would raise the dead from their graves.

And she needed no desperate measures, just the sheer magic that was hers alone, magic that transcended the elements or learned knowledge, magic that called out to him and gave him life itself.

Life itself.

He fought the truth that twisted and writhed within him and tried to make this kiss, her kiss, enough to drown it out.

But instead, it made his need to tell her more urgent.

The truth.

He pulled her away and gasped for air, for reason, for strength.

"I don't care," she said.

He sputtered.

"Whatever stupid thing it is that you've decided must make you unworthy...I don't care."

"How the fuck did you know?"

She leaned into him with her maddening smile. "I know you."

"Really?" He let a chill shape the word, and she frowned. "Then you know that when I want something...when I want you...I'll let nothing stand in my way."

Her eyelids lowered and her smile grew sultry. "Oh, yes."

"Look at me," he snapped. "We're not talking about...about that. I'm trying to tell you that I have done things...I did something you may find difficult to forgive."

"Oh, Professor," she sighed into his throat, "I love you no matter what you've done, and I forgive you no matter what you do, and if that isn't enough, I'll love and forgive you more."

"The glow," he said, forcing his words through his lips.

"Hmmm..." she hummed against him, her lips curved in a smile, a delicious hum that bespoke of that very silvery glow with which she was so pleased.

"Do you want me to tell you what it is," he asked, turning his voice to silk, "or do you want to wait until you figure it out for yourself?"

She stilled, then rose and glared at him. "Are you determined to ruin this, to cause a fight to prove some stupid something that only you care about? Because if you are...oh god."

"What's wrong?" All thoughts flew from his head except the look of panic that crossed her face.

"I need a wee."

And with that, she tore herself from his embrace and flew across the stone floor, slamming the door to the loo behind her.

Leaving him with empty arms and a heavy lump of dread to console him.

XX

The door slammed and suddenly he was gone. Not there, not where she could simply reach out and touch him, lean against him, touch him....

*Don't be ridiculous.*

She forced herself to do what she needed to do, but it seemed as if there were threads, fine threads holding her together, and suddenly, they were slipping loose...

She sank to the floor.

And saw her red box.

Feminine hygiene products...out in the open? In the loo? She felt her cheeks flaming. She would never leave them out for him to stumble over....

How long had she been out? The date on the newspapers...she pressed her fingertips to her mouth and fought back a moan.

Oh my god.

He had used them.

On her.

She reached above her head and grabbed the sink, pulled herself to her feet.

It wasn't as if he hadn't done more intimate things than that.

And now the wretched man was determined to try yet again to push her away, when her threads were fraying....

She pulled herself to her full height and stepped through the door, ready to throw herself into his arms...

It was dark, with only one dim candle burning.

And the chair was empty.

The bed was empty.

She whirled, frantic...

And saw him, dark and looming, leaning against the wall and hiding behind his dark curtain of hair, only the gleam of his eyes visible.

She took a step toward him, but he held out a hand...an elegant, beautiful hand...and she stopped.

He closed his arms around himself, tight, withdrew into himself, like she hadn't seen him do in weeks. His head lowered, he finally said, "You're pregnant."

"What?"

"You heard me. You're pregnant."

"But...but I can't be!" She pointed at the bathroom door, as if the red box were visible. "I...I can't be!"

"But you can be, and you are."

"What...what are you telling me?"

"I'm telling you that you almost died, that I was desperate, that I took a...a blind leap of faith..." He broke off with bitter laughter. "And if that isn't ironic I don't know what is. I used conception to save your life and, as it seems, your magic."

"You...you did what?"

"Conception," he snapped, "is the most basic, common, elemental magic that exists. And I used it."

The glow she felt. The magic. *Pregnant?*

"You used it. You used it? You 'used' conception? Don't you mean you bloody well ploughed your way into me, deposited your seed and got me pregnant without giving me even a moment's opportunity to say 'over my dead body'?"

"I saved your life, Miss Granger," he hissed.

"As if there weren't other ways...time, *time* would have taken care of..."

"You don't know that! *You weren't here!*" he thundered, pale and shaking.

"Which is exactly my point!" she shrieked, overcome with every emotion that had been suppressed for too long while she drifted, drifted.... "I'm only eighteen years old, and I'm pregnant, and I didn't have anything to say about it!"

"A problem you have solved all on your own," he sneered, his face icy calm. "You're finding plenty to say about *it* now."

He whipped away from her, his body rigid, and only his fingers betrayed him, his fingers trembling, and she wanted nothing more than to capture them and kiss them and suck them into her mouth and...

"I took your choice away from you," he said, and she felt the anger and his pain in his voice, "but I am giving it back now."

"How?" she demanded. "Surely you don't think I..."

"You were dying in my arms, Hermione, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Perhaps you would have preferred that, and I would have followed you. Perhaps your *faith*," he sneered, "allows you to believe in some benevolent hereafter where we would be together? Perhaps that's the choice you would have made? But you weren't here to consult, so I did what I did, knowing the risks, and was foolish enough to think that the worst thing that could happen was not to fail...because had I failed, I still had you in my arms, nothing would have changed. But what if I'd only half-failed? What if you'd remained in your condition, but conceived?"

She felt a chill of ice slice into her at those words.

"What if I'd managed to achieve that little miracle?"

She felt something hard and cold pressed into her hand.

"I was ready for that. I was ready. Two drops is all it takes, two drops each, and we would be gone. We would ~~be~~ be gone."

She stared down at the dark green phial in her hands and recognised the poison.

"*That's* the choice I made. *That's* the burden I carried. And now, Miss Granger, it's *yours*."

The phial almost pulsed in her palm, its deadly contents were so potent. She fought for air, and then spun away from him, and crossed to the potions cabinet, and placed the phial on the shelf. "You are a stupid, horrid man!" she spat.

"And did I ever profess to be anything else?"

"Tell me one thing," she said, her voice low and barely under control. "Tell me...does any part of you, any tiny part of you, find satisfaction in the fact that you... you got me pregnant?"

"Merlin's fucking ghost, no!"

"Does any part of you, any tiny molecule, take pride in the fact that a part of you is in me or..."

"*No!*" He whirled back to face her, his eyes burning like coals. "I never wanted children, never!"

"Nor did I!" She grabbed his hands and clenched him in hers. "But all the same, we're having one and it's your fault and...and it's *yours*. You did this and it's *yours* and I will never change a dirty nappy..."

"That's what house-elves are for."

"You wouldn't dare!" What new horror was he going to fling at her next? But if it was *this*, well... She drew in a shuddering breath. "That, of course, is entirely your decision to make. Because," she repeated, "it is yours. You chose to make it and I can't do anything but suffer through the growing and the...the..." she squeezed her eyes shut, "and the birth, but then it's yours."

"I have no problem with that."

"You don't?" Something hard and cold melted within her.

"I accept full responsibility." His words were crisp and matter-of-fact, and she realised, she believed him. He would do it. He would take responsibility. "I'm sure," he



snapped, "I'll find many uses for it. Infant parts make very effective potions ingredients and are quite difficult to come by."

Relief coursed through her and she sank against his hard body, and there was no other word for it...her soul rejoiced at the connection.

"Hold me, Severus," she whispered. "Please... hold me."

And he lifted and carried her back to their bed, their wonderful bed, where he held her close until the frightened ache deep in her core subsided, and she thought about the terrible plans he'd made, the preparations, the poison.

And she rolled into his arms and pulled his head to hers and found tears there, and soon their tears joined in salty unity. "We'll manage," she said. "One way or another, we'll manage. I'm sure there are books about it...."

Something hard and sharp dug into her side. She reached down and found another phial, this one empty. She held it to her nose, sniffed it, and didn't recognise its scent.

He snatched it out of her hand.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Surely you don't think I managed to...how did you put it? Plough into you?...without assistance."

She heard a small splintering crash as he flung the phial against the far wall.

She snuggled more closely into his arms and said, "Professor... would you need assistance now, if we were to..."

And a muttered, "Fucking hell," was all she heard before his lips found hers in the darkness and everything else fell away.

## In Sin and Error Pining

*Chapter 61 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards. Nominated Best New Author, Best Epic and Best Angst in the Moste Potente Passions Awards.** Thank you so much for your kind support.

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*I own nothing you recognize from canon, and the things you don't recognise, JK Rowling won't want. I make no money from this, nor does anybody else. I worship at the altar of Jo and thank her for letting us play in her universe.*

*My deepest thanks, as always, to the most fabu betas in the universe, GinnyW and Annie Talbot. And special thanks to mylifeasanamazon for Brit-picking and more. Thank you, ladies. You rock!*

*And a special thank you to all who nominated Care of Magical Creatures in the Best Epic and Best Angst categories of The Moste Potente Passions Awards, and me for Best New Author. I'm thrilled!*

*And finally, a special thanks to Potter Place for putting this chapter on their Christmas wish list and to SW69 for the gorgeous banner. Ladies, here it is!*

□

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### IN SIN AND ERROR PINING

*The scar ran all the way down to her navel.*

*She was hideous.*

*And it all came crashing back on her, the screaming and the stench and the maniacal laughter and the threat and the wild woman standing over her and blood, everywhere, blood...*

*An explosion of blood, blood raining down on her, and she stared at the scar in the mirror and suddenly it was open and wide and raw and blood was pouring onto her, into her...*

*She screamed.*

She clawed at the scar and screamed.

"Lumos." Strong hands closed around hers and pulled them away. "Wake up," he soothed in her ear as he pulled her into the curl of his body. "It's over. She's gone. It's over."

She pulled the white shirt closed around her. "Don't look!"

But he was too strong, too determined, and he rolled her as easily as if she were dandelion fluff and she didn't want him to see her but she wanted him, needed him to hold her, because now she could hear his heartbeat and touch him and she sobbed into his hard chest, his beautiful angel-white skin and closed her eyes to see blood, *more blood...*

"Hermione!"

She jerked her head away from him.

"Miss Granger!"

She tossed it from side to side, clutching the edges of the shirt together over her shame. "Don't look," she begged. "Don't look."

And then he was holding her, rocking her, and she sank against him and sobbed until there were no more tears.

"I won't look if you don't want me to."

She shuddered against him.

And she would have relaxed, she would have, but his fingers were drifting down the scar, painting it with an unguent that smelled of eucalyptus and spearmint. She seized his hand and looked up at him in horror.

His face was a contrast of light and shadow made alive by flickering candle light, his eyes closed. Slowly he opened them. "Don't deny me this, too."

"Deny you?"

"If I can't look at you, if I can't touch you..." He let his voice drift off, but the ache in it was as real as the ache in her own heart.

"How could you even want to?"

"Stupid girl," he said, and his voice was tender where his words were not.

Again, he touched the scar, this time watching his finger trail down. "It's so much better than it was, and it will be better still, but even if it doesn't change at all, why do you think I would care?"

"She did this to me," she whispered.

His eyes turned to cinders, burning and hollow. "Because I didn't kill her when I should have."

"No," she said fiercely, "because I didn't do it properly when it fell to me."

"The first time," he said.

A shiver shuddered through her. "I only thought there was too much blood the first time... but then, at Godric's Hollow..." She closed her eyes against the memory, and instead, the nightmare came back, only it wasn't nightmare, it was real. "Her blood... it coated me, it... it..." She clawed at her chest. "It got in me. It got in me!"

This time, he pinned her hands down on either side of her and his lips trailed down the scar and she couldn't move, couldn't push him away. She forced herself still as his breath puffed over her skin.

"You have been checked by Albus..." Kiss. "By Poppy..." Kiss. "By me." Kiss.

And then he was at the base of the scar, and she held her breath as his lips tantalised her navel before finally returning to her jaw, her cheek, her eyelids.

"We've found nothing, no Darkness, in you. Whatever happened, you are unscathed. You are still..." He kissed her earlobe. "You."

"But..." She couldn't stop the words from coming. "If she's in me...what if she's in me with your baby..."

"She's not." He dug his fingers into her hair, and the scrape of his nails against her scalp sent tremors through her.

"Your son," she breathed, trying to imagine this new fact, that this tiny growth in her was indeed a son.

His movement ceased. "*Our* son."

"Your son," she repeated, feeling more herself as her thudding heartbeat slowed. "*Yours*." But she let her hands trail down his body so that her nails could draw the same tantalising patterns on his thighs that his did on her scalp. "And you're sure Poppy didn't tell Professor Dumbledore?"

"Has he twinkled more excessively than usual?"

"No," she said, realising he was right. If Poppy had told anyone she was pregnant, it would be the headmaster, and the headmaster clearly didn't know. Her secret was safe for now.

"This is going to be a very long day," he said, stroking her hair.

"An ordinary day," she said in wonder. "Christmas Eve."

"Yes, and if you insist upon making me miserable and forcing me to go to your Muggle midnight mass..."

She moulded her body against his and, comforted, gave herself up to sleep.

XX

"Happy Christmas," she said to Russell and thrust a basket of Christmas presents into his hands. She'd always bought something for each of the staff, and even if she'd relied on impersonal gift certificates this year, she hoped that the care she'd given when choosing particular shops would count for something.

She tightened her bare fingers on Severus's...despite the cold, they both needed that skin-on-skin contact too badly to even consider gloves...and dragged him further into The Grange. She had expected this moment, this night, to be momentous in its very ordinary-ness.... Instead she felt clenched tight inside. Her stomach tightened in a knot as she anticipated revisiting this place that she'd last seen in an explosion of noise and blood....

This time, the entrance hall was strewn with evergreen garlands and fat silver bows. She'd never considered how positively Slytherin her mum's design choices often were. Sconces of candles burned on the walls, and a tall Christmas tree decorated with silver spun-glass globes and fairy lights held court in the centre of the oxblood medieval-tiled floor.

"They're in the family drawing room, Madam, Professor," Russell intoned.

She thanked him and tugged the Professor after her down the narrow hallway and into a room with their family Christmas tree, from which dangled an odd assortment of decorations made from anything from glass to felt to coloured paper that she had brought home from school during the first ten years of her life.

Her parents stood immediately; there was no disguising the expressions that mixed suspicion with relief when they saw her. She released his hand and rushed forward to

meet them, first disappearing into her father's embrace and then turning to her mother, who held her at arm's length and took in her appearance.

"You haven't worn that dress for two years. I'm amazed it even fits you." Her eyes swept down the wine-coloured velvet that covered her from neck to ankles, barely hugging her thin hips.

"It's so warm, and you know I've always loved the way it feels," Hermione said in a rush, not admitting that she chose it because it covered scars and, more importantly, the effects that loss of appetite and queasiness had wrought on her body.

Her mother's eyes returned to her face. "Darling, you're..." She broke off and pulled Hermione into her arms, and Hermione almost choked on Chanel No. 5. Then her mother released her and rose to her full height, slightly taller than Hermione but only because of her very unsensible heels. "How far along are you?"

"Oh, Mummy." She could tell by just *looking*? "Not quite ten weeks..."

"Do you mean," her father said, "that she's...you're...pregnant?" He turned to Severus with a glare. "What kind of a world do you live in, where an eighteen-year-old girl is drawn into war and married off like chattel and now..."

She turned to see Severus's face drain of colour and jerked from her mother's arms.

She spun away before they could see the tears stinging her eyes, the pain beneath her anger. She'd come here for comfort, for something that was familiar and reassuring, and instead was two breaths away from crumbling. But her Professor, oh, her Professor, took one look at her and took one of her hands in his and rubbed his knuckles softly against the nape of her neck. Her emotion quivered through her even as she felt his flare within him.

"Mother, Father," she said, certain that the absent affection of *Mummy* and *Daddy* was felt by both. "Happy Christmas. I believe we'll be going to the cathedral without you, and if I don't see you in all the crush, Happy New Year, as well."

"Oh, really, Hermione, let's not overreact," her father said crisply.

But before she could spit out a response, Severus was speaking. "Sir Alistair," he replied, his tone icy, "perhaps I do owe you some reassurance..."

"No, Severus," she said, shaking her head fiercely. "You owe him nothing."

But he ignored her, his eyes never leaving those of her father. "I certainly find it hard to blame you for what you're feeling. But you should know, I had the benefit of sharing your world during my formative years, and I can assure you that I couldn't escape it fast enough nor stay away from it long enough. The wizarding world holds no corner on cruelty, bigotry and despair. In fact I am only here tonight because it meant so much to Hermione to come here, to take part in a childhood tradition. Her traditions mean much to her, as I've learned to my consternation. I did not ask for the situation we are all in, and I certainly didn't set out to marry and impregnate your daughter..."

Both her parents flinched at the cold word, *impregnate*, but Hermione pressed closer against him and gripped his fingers tightly.

"...but we are bound by more than you can ever understand, and it all began with the traditions she loves *your* traditions, your Muggle vows which I took most unknowingly and unwillingly. Your world means nothing to me. Your god, less than nothing. But your daughter..." He broke off, then forced himself to continue. "*She* is my goddess."

Hermione felt the world tilt at those words and stared up at him in confusion. And then he turned his eyes to her, his black eyes that offered her the world in their depths.

"Severus..." she breathed. "I can't be that. I can't be that...that perfect."

The corner of his mouth twitched, and she recognised the smallest of smiles. "You saved me, you wretched girl, and damn near saved our world. How could you be less than a goddess?" And though his words seemed aimed at her father, his eyes never left hers. "I have vowed to love your daughter, to comfort, honour and keep her, in sickness and in health...to worship and adore her, for all the days of our lives. I hope that is enough for you, because it's the best I have to offer."

Hermione stared up at him...and burst into tears.

"Oh, fucking hell," he sighed and pressed a handkerchief into her hand as he buried his face in hair.

"I need a drink," her mum said, her voice quavering oddly.

"Well," her father muttered, clearing his throat suspiciously, "he should have said so sooner. It would have saved us all a lot of bother."

"Daddy," she said, turning back to her father, "please show Severus the wine cellar. He's very interested in your collection. But don't keep him long." She slowly pulled her hand from his. "Mum..."

"Come with me, darling," her mother sighed. "We have things to discuss."

XX

Severus followed the older man down a hallway to a narrow stairway, bracing himself for a well-timed Obliviate if any trace of the carnage remained and caught her father's attention.

He felt the recoil before he even stepped through the door and into the darkened cellar. Sir Alistair pressed a switch and the rows of wine were revealed, but Severus had to fight to breathe through the magical residue.

He scanned the floor, the wall, all the surfaces that Hermione had described and could detect not a drop of blood. The Hogwarts house-elves had done their job. But the magical signatures were overwhelming, and beneath it all he still felt *her* presence.

Bella.

He cast a quick look at Miss Granger's father. The man had not even a modicum of magical sensitivity or he'd feel it as well, but he was examining bottles.

He finally pulled one out and offered it. "I know she won't be drinking any in the foreseeable future, but as I recall, you'll be even more appreciative of a good vintage. Pregnancy..." He gave his head a wry shake. "Well, it doesn't always bring out the best in a woman."

Severus bristled but bit back his retort as he noted the pain in the depths of the man's brown eyes.

"Her mother lost two before Hermione. Please." He raised his eyes in entreaty. "Please take care of my girl."

"I am," Severus said. "And I will." He accepted the bottle. "She didn't tell me about her mother."

"She most likely never knew."

Severus's mind raced, considering the ramifications, the potential potions and treatments should the need arise. And beneath it all, he felt the itch, the ache, the urgency. "I think perhaps I'd like to have a more complete tour at a later time, but now..."

"Yes, let's go back upstairs, why don't we?"

Severus watched the cellar door close behind them and regretted his inability to cast a cleansing charm, but eventually the magical residues would fade on their own.

Again, the urgency twitched within him, and he found it difficult to maintain the easy pace Sir Alistair set as he took the stairs ahead of him. When they entered the drawing room again, Hermione and Lady Granger were sitting close together, heads bent over a book. A small pile of more books was on a side table beside them.

He had hardly entered the room when Hermione leapt to her feet, the book...alarmingly titled *Husband-Coached Childbirth*...clutched to her breast. And then she was darting across the Aubusson rug to his side, this time not content to twine fingers but instead, rubbing her palm against his to increase the connection, and he felt her soft sigh match his.

"Will you fix my hair? I never can do it without a mirror," she asked, and he could only imagine what she'd done to have half of it dangling down her back, but from the state of her eyes and cheeks, tears and most probably maternal embraces had been involved.

And of course, she wouldn't have wanted her mother handling a magical hair comb.

He sighed and refused to allow any hint of colour to flush his skin, absolutely not a single capillary to swell, as he briskly twisted her hair into a knot and tucked the hair comb into place.

"It's a beautiful comb," Lady Granger remarked. "And I've never seen your hair look so lovely."

"The comb was my mother's," he replied. "And her hair is perfectly..." He broke off short of *horrid*. "Obviously *her* mother's." He left it there, hoping it sounded like a compliment.

XX

Christmas dinner was arranged in the small dining room with her parents at either end of the table and Severus across from her. She would have preferred him beside her, but to suggest so would have been awkward.

"I feel so...so responsible," her mother sighed. "I should have insisted that you come back to London and go on the pill."

Hermione froze and saw Severus's jaw tighten. "The potion I took has a higher efficiency rating than birth control pills," she said slowly and then turned her face to her mother's. "This baby is intentional."

Her mother held her soup spoon suspended and stared at her, astonished. "But darling, you're only eighteen and you had so many goals..."

"I still have the same goals," Hermione interrupted sharply. "I'm studying and doing everything I intended. I have it from the highest authority that I'm an overachieving little minx, and now I get to prove it."

"But..."

"We have it all planned. Really."

Her mother drew back a fraction of an inch and then inclined her head in a reluctant nod. "Well. I'm sure you have."

Hermione returned to her soup, but her mother did not.

"About these potions... what are you taking now?"

This time Severus tensed visibly.

"I'm only taking an occasional potion for nausea, that's all. But if I need anything else..."

"And how safe is this potion?"

"These aren't new potions. They've been in use for a long time, and they're safer than you can begin to imagine."

"But these Squibs you told me about. Can you be sure that they weren't because of some little known side effect of one of those safe potions?"

"Mother!"

"I want you to see my doctor."

"It's not necessary. In fact, with the magical issues during childbirth, dealing with a nonmagical doctor could be a nightmare." Hermione took a deep breath. "Mum, listen, our mediwitch at school has already done the early wand-scans and..." She shot a quick smile at her father. "It's a boy."

"You already know that?" he asked, astounded, his eyes lighting up.

"It is a perfectly healthy boy."

"I'm...I'm sorry. I'm sure you will do what's best." Her mother reached for her wine glass, and Hermione was shocked to see that her hand trembled. "You don't know what it's like to have a pregnancy fail and then find that some 'safe' drug you've been taking has been recalled because it's not safe at all, and to never know for sure if that's why...if that's why..." She broke off and seemed to remember the glass in her hand. She took a deep drink from it. "I didn't take a single pill, not a single drug while I was carrying you, and I was sick as a horse. But I never regretted it."

"Mum," Hermione said softly.

Her mother grabbed her hand and they sat there in silence, broken only when the soup course was cleared.

When the platter of sole was placed before her, Hermione's throat tightened. But before she could cast an air-clearing charm, her father spoke up.

"I think we'll be skipping the fish tonight, Hammond. Oh, and hold back the sprouts, as well." Her father gave her a wry smile. "It hasn't been so long ago that I've forgotten."

The sole was whisked away and the roast took its place.

"I can't help but notice, my dear," her father said, straining for some semblance of normality as he sliced a bloody bite of beef, "that you still call your husband 'Professor.' There must be a reason."

"The reason, Sir Alistair," the Professor in question announced, "is that she is insufferable and likes to constantly remind me of the ridiculous difference between our ages."

"And he calls me Miss Granger to keep me in my place," Hermione added, gifting said Professor with her sweetest smile.

All while beneath the table her stockinged feet were snug between his.

"It's like that, is it?" her father muttered. "Well, lest you get any strange ideas about what is appropriate, you may call me Ali, Severus. All my friends and family do. Always have."

Hermione bit the inside of her lip as she noted the almost imperceptible shift in Severus's demeanour as he considered the proposition with horror.

"Except for me," she said blithely. "I call you Daddy. Professor, darling, you could call him Daddy, too, if you don't like..."

"Which is exactly the kind of strange idea I am nipping in the bud, young lady."

"Let me know how that works out for you, Sir Alistair."

Hermione met her husband's smirk with a smirk of her own, but up until the moment when, ordinarily, the men would disappear for cigars and brandy, her head spun with thoughts of pills and potions and lost siblings and lost magic, and she found it difficult to swallow anything at all.

XX

"I made this when I was five years old," she said, pointing out what appeared to be an egg infected with splotchy-ticked skin disease, only glossy.

He grunted noncommittally as she lifted it gingerly from the tree branch.

"I used my mother's nail varnish to paint it. My fine motor skills left something to be desired."

Nail varnish. On an empty eggshell. Dangling from a Christmas tree branch.

Slowly, reality dawned. The tattered oddments that clung here and there on an otherwise ordinarily decorated tree were all hers. He found himself taking the delicate egg from her fingertips. "You made this thirteen years ago. And it's not even cracked."

"My mother packs it in cotton wool. She adds these decorations herself. All the others at The Grange are done by staff, and the tree in the entrance hall by a professional team." She stroked a bedraggled pipe cleaner reindeer with one fingertip. "Of course, once I entered Hogwarts there were no more Christmas ornaments."

"Of course." He watched her re-hang the egg and thought of Malfoy Manor. If Draco had ever brought home anything as insignificant and unlovely as this egg or reindeer, it would have been Vanished within the day.

But before he could think further of it, she was pressed against him, her face upturned. "Kiss me," she whispered, her eyes haunted as they were all too often these days. "Now."

*Now?* He dipped his head and their lips joined. They could walk in any moment...her parents...they would find him kissing their precious daughter, and he would rather die than suffer the indignity, but he'd rather suffer that indignity than deny her even a kiss.

When it ended, she simply buried her face against his chest and sighed.

"As you requested," Russell's voice announced dryly from behind them, "the..." He broke off as if steeling himself and the last word dripped with disdain. *fbunds.*

Severus turned, astonished at such barely-restrained insolence from a servant, only to see a mischievous smile on the old man's lips.

And then, a sense of magic as he felt Hermione throw up a shield.

And finally, a thundering sound of paws on stone as a veritable herd of mutts skidded and slid their way around a corner and exploded into the drawing room.

Hermione squealed with delight and flung herself into the middle of them.

XX

If anyone had asked him what his Christmas experience at The Grange might entail, the last guess he would have ventured would have been the four of them...Sir Alistair, Lady Granger, Hermione and...he shuddered...*himself*, sprawled on the floor amidst a disarray of coloured paper, ribbons, open boxes and seven dogs lounging wherever they saw fit to lounge.

Hermione's insistence upon supervising the creation of three different fragrances of bath salts for her mother (lavender & verbena, milk & honey, and pure peppermint) had brought its own reward, as he caught the woman taking quick sniffs of one jar or another whenever she thought nobody was looking. The shaving soap created for Sir Alistair had been simple vetiver, and Lady Granger couldn't keep her nose out of that one, either.

Hermione managed to stay wedged between his thigh and a particularly disreputable looking beast, long and lanky with wiry grey hair and whiskers that bordered on beard. He appeared to have special affection for Miss Granger, which she returned in full, as could be attested by her constant stroking of his coat and an occasional brush of her lips upon his head.

Once the beast even licked her full across the mouth, and she only laughed.

*Laughed.*

He closed his eyes and pushed back the resentment that a dog made her laugh, when he hadn't heard that laugh in days, if not longer.

And she'd better not be expecting him to kiss those lips before she indulged in a good face wash.

It became patently obvious that the shields Hermione raised had been because of this dog. The others had all calmed immediately and wandered the room sniffing but without disrupting anything. None of the others wagged tails so fiercely that they would topple the tea set from the low table. None of the others bounced off the shield around the tree. None of the others was as obviously daft as this particular beast, so of course he would be her favourite.

"What is his name?" Severus finally asked, aware that even though she still stroked the dog, her body was pressed against his side and a slight tension was still evident.

She didn't answer.

He looked up and met her parents' gaze and realised that they were all silent and, it appeared, embarrassed.

Finally, Sir Alistair cleared his throat. "We meant no disrespect, of course. It just seemed rather..."

"Obvious," his wife concluded.

"To all of us. At the same time," Hermione added, "which never ever happens. We usually argue about names for days before Mummy wins just by being most persistent with them. They're her dogs, after all. Mostly."

"I see." Severus pinned her with a gaze. "Which explains everything but his name."

They spoke as one.

"Albus."

At which point, the dog sprang to his feet and began barking.

And Severus first choked, then sputtered...

Then exploded with laughter.

At which point, the beast covered his face with tongue.

Repeatedly.

Hermione finally wrested the mongrel under control. Before Severus could reach for his own, Sir Alistair handed him a handkerchief. "Welcome to the family, Severus."

Lady Granger raised a small bell from the low table and gave it a sharp ring. Russell appeared at the door almost instantly. "I believe the dogs have Christmas dinner waiting for them? You are dismissed for the night, Russell. Don't forget the presents for the grandchildren."

He gave a slight bow and smile. "Milady."

She gave a short whistle, immediately bringing all the dogs to full alert. A gesture, and they padded softly to the door where Russell prepared to usher them to their leftovers.

Only Albus didn't follow.

Hermione grabbed him by the ruff on either side of his neck and buried her face in his side. "Don't be an idiot," she said, and Severus had a feeling she'd used that tone on Weasley more than once. "Go on, before they get all the goose."

At that, the dog took off, leaving a flurry of tissue paper in his wake.

And Hermione turned and kissed him.

Full on the lips.

With no thought to dog.

Or her parents watching.

And then she sighed happily and he could begrudge her nothing.

The presents were alarming in their thoughtfulness. Explaining that he understood quills were more common, Sir Alistair had given him a fountain pen that felt and looked expensive, and Severus instantly wanted to see how its gold nib felt sliding across parchment.

After opening his next package, he'd barely managed to get the cashmere jumper out of the range of dog hair, all the time pondering what it was about black turtlenecks that appealed to women. He already had the one from Narcissa. He had only worn it the once, when he needed to look more like a Muggle. But as he'd raised this one from its box and held it aloft, he had caught Hermione and her mother exchanging a smug look.

After fretting for days over her birthday, he'd had little time to devote to thinking about Christmas presents, much less any opportunity to actually shop. He couldn't leave her for anything, and certainly not to wander Diagon Alley in confusion.

He'd owed an order to his tailor, and at least the results of that had been adequate, if the delight on Hermione's face and the impressed nod from her mother were any indication. Her mother had even propped her reading glasses upon her nose to examine the needlework.

And finally, there was the other gift, this gift that was hardly a gift at all. He reached into his frock coat and pulled out a long, narrow box. It had no wrapping, only the label at the end and the name of the shop in script down the side.

Without a word, he placed it in Hermione's hand.

She froze.

He finally opened it himself and withdrew the length of vine wood with its delicate spiral of carvings climbing its length. As soon as he placed it in her hand, he felt the magical surge of connection go through her and knew it was right. "Your wand had a twin," he said.

Her grip clenched over it and a choked sob escaped her lips.

Alarmed, he drew her to him.

"After what I did?" she sobbed. "I don't...I don't deserve..."

He had to stop her, had to silence her before she revealed too much. He pulled her to her feet and swept her into his arms and opened his mouth to say something...anything...to her parents.

"I think she needs to rest."

Her father nodded benignly. "We have two hours until we leave for the cathedral."

Her mother added with a strange smile, "She's pregnant. Get used to it."

With that strange benediction, he Apparated her into her bedroom where he lay her on her bed and clutched her to him as she wept, all the while feeling everything click into place...her refusal to go to Ollivander's, her insistence that wandless magic a wand was superfluous.

*After what I did, I don't deserve...*

"Stupid girl," he whispered into her ear, inhaling the scent of her hair. "You stupid, stupid girl. You saved my life. You saved both our lives, maybe all our lives...."

He would have said more, but he realised she was asleep.

*She's pregnant, he told himself. Get used to it.*

And he settled in to listen to her breathe, to feel her heartbeat connect with his, to soak in the solace of her soul... and keep watch over the slender fingers clutching the vine wood wand, as if afraid to let it go.

XX

"They're boy jeans, 501s," she had said snappishly, "and it's not as if I don't wear your clothes all the time."

"I know what 501s are," he'd snapped back. "That doesn't mean I have to fucking wear them."

But then it had got worse. Not only was he wearing her Transfigured jeans, but he wore the black cashmere turtleneck under his cloak, as well. "You'll blend better," she had insisted as she'd pulled on her own jeans and jumper, and he'd given up arguing. Although if all it took was a glance at the hollows under her pleading eyes to twinge his guilty conscience and bring him into line, he was in for a very long nine months.

Only when they'd emerged from her room and he'd seen her mother's gaze crawl down his body and the appreciative glance she'd shared with his Hermione did it finally click into place. The harriard had picked it out because she *liked the way he looked*. Which meant even Narcissa had been trying to get him into such a sweater, which meant, even Narcissa...

*Fucking hell.*

Even now, surrounded with a thousand Muggles...maybe more...all singing Merlin knew what with a procession of choirs and men in robes that would have tweaked Albus's fancy...even now his cheeks flamed at the thought, and he wanted to transfigure the jumper into something...anything...but black cashmere that made women look at him with that gleam in their eyes.

He didn't bother to hold a hymn sheet because he didn't bother to pretend to sing, but she didn't care, nestled against him and holding her own, her own voice raised with those of her parents as candles burned around them and incense wafted into the air, its fragrant smoke visible as it climbed to the vaulted ceilings high above their heads. And as she nestled against him, she rubbed her cheek against his chest and her free hand stroked his back beneath the cloak and...

*Fucking hell.*

*She* liked the fucking jumper.

He sighed and pulled her closer.

As the music soared and his eyes traversed the familiarity of the 900-year-old cathedral...enough like Hogwarts in many ways to be disconcerting...he pondered the connections. Had wizards been involved in this building, this architecture? Unlikely, or they wouldn't have a crypt that had been underwater for eight centuries, nor would they have had to drain it and restore the foundation by hiring a lowly deep-sea diver to spend years doing the work....

Had wizards taken inspiration and even knowledge from the Muggles?

The Muggles had built this and spent centuries worshipping their Muggle god here, and now, despite his best efforts at disdain, he felt a surge of emotion, of...of spirit...as he found himself surrounded by the sheer sensuality of their worship. The scent, the sound, the glow, the movement, and finally, the warmth of Miss Granger tucked under his arm and swaying gently with the music.

It was nothing short of transcendent.

And purely Muggle.

And it hit him. Hard. Between the eyes. In the gut.

*He* would know this music. *He* would know this world. *He* would know this.

The music ended and people all sat just as Severus's knees threatened to crumple. He sat down heavily, staring blindly at the Perpendicular architecture as a voice...a prayer...echoed in his ears.

The Dark Lord would know this. Did know this.

And he would have destroyed it.

And this was the blood that ran through his veins.

He found himself staring at Sir Alistair who sat so erect and yet comfortable in this place, whose blood ran deep in these stones, whose ancestors had protected them, and whose love for his wife and his daughter was a tangible thing that you could almost reach out and touch.

Severus's limbs turned to stone, his hands to ice. This wasn't his world and worse, this girl, this woman in his arms...he would break her. He would destroy her. He didn't know how to do anything else. He had no pattern, not from his Muggle stepfather and certainly not from his...

He shuddered. He couldn't even voice the word in his mind.

But he forced himself.

He forced the word, "Father," and felt the bile rise in his throat.

He had tried to make her understand, tried to force her to understand. As soon as he could bear to, as soon as he thought she was strong enough to hear it, he'd told her the entire story. Who he was. Who his father was...

*And she had stared at him, her brow wrinkled, her eyes cloudy, and finally let out a satisfied sigh and said, "Well. That explains a lot, doesn't it?"*

*She was supposed to recoil, to react in horror, and instead she seemed pleased to have a tantalising riddle solved.*

*"He did feel a connection to you, and so, is it any wonder you felt that?"*

*And then, she stiffened, and he braced himself for whatever delayed reaction she was about to have.*

*Only to have her stare at him in consternation and demand, "Does this mean we can't keep the crystal?"*

*And he found himself sending the wooden box of elfen crystal to Filius to test, furious with her because she wasn't taking this seriously enough, she didn't understand what it meant.*

*"What am I supposed to be upset about?" she asked. "Your father was Tom Riddle. He wasn't Lord Voldemort. He wasn't the Dark Lord. He wasn't half-snake. He was a half-blood named Tom Riddle." And then, with a brush of her lips across his temple and a whisper in his ear, "And he isn't you," she dismissed his fear as if he were a boy*

and she his mother, reassuring him in a way so fucking patronising he didn't know whether to snarl at her or...or weep in relief.

So he had snarled.

And she had pushed him into the flowered chair and climbed on top of him and made him forget everything but her scent, her taste, her body....

And now she was leaning across him to whisper to her mother, and now she had his ice-cold hand tugging, and now she was pulling him out of his seat and into the side aisle.

Concerned, he reached to touch her face, to ask if she was ill, only to have her shush him and pull him around a corner and...

Disillusion them both.

He felt the ice cold trickle pour down his body, watched her disappear, then felt her warm hand grab his and guide him along the aisle, around another section of seated worshipers, and finally behind the quire and to the stairs that led down to the Crypt.

He heard her soft giggle as the chain blocking the way dropped silently, and then he followed her invisible form down into the darkness until a ring of soft wand light appeared, showing their way deeper until they were swallowed up in the recesses, icy water swirling around his ankles. "Fuck," he whispered, casting a quick *Impervio*, a lot of good it would do now, though.

And finally, "*Finite incantatem!*" and she was standing before him, her smile beatific. Then she winced. "I forgot about the water. I suppose when we came magically we simply didn't feel it."

"Evidently." He glanced around at the low Norman arches, at least two centuries older than the Perpendicular architecture above them in the nave. "I suppose you wanted to return to the scene of the crime?" he asked with a twist of his lips.

"I brought you down here for your Christmas present."

"How romantic."

She scowled. "If you're going to sneer..."

"My fucking feet are wet."

"Well, are you a wizard or aren't you?" she snapped, and before he could, she dried his feet with a flick of her fingers and evidently added a warming spell to boot. "Now. Your present." She reached deep into her jeans pocket and retrieved something that flashed gold in the wandlight. She closed her fist around it and suddenly looked hesitant. "But, you don't have to.... You can just keep it with... you know... with your things, if you want to."

He took her hand in his and slowly opened her fingers.

A simple gold band...a man's wedding ring...nestled in her palm. Clearly old, clearly much worn. "It was my grandfather's," she said. "Daddy said I could have it, and I thought since...since we don't have the Ministry rings, and I have your mother's but you don't have one...although you never wear jewellery and if you don't want to, I mean, I know it might get in the way of brewing and..."

He silenced her the best way he knew how. Closing her hand with his to secure the ring safely, he kissed her, and what began softly turned into true hunger as she pressed against him, opened her lips to him, and drew him in.

Abruptly, she pulled away. "It might not fit," she began again, and before she could continue her babbling, he touched her lips with his finger and having her full attention, held out his hand.

Staring into his eyes, she slipped the ring over his fingertip and then, sliding it slowly down his finger, said, "With this Ring I thee wed." And as it passed over his first knuckle, "With my Body I thee worship." And as it slid home, "And with all my worldly Goods I thee endow."

And it fit. It fit the way she fit next to him, the way he fit inside her, like missing pieces rejoining and becoming whole.

Something hard and cold inside him broke open, and overhead, music broke forth, beautiful and glorious music with strings and horns and choirs, and down in the dark beneath he held music in his arms, more beautiful and more glorious.

In the dark, she was his light.

In the crypt of the Muggle god, she was his goddess.

In the depths of his despair, she was his hope.

## Winter's End

Chapter 62 of 92

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*A/N: I have said before that it takes a village, and in writing these final six chapters, the village has grown. I have to thank the superb GinnyW (who is always right!) for all the feedback and tough love she has given me, beginning with the very wise advice to complete **Care of Magical Creatures** before posting any more. This has given me the opportunity to get it right, to hopefully eliminate loose ends (though if you find any, they are all my fault and not that of my betas). Because of her sage wisdom, I can*



now post these final chapters close together and you, my dear readers, won't have to wait long for updates. The story is finished, and soon, it will be yours.

The sainted Annie Talbot has done much hand-holding, brainstorming, betaing and more during this process. My long-suffering real life friend, Eco, has done the same. My fabulous britpicker, lifeasanamazon, has responded to constant emails about usage questions in addition to reading these chapters as they were written and sharing her insights with me. Finally, deemichelle and machshefa both volunteered to read the final six chapters all at once for continuity, and thus had 21,000+ words dumped on them on a busy weekend with all the weight of a fangirl uprising in my LJ on their shoulders. They took this responsibility very seriously!

Finally, I must thank Dynonugget for telling me to write 2,000 words, ferporcel for giving me the advice that finally brought me to my perfect ending, and mischievous-t for making me laugh again and again and again whilst in the midst of creative hell.

And finally...Portugal Faro, my love, these chapters are for you.

So hold on, the end is nigh, and it begins here. Thank you for all your reviews and support. I don't have enough words to express how much they mean to me, and now all I can do is sit back and wait for you to read....

## 62. WINTER'S END

~\*~January~\*~

Her sleep was both deep and uneasy. Deep, almost as if drugged. Uneasy, because even in the deepest sleep, she felt a desperation, an awareness that to awaken meant awakening to nausea and misery.

Beside her, he snarled, a deep gargling sound as words tried to form but couldn't break the surface of his own sleep.

His nightmare.

Instantly, she was awake and murmuring a soft but desperate, *'Petrificus Totalus'*, catching him before the thrashing started.

She rolled from her place, snug in the crook of his arm, and eased onto his naked body, full contact, skin to skin from shoulders to legs. "Just a dream," she whispered, stroking his hair from his face. "A dream.... It's not real."

She rubbed her cheek against his, whispering, until she felt his eyes pop open and felt his surge of rage...

That gradually calmed to despair.

And she released the curse and nestled into him as his arms clutched her tight. "Just a nightmare," she murmured, as if what he suffered could ever be referred to so dismissively.

His hands rubbed against her back, tangling and sliding through her hair. "Did I..."

"No," she said quickly, her throat tightening with sick. She fought it down, fought the wave of nausea, the ever-present nausea, and felt her eyes stinging with tears.

If only he would tell her what haunted him, what memories or fears brought him such violent terrors that she had to protect herself by casting full Body-Binds and then fighting to bring him out of his ordeal as gently as possible.

If only she knew the words to help him, knew what horrors to chase away.

She swallowed thickly and took shallow breaths.

If only she could sleep, just sleep, and forget everything.

If only...

He rolled her gently sideways and she felt the flicker of his magic as he cast a calming spell over her. Sometimes it helped. *Please, let this be one of those times.*

She nuzzled into his neck, inhaling the faded scent of shaving soap, a scent that, to her despair, sent her hurtling to the toilet if it was flung into bathwater, but still brought her comfort when on his skin.

And finally, the sound of his steady breathing a benediction in the darkness, she found the depths of sleep again.

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The sense of emptiness that awakened him proved, even before he flung an arm out, that she wasn't beside him.

The bathroom door was ajar and soft light shone in a wedge across the cold stone floor.

He sprang from the bed and found her, curled on her side on the floor by the toilet, cocooned in her grandmother's faded, rose floral duvet.

"Fucking hell."

"Stating the obvious, Professor?" she responded weakly.

"You are not to use a Muffliato when you're sick!"

"It gave you fifteen more minutes of sleep." Her eyes welled with tears and left him feeling like the worst of bastards.

"Please," he said, "let me help you."

"Today is your birthday..." Her voice broke off, choked. "...and I wanted it to be perfect, and I...I can't do anything but lie here and..."

"You can't be bloody serious." He scooped her cautiously into his arms and rose, no sudden moves, then braced himself until she settled against him, lost in the folds of pink, rose and green that should bring up sick faster than getting jostled, yet she seemed immune. "Perhaps you could take one of my anti-nausea potions, if you're so wanting to please me," he sneered.

"This will be over soon. Morning sickness only lasts a few weeks," she said, as she'd said so many times before. "It's not worth the risk to your baby."

"That your mother refused to take Muggle medications may be admirable but for you to refuse time-proven potions..."

"None of which are totally without risk," she interrupted. "And this isn't your choice. It's mine."

Other than a soft growl, he didn't bother to respond. Hadn't they argued this point too many times already, with her sticking to her mother's theories rather than accepting

the relief he could give her? With a flick of a finger and a wordless command, the bath started filling and steam rising.

"You gave me a perfect birthday," she said, her voice aching with sadness and her cheek cold against the bare skin of his chest.

"Your condition is affecting your memory," he snapped. Bracing one foot on the side of the bath, he steadied her and eased her out of the quilt, then pulling her back against him, sank into the water.

"Fucking hell," she whimpered against him.

He stiffened, preparing for a hasty Evanesco.

"How did you do that... without toppling us both into the water?"

He felt his heartbeat slow. "A strong sense of balance."

"Thighs like rocks," she corrected, her voice not much more than a sigh. "So strong..."

And then she relaxed against him, into him, as the water crawled up their bodies.

*I wanted it to be perfect* she'd said.

He was thirty-eight years old, but he felt as old as Albus, ancient and twisted inside and out. Yet here he sat in a bath with a naked young woman three deep breaths from vomiting and with every reason to hate him...

Yet she didn't hate him. Instead she fended off his night terrors as if he'd never caught her with a blindly thrown arm. Her belly was beginning to swell with an infant she'd never wanted, she was joined to him irrevocably, and yet she didn't even seem to *mind*....

"Foolish girl," he said brusquely. "As if you could give me anything but a perfect birthday."

"Yes, and maybe you'll get lucky and I'll vomit on you."

"Insufferable," he growled.

He felt her lips curl against his neck, felt her smile.

He was dazed by the wonder of it.

"Read to me," she sighed.

"Read what?" he asked, distracted.

"Arithmancy..."

But of course she'd be revising, even now.... He Summoned the text and, as it hovered in front of them, read until she slept.

~\*~February~\*~

Twenty-one minutes.

She turned her face up to the bright sunlight and tried to enjoy it, when every fibre of her being simply wanted to be back in their quarters with her professor. She'd chosen a garden bench with fragrant white roses blooming out of season, thanks to the sixth-year Herbology classes, but other than being relieved that their scent was light and diffused, she paid them no mind.

Twenty-two minutes.

She didn't feel the ache yet. This was a good thing, she reminded herself. This was the point, after all. Forty-five minutes, and they could call it a success. But the very need for such exercises simply made her guilt that much more difficult to live with.

Twenty-three minutes. They'd passed the halfway point.

Footsteps sounded on the gravel, but not *his*. She would sense if he were the one approaching her. She prepared to Disillusion herself. Then she saw the longish, mussed red hair glinting in the sunlight.

"Mione!" Ron came into full sight as the path he followed emptied into the centre of the rose garden and its fairy fountain. He picked up speed as he saw her, but stopped short of grabbing her into a hug. "Erm...don't suppose Snape would like me to do what I want to do, so...erm...consider yourself hugged."

"Professor Snape," she said sternly, and then, she couldn't help it. She laughed. "And duly considered."

He stopped, clearly uneasy. "Do you mind? That I came to see you? I saw you from Gryffindor Tower and..."

The fact that she didn't mind hit her sudden and hard. "No," she said, surprised. "I don't mind at all."

He crouched on the gravel before her, grinning. "Bloody hell, you look good. Tired, but good. Better than Harry, at least. I was worried about you."

"Worried?" And privately, *I look good? After everything I've been through?*

"Nobody's seen you and Snape. We didn't know what to think. It's been since October, since the battle...."

Of course she knew they were worried. At some level she'd known and simply hadn't cared, hadn't had the energy or the emotion to care about anyone but Severus. In deference to her desires, he'd timed their outings to be when they were least likely to be observed... what few outings they'd had beyond laundry days at Spinner's End which they'd spent curled together, reading, whilst the ancient twin tub did its job. And in fact, she hadn't expected anyone to be around today, or she would never have chosen such a public spot. "It's Valentine's Day and a Hogsmeade weekend. Why are you even here?"

His cheeks flushed red. "The witch I'm interested in isn't exactly..." He swallowed and plucked a rose from near her head and twirled it between his fingers. "There's not much point."

"And you a war hero," Hermione chided. "Afraid of a witch?"

"Not afraid," he said, bristling. "Just... she's a pureblood."

The fucking Marriage Law. How had she forgot? And then it hit her. Of course he was still smitten with Lavender Brown, who was not good enough for him, no matter what he might think. If it weren't for this horrid law, time could pass and he could get over it, but now there was such a sense of desperation...

His soft smile was bitter. "People were beginning to protest but then, well, it worked out for you, didn't it?"

She had no answer, no words to express the rage that somehow what happened to her and her professor could be attributed in any way or fashion as a success of the Marriage Law. And then, the niggling of an idea took root and she gasped.

"Oi, you're looking dangerous," he said.

"I just thought...I just realised..." She looked into his blue eyes and felt a surge of purpose. "...that maybe there's a way to bring the law down."

He stared at her. "Seriously?"

She swallowed. "It's just an idea," she said. "But..."

"I'll put your ideas against the fucking Ministry's any day." He flexed his wrist as if to toss the rose aside, then belatedly, grinned and offered it to her. "Milady."

She took it and sniffed carefully, her mind racing ahead to Arithmantic equations, to new realms of research. She studied the rose more closely. Either the rose's scent was unexpectedly soothing, or she was at long last getting beyond her sensitivity to scents. She hoped fervently it was the latter. But a new trouble seized her. "What did you mean, that I look better than Harry?"

"Oh, he's pretty chipper in the day, but at night...nightmares like you wouldn't believe. He's not getting much sleep."

"Ah..." She felt a twitch of concern. "What kind? Does he tell you?"

"No, never. But he's...he's cried out a couple of times, before he remembered to cast a Silencing Charm." Ron was carefully avoiding her eyes.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What aren't you telling me?"

"They're about Snape."

Even now, Harry so resented Severus that he had nightmares about him? And they wondered why she didn't want to submit herself and her marriage to their stares and speculations?

She stifled her annoyance. They all had their own nightmares, she supposed. "If there's...if there's anything I can do, will you let me know?"

"How the bloody hell? We can't get owls to you, and you never come out that hole you live in. It's as if you're hiding..."

She glanced up to see him studying her, his brow knit in concentration.

"What?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Bloody hell," he breathed, and then the strangest, softest smile transformed his features. His eyes flickered down to her lap, and then back up to her eyes again. "Are you going to have a baby?"

Well.

She'd known it would happen, but had never once expected it to be Ron, of all people.

And then, again quite unexpectedly, she realised, she didn't mind.

It was time.

"You're the first to notice," she said, her smile matching his.

"How could anybody notice if you stay hidden away all the time?" he demanded. But then his grin spread. "Really? I'm the first?"

"Well, Severus has known from the beginning, of course, and Madam Pomfrey and my parents."

"You mean...not even Professor Dumbledore knows?"

"Not even. And Ron, he *has* seen me." She pressed her hands against her stomach. "It's not that obvious, yet. It isn't due until almost July." There, that sounded vague enough, and Ron was unlikely to ask for a specific date. She felt her cheeks warm, and not from the unaccustomed sun. The nature of her pregnancy was intensely private, and that most certainly meant she didn't want the date of conception easily deduced.

"If you don't want anybody to know yet, I won't tell, but..." Ron's eyes clouded over. "Are you hiding it? Is that why you never come to meals?"

"No!" she said. "That's not it at all! It's just that...I'm not ready for the stares. Not because of this." She put her hands over her small stomach and marvelled that he'd even noticed it. "But because... I already felt like a bloody display, ever since we married, with everybody staring and gawking all the time, and especially at meals, and now, I just want to study and... we *need* each other. It hurts to be apart, and so we must... well, get over that, or else I'll never be able to take my N.E.W.T.s." She stared blindly at the rose in her hand. "What I did when I broke my wand...being separated physically and spiritually and magically...was really horrifying," she said softly. "It takes time to heal that kind of wound."

"But you're happy."

It wasn't a question, and she smiled at him for understanding. "Beyond measure."

"Even in the dungeons?"

That was definitely a question. "Especially in the dungeons. It's..." She stopped, unable to find words that she wanted to share. They had been her refuge and her safety and now, they were the centre of everything she loved. "It's our home," she finally said. "And we do get out, just not when people are around."

"And you're studying 'round the clock."

This time she laughed. "Well, yes, pretty much." Then it hit her. "Your schedules...do you need me to..."

"With Ginny around? Are you mad? She's cracking the whip over Harry and Neville and me. She hardly leaves us time for Quidditch!"

"Well, somebody has to worry about your N.E.W.T.s!" Hermione grinned.

But Ron didn't. "Bloody hell, Hermione. You might have a Slytherin!"

She felt the small knot form in her stomach. "It could happen, yes."

He blinked, his mind visibly whirring the same way it did when studying a chessboard. "That could be bad. The baby could...well, when it..."

"He," she said.

"He?" He grinned briefly and then looked even more concerned. "If he gets sorted into Slytherin, he could have a target on his back and no friends to protect him."

She couldn't allow herself to think such thoughts, not now, when she had trouble even imagining the baby as a real baby. "I'm sure it will all work out," she said, but she heard the doubt in her own voice.

Ron's eyes brightened, not with mirth but with determination. "Well, then. I guess it's up to some of us Weasley men to find Slytherin brides and make sure somebody's got your wee one's back, isn't it?"

"That's preposterous! You can't go looking for a Slytherin just to..."

"Oh, now, did I say that was the only reason?" And this time his eyes definitely shone with mirth. "In fact, there are a few Slytherin witches who are quite easy on the eyes...."

Hermione blinked in confusion. "All right, who are you?" she demanded, leaping to her feet, her hand flung forward and fingertips splayed in threat. "And what have you done with Ron Weasley?"

"Oi, don't hex me. I can't fight a pregnant woman!" Ron backed up, holding his hands up defensively.

Hermione clutched her hands over her stomach. "That still doesn't explain you and...and a Slytherin!"

"You should have seen her, Hermione," he said, suddenly embarrassed. "You should have seen her at Godric's Hollow."

Hermione's mind raced. "Tonks?"

"Parkinson." His grin was back in place. "Luckily for the little Snape in your belly, Valentine's Day isn't over. I guess I may have to make my move, after all."

And with that, he pressed a quick kiss on her forehead and bounded off down the path, spraying gravel in his wake.

Bloody fucking hell. She was going to try to bring down the Marriage Law so that Ron could pursue Pansy Parkinson? Hermione stared after him and then suddenly realised that she wasn't alone.

She spun, feeling the presence at the same time she felt the need in her surge. "Severus? Professor?"

A shimmer dissolved, revealing him near the fountain. "Fifty-two minutes," he announced crisply. "And to my amazement, it is the most dunderheaded Weasley who worked it out."

She flung herself into his arms and pressed her face into his neck and suddenly found it easier to breathe, to exist. "He's smarter than you think," she said, soaking his warmth into her body.

She felt him nuzzling his nose into her hair and felt his heavy sigh. "Fucking hell."

She felt a cold little knot in her stomach. "He saw me and came. I couldn't send him away."

"Merlin, woman. You think that's my problem?" He rubbed his cheek against hers in the way that had become so familiar. "I'm just wondering how the House of Slytherin will survive an invasion of Weasleys."

Relief coursed through her and laughter bubbled up from deep inside her and grew even stronger when he clearly did not share her mirth.

"You realise what he didn't say, don't you? What others *will* say? That you're giving birth to a new Heir of Slytherin?"

"Well," she huffed. "I'm married to an Heir of Slytherin, so where's the surprise in that?"

And then...she gasped and grabbed her stomach. "Professor! It moved!"

He stared at her abdomen in consternation. "How can you tell?"

"I felt it! It felt all... fluttery!"

"And you're sure that's normal? Fluttery?"

"I...I think so."

"We're going to see Poppy. Can you walk?"

He was already bending as if to lift her, and she drew back just far enough to say firmly, "We don't need to see Poppy, and I can walk. We'll look it up in my books."

"You and your fucking books."

"No, not the fucking book, the baby book." She smirked. "We can look at the fucking book after."

She pranced down the gravel path with her hands pressed over her abdomen, leaving him to follow, cursing not quite under his breath.

She had a new project, and this one...this one...was important.

XX

"Professor..."

Her breath gusted softly into his ear. He rolled toward her, rousing himself enough to cast a calming spell, something he now could...and often did...perform in his sleep.

Her skin, warm and soft against his, soothed him. Her pubic hair, coarse and tingling where it rubbed against his thigh, did not.

"Miss Granger," he groaned, "you're...you're dreaming." And then he waited for her to awaken, to come back to reality, and most likely, head for the loo to be sick.

"*Professor...*"

This time, she was whispering into his other ear, raised on an elbow, her breasts pressed against him, and he fought to still his body's automatic and treacherous reaction. Skin contact...as much as possible...brought both of them comfort beyond measure. But the more carnal benefits of such skin contact had been sweet and gentle and rare in recent weeks. He reminded himself with a grinding of teeth as he held her pregnancy-ravaged body that even that was more than he deserved.

Her hand stroked down his bare chest as she arched her back. Her fingertips brushed the top of his cock and he bit back a groan.

This time when she whispered in his ear it was to ask, "Severus... are you awake?" as she dragged her fingernails lightly down the length of him. "I'm awake. Are you awake?"

She sounded... playful.

Blood, heat, need...all pulsed at her touch.

"You're not ill?" he managed to say.

She took his hand and brought it to her pubic mound, to the tight, thick curls that made a nest there, and guided his fingers deeper into the folds until his forefinger brushed against the evidence that she wasn't ill, not at all...the swollen bud of nerves that brought a gasp and a whimper to her lips as, stunned, he pressed and circled and pressed again, until she seized his hand and ground against it and...

"Is this...is this that hormonal state your books predicted?" he growled, doing his damndest to control the surge of raw need that rose within him.

"No..." She tightened her hand on him, began the slow, sensuous slide up and down the length of him until he thought if he didn't get control of the situation, it would end before it started. "This is me feeling like myself again...."

She latched onto his left earlobe and suckled.

In one swift, fluid movement he rolled her onto her back and, trembling, landed between her thighs, achingaching...

And without hesitation or further preparation, shifted his weight until his cock found its place, its hot, wet entrance to her body...

And plunged home.

## Bearing Witness

*Chapter 63 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

*Banner by Savine Snape*

With respect and gratitude to JK Rowling, as always.

### 63. BEARING WITNESS

~\*~*March*~\*~

Frantic, she shrank deeper into her oversized, over thick Weasley jumper as she paced in front of the fireplace. The little Slytherin snake's tongue quivered, and its eyes seemed to follow her, sharing her distress.

Pieces of her. Missing. Not just missing, but being seen by others, examined, *seen*.

They were memories she never wanted to see again, and she had in fact felt relief when the silvery strands slipped from her mind. But now, now she wanted them back where she could keep them hidden and safe. They were pieces of her, and they were missing, and she wanted them back.

She twisted her hands in front of her. When would he return to her? She wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed, seeking warmth, seeking safety.

*Crack!*

She heard the words, "Dobby has teacakes for Madam Snape!" almost before the sound of his Apparition. His black eye patch jauntily askew, Dobby presented a rose-spangled plate. "Winky used the recipe you gave her."

"They smell perfect," Hermione said, whisking them out of his hand to place on the carefully laid table by the bed. She knew from long years' experience that the pile consisted of a perfect dozen. She turned, feeling all too distressed but unable to control it. "Didn't you eat any?"

Dobby's ears flattened down the sides of his head and his one good eye trained on the floor.

"It's all right, Dobby. I wanted you to!"

"Madam Snape did?" Now he looked even more forlorn.

"But I told Winky--when I gave her my grandmother's recipe, I told her we only needed six and the rest were for the two of you."

Dobby shook his head slowly.

She pulled several off the top of the pile and handed them back to him. "For you and Winky, and from now, of course you get your share. She's baking them and you're

delivering them, after all!"

Clutching teacakes to his chest, Dobby began bowing deeply, over and over. "Thank you, and Winky thanks you, too!" And then he stood, alert, still staring at the floor.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Dobby took a deep breath. "Nothing is wrong. But, house-elves want to ask Missy Snape a favour. We—" He turned his one huge eye up to her, pleading. "We want you to write our stories."

"Your—your stories? I don't understand."

"Missy Snape is a writer girl, we always see that, but we didn't know you wrote stories for *Hogwarts: A History* until... well, until Professor Snape brought you back and he wasn't very tidy, and I saw them, and I told Winky, and she told the others and—"

"You saw what I wrote?" Hermione gasped, horrified.

Dobby nodded firmly. "We want our stories from the Battle of Godric's Hollow to be in *Hogwarts: A History*, too. So wizards will know. Wizards will remember that house-elves is brave and house-elves is loyal and true."

"You saw what I wrote, and you—you trust me to tell your stories?" The tight hard pain that lived somewhere on top of her abdomen, frozen and jagged, broke loose, and with it came tears. *A writer girl.*

Dobby flung the teacakes in the air and collapsed to the floor where he began banging his head against the cold stone.

"No!" she cried, awkwardly bending over her growing belly to grab him by the middle and pull him up. "Don't do that!"

"Dobby made you cry!"

"Dobby made me—you made me happy!" she insisted, falling onto her backside in a heap, bringing him with her. Startled, she released him and he scrambled to his feet.

"You is not happy."

"I'm happy, damn it," she sniffled. "Please, hand me a hanky."

He grabbed a clean one from the pile by the bed and thrust it at her, his expression alarmed.

"You—you really trust me to tell your stories?"

Dobby narrowed his eye. "Missy Snape is two-edged dagger, and some house-elves is nervous. You cares for us enough to tell our stories. We knows that. But they also knows you think caring for them means giving clothes. You'd have to promise—"

"No clothes, I promise!"

"Or socks."

"Or socks." Her mind racing, she looked up at the study schedules hanging at the foot of their bed. "I'll have to work you into my timetables... oh, dear, there's just not a lot of time between now and June, but I can do it. I need a list of everyone's names, and schedules and—" She stopped and stared. "Dobby! You're not going to eat those teacakes now that they've been on the floor!"

He picked up the last one. "Dobby can clean them like fresh." He began his bobbing again. "Thank you, Missy Snape. Thank you. You will get lists and lists; you'll be very happy!"

And with another *crack*, he was gone.

Leaving her in a pile on the floor with tea to be made, sniffing into a hanky, unsure whether it was from misery or sheer joy.

XX

He approached the doorway, his heart pounding.

He had left Albus with all their business unfinished because once he saw, he actually saw what she'd suffered, he could barely contain his reaction. She'd been so vulnerable when he left her, her features drawn, her hands twisting in her lap.

And now, with what he had to ask of her...

He braced himself for what he'd find.

And when the opening revealed itself and the interior of their quarters, he found her bent over the table, tea things shoved aside, her horrid hair bouncing with each movement as she scribbled furiously across a scroll.

"I saved you some teacakes," she said without even lifting her head. But as she scratched the last few words, she was already rising, and with a final flourish tossed the quill aside and rushed toward him, her face alight with an almost dangerous energy.

He caught her in his arms and surrendered to their connection as she first buried her face in his neck and then claimed his lips with hers. The force of it all staggered him, and he drank it in.

"The most amazing thing." She was chattering as she pulled away and waved distractedly at her timetable chart. Purple? Merlin, what had she found to squeeze into her already impossible days that required purple?

"Winky and Dobby and the others—they want me to write their stories. I've been making an outline, attempting to work out how to structure it, whether to go chronologically and mesh them all together or take each one individually, and I'm sure it will all be easier to decide once I've actually interviewed some of them, but a good journalist has an idea for the story going into it, even knowing that it may get discarded if the material presents a better—"

"Merlin's ghost, woman, slow down," he finally managed.

She blinked up at him, her cheeks flushed. Too often of late her energy had been almost frantic, and the last thing she needed was a new project, a new pressure.

Not that he could ever be the one to tell her that.

"Come," he finally said, pulling her with him onto her chintz seat. She burrowed into his arms, and it was with a sense of great relief that he slid his hands under her appalling jumper to stroke the bare skin of her back. "Hermione," he said softly, guilt eating at him, "give me your eyes...."

"No." She nuzzled closer against his neck, her breath sending shudders of comfort and desire through him. "You don't need to see more. You have enough nightmares of your own."

"But—"

"You've seen enough to know. You've seen enough to use in their trials."

And now he felt her tension, not tension of desire but of trepidation.

"I know what you're not telling me," she said. "I know what you're going to ask me to do."

Of course she did, his clever witch. Of course she did. He squeezed his eyes shut and held her closer, wishing he could deny it.

"My memories aren't enough. Albus wants me to testify in the Malfoys' trial."

Her hands clutched his shoulders and he waited for the rest.

The rest that didn't come.

He fought for words, for the request that he had to make. Was she not as clever as he'd thought or was he more despicable than she'd dreamed?

"What?" She sat up abruptly, her eyes wide and startled. "There's more?"

Remain silent, and she'd get there on her own. He wouldn't have to say it at all.

The coward's way.

"Yes, there's more," he said, his voice harsher than he'd intended, his throat tight. "We—and it is we, not just Albus—need you to—"

"No."

"—testify on Narcissa's and Lucius's behalf."

If a body warm with flesh and blood could turn to ice, hers did. He reached for her, but she jerked to her feet and backed away from him, everything about her from her eyes to her hands to her hair crackling with fury. "What is he holding over your head to make you do this?"

"Hermione, it's not Albus. It's me. I had to convince him."

And now the frantic energy snapped into rage as she picked up the teapot—her grandmother's teapot—and flung it at him.

Instinct ripped through him. He stopped its trajectory in midair, for to let it hit would be to let it shatter and he couldn't do that to her, couldn't allow her to destroy what she held in such loving reverence.

But the contents—obviously kept hot by a Warming Charm—exploded over him in all her scalding wrath.

His face, his eyelids, his neck—

He was on fire.

And Hermione, his Hermione, wheeled away from him, putting even more distance between them.

He grabbed a serviette from the table and, resorting to a charm, cooled and dampened it before pressing it to his face, then Summoned an unguent from the potions cabinet. By the time he opened his eyes to look at her again, she was pacing and only glanced up to hiss, "And tell me, Severus Snape, exactly what you saw in my memories that made you think it would be appropriate for me to testify to *free* Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy?"

"What do you think I saw?" he asked, wiping excess unguent from his skin, watching her warily.

Her hands fisted at her sides, she tossed her wretched mane and glared at him. "That he once again found a way to walk the edge so carefully, there would be an excuse for the Wizengamot to let him go?"

"Do you despise him for being a particularly skilled Slytherin?" He tossed the cloth aside.

"Well, I couldn't very well despise him on that count, could I? I'd have to despise my own husband, in that case."

"Indeed."

"I despise him for being *evil*. You were never evil," she said, her frustration evident in the way she twisted her jumper in her hands. "And now you want me to help him get away with it!"

He ripped his left sleeve up his arm and thrust his forearm at her. "I was never evil?" he demanded. "Cast aside those rose-coloured glasses you're wearing, Miss Granger, and deal with reality!"

"You were eighteen years old and you quickly realised you were wrong. You didn't dedicate your entire life to perpetuating your mistake," she said crisply, but the way she shrank into her sweater made his heart ache. Her lips twisted bitterly. "Just tell me what *you* saw."

"You know what I saw! I saw my fucking failure to protect you!"

"Not that," she said with a dismissive toss of her head. "What you saw that should make me willing to protect *them*!"

"I saw a superlative expression of cunning that traced that razor's edge with delicacy and skill. I saw a wizard who thought he'd escaped the net once before only to get dragged back in when the Dark Lord rose again. I saw a wizard who flung himself fully into the Dark Lord's work, who, as you might say, embraced the evil with a whole heart as it was the only way to protect himself and his family." He fixed his stare on her and dared her to look away. "I saw a man not so very different from me."

"You didn't—"

"Yes, I fucking did, and you know it. I did the same, and worse, and would do it again to save you. But you're asking the wrong questions. This isn't about what I saw. This is about what I need."

"You need—you need the *Malfoys*?" she asked in disbelief.

"Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban will be more dangerous than Lucius Malfoy at Malfoy Manor."

"Because..." She grew very still. "Because he's the only Death Eater who didn't make the vow to you. Because he'll owe you a life debt, which could be just as strong if not stronger, if you get him freed."

"Yes, he is the only Death Eater who didn't make the vow. Yes, I need to strengthen the loyalty he showed me when he saved your life. Because it's you who *ow**h**im* a life debt, Hermione."

She drew in a sharp gasp.

"For you to testify on his behalf is to demonstrate that you have honour, honour that he doesn't expect, and thus, honour all the more profound."

"He would dare doubt *my* honour?"

He felt hollow inside. He forced himself to raise his left forearm again. "I have the power of the Dark Lord. As long as I wield this power, I must be ruthless in its protection. And that means asking the unforgivable of you, and yet I must."

She closed the distance between them.

He watched without moving as she lifted his right hand and opened the pot of unguent and slowly smeared the greasy substance over a blister he had missed.

He watched without moving as her cold fingertips trembled on the back of his hand.

He watched without moving as a teardrop fell and formed small balls of fluid on his greased knuckle.

With a choked sob, he pulled her to him and felt her sink gratefully into his arms.

"I—I thought you'd deflect it all."

"I was—*distracted*."

She sniffed and then blew her nose on her handkerchief. "As well you should have been, considering what you were going to ask me to do." She turned her tear-stained face to him, her eyes still swimming. "I never intended to hurt you. Not like that."

"I know." He suddenly found her eyes impossible to meet. "Your reaction made it easier for me to hold my position. This," he said, gesturing at her situation in his lap, "does not. Say no, and I'll—I'll find another way. Between Albus and me, we can save them from the worst of it."

"But if I appear with you, pregnant with your child, and tell them how Lucius made Draco swear he would protect me until you came..."

"I wasn't going to ask you to do this pregnant."

"The more pregnant the better, I'd say. And the fact that he healed my wound—well, the odds are very good for the House of Malfoy, aren't they, if even I am willing to forgive them?"

"You won't bear the brunt of the testimony, because as you said, Lucius is practiced at leaving a trail of breadcrumbs that will help him find his way back out of the forest with witnesses to prove that he was never there at all. You won't be the whole of his defence, but you will be the heart of it."

Her eyes locked with his and she pulled the jumper over her head, baring her torso to him as she hadn't done other than in darkness and baths since before her wounding. She touched her breastbone, just above where her bra would be had she been wearing one. "And if my robes expose this much of my skin, the Wizengamot will get a glimpse of exactly what *healing* had to be done."

He covered that portion of her scar with his hand. "You don't have to do that."

"I owe him a life debt. My honour demands it."

"My warrior bride..." he breathed, his heart aching at the determination in her rigid body.

She pulled her jumper to her then, holding it in front of her as if no longer able to bare herself to his eyes.

"I've failed you in so many ways, not the least that even now, you don't understand how little that scar means to me."

She gave him a sad smile. "It's not about the scar. It's about—about everything. I don't recognise myself. This isn't my body anymore."

"I recognise you, you foolish woman. I recognise you, whether you're a seventeen-year-old virgin in boys' knickers or a nymph dancing around my quarters in nothing but my white shirt, and I most especially—" He leaned forward and placed a kiss on the sharp bone at the juncture of neck and shoulder and felt her arch into him with a cat's pleasure. "I most especially recognise you now."

"Then tell me the truth," she said. "The rest of the truth, that is. The truth about how you want to save Lucius because he's your friend." Her voice was even and her body still in his arms; for once, he couldn't read her inclination.

"I am... relieved. I'm relieved that I have good reason to save them, because they are my friends, just as he was relieved to have the opportunity to save you, because I am his. I'm relieved that I have important reasons to repay him the gift of your life, just as I'm relieved to have valid and important reasons to repay Albus, my friend, for saving us."

She stared at him, her eyes accusing. "You still call those men your friends, after everything they did."

"It has been a complicated life," he replied.

"Well, it's not any more," she said intensely, turning in his lap until she straddled him. She grabbed his face and held it between her hands as she glared down at him. "It's not complicated anymore. You have no more masters. You have *me*."

That place behind his heart twisted in response as—the gentle swell of her belly between them—she kissed him with a slow, deliberate kiss that wiped all thoughts of everyone else away.



# April Fool

Chapter 64 of 92

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

*banner by ferporcel*

## 64. APRIL FOOL

~\*~*April*~\*~

He levitated his wand, lit by the gentlest of Lumos spells, over them as he watched her sleep.

Now that her nausea had finally passed, her face was beginning to fill out again. Her eyelashes cast deep shadows on her cheekbones, and he longed to trace the edge of her jaw with his fingers, to stroke her hair away and expose her ear....

Her hair.

How long had it been since he'd fantasised about running his fingers through strands of silky red hair? How long since emerald eyes had caused his jaw to tighten, his hands to clench?

Instead, his fingers itched to dig into curls that snagged and tangled and captured him, and he found himself melting at the sight of eyes the colour of tea.

She glowed golden in the wand-light, glowed with warmth and with light and with all that was holy in his world. How he longed to pull the covers down to glory in the view of her body. The swelling of her stomach had done nothing to dampen his desires, though he was stricken anew with guilt when he imagined what was ahead of her.

She rolled over and gave him a sleepy smile.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"Hmmm...?" Her eyes fluttered closed; she was asleep again.

But her shoulder and breast were exposed, her nipple tight in the cold air.

*Fucking hell.*

He couldn't stop himself. He eased down the bed until his lips were level with her nipple and—with the tip of his tongue—tasted it.

Her soft sigh went straight to his cock.

He leaned closer. This time he stroked her with the flat of his tongue.

Another sigh, this time with a restless stir of her body, and he had to stifle his own groan.

With a slight gesture he raised the covers and then sent them into an accordion fold at her feet.

Even in the dim golden light, he could see the gooseflesh form on her skin.

He wanted to hear her moan.

He wanted to taste her.

He wanted to give her honey-thick, ecstasy-drenched dreams.

One more taste of her sweet nipple, this time with a gentle tug of suction...

She stretched onto her back with a low whimper.

And he slid down her body, pressing a wet kiss against the navel that was stretched tight across her abdomen, then lower, the roundness of her belly soft and tight and smooth against his rough cheek. He nuzzled it softly and was dragging further down toward the nest of curls, tight and black in the low light, when he felt it.

A thump against his nose.

He froze.

Again, this time harder.

His heart felt tight and hard, his breath trapped in his chest. For the first time, he imagined something real and living inside her. Growing, moving. A foetus with arms and legs and a head, not just an image but also an infant made of flesh and blood and bone.

*A being.*

Not "baby" as a concept, but "baby" as reality.

She moaned in her sleep, but in her belly—

A pulse of magic hit him with an almost-sting of heat.

He pulled back and forced air into his lungs.

A son.

A *Snape* son.

He fumbled for the covers, pulled them up and tucked them under her chin and, heart pounding, watched her nestle back into sleep.

XX

She woke to darkness and an empty bed and felt the clutch at her heart. Another of his nightmares? When would they end?

And where was he? They didn't usually send him out of bed. They sent him into her arms.

She sat up abruptly, suddenly afraid.

He sprawled in the chintz chair, facing a cold fireplace.

With a bottle of Firewhisky dangling from one hand.

"Professor?"

She didn't take time to grab her robe, but ran shivering across the cold floor to send the fire blazing with a wave of her hand. She dropped down on her knees in front of him. His face was all harsh angles of shadow and he reeked of alcohol. "Professor," she repeated and sought his eyes with hers. "Please... tell me how to help you. Tell me what they're about so I can—"

"It's not a fucking nightmare," he snarled, staring past her into the flames.

She stopped her hand halfway to his cheek as he took a long draw of whisky straight from the bottle. He glared at her stomach. "How long has the little beast been battering you from within?"

She placed a hand on her abdomen. "You felt it?"

He jerked his gaze away from her and into the fire again, took a draw of whisky again.

"I told you it's moving now," she said, confused and careful.

"You said... *fluttering*." It was more sneered than spoken.

"It started out that way..." She watched the bottle dangle precariously from his fingers and finally reached for it. "I'm going to take this now." Miraculously, he allowed her to. She re-corked it and put it out of his reach.

"You also didn't tell me he was manifesting magic," he snapped.

She puzzled that out. "Is that what it is? Sometimes I feel something stronger than usual, but it's all mixed up with what I feel for you, and—are you sure?"

"I recognise magic when I feel it." He reached for the bottle that was no longer there, and she shifted so that he wouldn't see it behind her. His hand fell back to his side.

"You didn't tell me he was sentient, that he was *aware*."

"Severus, I don't know what you're talking about." A shiver rippled through her body and her teeth started chattering, but it was from fear as much as the cold.

He rose to his feet, his movement as fluid as if he weren't already half-inebriated. He snatched the floral cover from the bed and wrapped it around her, his movements more sharp than affectionate, and she felt and saw him drawing further into himself, into whatever rage and terror consumed him.

"Severus," she said, and this time she did reach for his face, ran her fingers through his hair in as soothing a fashion as possible. "Professor."

His eyes were flat and black as he drew away from her. "Yourson," he said, his voice sheer sinister sibilance, "senses me... and he despises me."

It escaped before she could stop it, though even as it happened she knew it shouldn't, knew she shouldn't. Laughter. Incredulous laughter. "You're jesting. You're—you're drunk!"

He hissed his anger, drawing back and decidedly not jesting and, she belatedly noticed, not truly drunk.

"You can't be serious," she insisted. "Its internal organs aren't even fully formed. It's just—"

"A little beast that will emerge fit for nothing but pissing, shitting and squalling, yes, I realise that—"

"Of course that's all it will be fit for! I can't imagine that babies do much more."

"He despises me and did his feeble best to push me away from you. You, my dear wife," he said, the power of his voice overriding her protests, "must realise the nature of Snape fathers and sons."

"Not so feeble," she said, and turned away, overwhelmed with helplessness and vexation and—and even a little fear. "Evidently not so feeble at all. You left me alone in our bed, did you not?" With a toss of her head she whisked into the bathroom before he could say more, before he could stop her. She cast a quick Silencing Charm so he wouldn't hear her tears of frustration as she sank against the wall.

And her sense of helplessness grew as he followed her into the dark room. The candles sparked into light. She tried to rub her tears away, but he grabbed her before she could move her hands, and helplessly she let the charm fall.

"Don't do this," he said urgently. "Don't hide from me. Not your sickness and not your pain."

"Your emotions are overwhelming me until I don't know where yours end and mine begin," she snapped back. "I need privacy to deal with it all. Can't you at least give me that?"

His expression was stricken. "I don't want you alone with your emotions. Not when I know what it leads to, the kind of despair and—and—"

"And idiocy, like deciding your baby, who isn't even fully formed yet, despises you?" But her words were gentle as she allowed him to draw her close.

He turned his forearm so that the Dark Mark was visible. "Or worse," he said. "There are worse idiocies that spring from being alone with despair."

*Oh, Professor.*

Her frustration and impatience finally lost out to her anguish as she felt herself weeping within.

"Then neither of us must be alone with our dark emotions," she said, knowing that she must find a better place to hide to lick her wounds when the situation called for it, as it surely must. But she stroked his hair and nestled her cheek against his neck. "Neither of us, and you must promise me that."

And while he didn't promise, he did lift her in his arms and carry her back to their bed, their wonderful bed. When he released her into the pillows and slid his arms from beneath her, she grabbed his hand and refused to allow him to pull away. "I feel so much for you... *of you*," she said. "And you expect me to feel a tiny infant's magic?" She pulled his hand to her left breast and held it there. "Feel that?" She watched him stare down at his hand, at her smaller one holding it against her flesh. His fingertips stroked lightly and she caught her breath. "You expect me to know how much of my glow could be from something else, when we share our very souls?"

Again, he started to pull away.

Again, she held him and refused to let him go. "You want to know what I'm feeling? You want to know what your baby is doing to me?" She slid his hand lower down her body, and when it touched the top of her swollen belly he tried to jerk it away. "No," she ordered, "this is me. This is my skin, my body, and—" She sighed. "—it *itches*."

"Itches?" he repeated dumbly.

"Itches! Don't you feel how tight it's stretched?"

He placed his hand on her belly again. She braced herself, waiting for the pushing, the kicking, and the sense that the little creature was pushing at her in all directions at once, and braced herself for Severus's reaction.

"*Accio Stellaria*." He caught the pot of unguent as it sailed toward him, and opened it with one deft hand. He dipped it with his fingers and sniffed, then satisfied, dropped a finger-scoop of the cream onto her stomach.

"Severus!" she shrieked, as the cold mess hit her with a splat.

He was smirking. The—the beast was smirking.

She started to roll away from him, but this time he held *her* still, and when his fingers began their slow circling of her belly, she simply sank back with a sigh of relief. He hummed a soft chant under his breath and everywhere he touched, she felt blissful relief.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked between chants. "About the kicking, and the itching, and—what else aren't you telling me?"

"Not very much. Just the least bit of indigestion," she admitted, gasping as his fingers soothed away the irritation.

"And you didn't tell me, why?" More circling, gentle and ever widening as he worked his way around and around her belly, his movements languid, lazy.

"Because... because it's not really your fault, and you feel guilty enough already," she sighed. She almost moaned as his hand slid under her to her back, and his strong fingers found the ache there. "No more guilt," she managed to say.

"This means you—"

"It's still your baby," she said in a rush, hiding her smile. "Your responsibility."

"Of course." He eased her onto her side and now it was her entire back that felt the benefit of knuckles and palms and thumbs gliding, pressing, probing.

And the baby remained blessedly still.

And she suddenly knew.

"Severus," she said, and rolled to face him. "He wasn't pushing you away."

He stilled, wary, and she felt him bracing to pull away.

She stroked the bridge of his nose. "He was bored. He was trying to get you to—"

"Bored? Are you mad?"

"What? He can despise you, but he can't be bored?" She gave him her most Snapish glare. "He wanted you to talk to him, to read to him. He's always calm when you read. You woke up. He felt you. He was demanding—yes, demanding, because he is *your* son, heaven help me—that you play with him. That you read to him. That you do something to relieve his boredom because at this time of night he's always trying to get *me* to move around. He just decided to work on you for a change."

"Insane."

"Severus..." She took his hand and sucked the tip of his finger into her mouth. She gave it a voluptuous nibble. And she kissed him, and there was no more talking, and no more thinking, and if the baby moved, she didn't know, because how could she tell, when she was in her professor's arms?

Later as she lay in his arms with his heart beating against her ear, she pressed a kiss onto his warm skin and said, "Today I would like to go see Mrs Weasley...."

He didn't answer.

He was asleep.

XX

The last time he'd been so aware of a woman's pregnant body, she had worn a full robe of diaphanous layers of coppery gauze and linen that floated on the breeze around her and occasionally whipped against her to reveal the full swell of her abdomen.

He had never touched her. He had only watched from afar as she'd laughed and walked down Diagon Alley, hand in hand with his enemy.

And here he stood, almost two decades later, with a pregnant witch beside him in a tight knit shirt that hid nothing, not even the nip of a navel that still remained, despite her body's best efforts to stretch it tight. He fretted that her low-rise jeans would slip right down her arse and to the ground, despite her assurances that they couldn't and was relieved that his green robes, still transformed to fit her, draped from her shoulders and provided at least a modicum of coverage.

But as for touching her—standing there outside the Hogwarts gate, she curled herself against his body and sighed with such trust and contentment, he closed his arms around her and forgot for a moment why they were there.

Would that he could.

They arrived at the Apparation Point near the Burrow with a loud *crack* but no stumble, as he gripped her tightly to secure her landing.

"I won't break," she said, straightening and smoothing herself.

But he noticed that she allowed him to take her arm as they walked down the path and into the Weasleys' garden.

A Weasley he didn't recognise stood at the far end of the wall, his thin shoulders dwarfed by a Weasley jumper, red hair limp and hanging down his back.

Hermione slowed to a stop beside him and caught her breath. "George?" she called quietly. And then, "George!"

Severus schooled himself to no reaction at all, despite his sharp twinge of dismay. George Weasley seemed to be wasting away. One glance in those hollowed eyes, and he felt himself hurtling backward, backward into a nightmare, *the* nightmare—

And the spinning image of Fred Weasley flying toward the earth in a spiral of beautiful grace.

*Sickening, horrific grace.*

And him doing nothing.

Nothing.

He jerked himself back from the chasm in alarm.

It had never seized him in waking hours before.

It was getting worse.

And then he saw Hermione, face streaked with tears, in George Weasley's arms.

And George Weasley's own face ravaged with grief, holding her as she wept.

And before he could react, she was pulling away, reaching for him, *for him*. Pulling him toward the grieving twin, the one who had every reason to despise him, but who was looking at him with exhausted resignation, nothing more.

And then—turned back to Miss Granger, his eyes fixed on her stomach.

A little slow there, this Weasley? Or perhaps justifiably distracted.

"I think this is where I'm supposed to make some poncey comment about life going on?" George asked with the smallest of smiles. "Kind of nice, I guess, since it seems I lost my twin Fool."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "April the first, your birthday."

"Ah, so you weren't invited? Lucky you. The rest of them are inside pretending to be happy for my sake."

And then, he reached forward and touched her stomach.

Severus felt his hands fist, his jaw clench, and his heart turn cold—

Hermione stared—shocked—as Weasley dropped, stunned, to one knee, his hand still pressed against the side of her abdomen. Her eyes fluttered closed and then Weasley was pressing his face to it, his cheek against his Miss Granger's belly, against his son—

He felt Miss Granger grab his fist, clutch it, then a surge of...*something*.

And after a long, intense moment...

George fell back onto his heels, his breathing ragged.

"I hope—" Severus bit out, "—that you don't repeat that performance. If you think I will stand here and allow you to paw my wife and unborn child, you are simply proving my opinion that there wasn't a day since you were put on this earth that you haven't had enough fool in you for two; you clearly don't need your brother to spur you to greater heights of foolishness."

Weasley froze, his face pale, and then, to Severus's dismay, burst into laughter. He hoisted himself to his feet and cocked his head at the Burrow's front door. "Come along, then. Let them see what you've done to our Hermione."

At which point Severus would gladly have turned the other direction, but Hermione tugged him forward and he gritted his teeth to follow.

George flung the door open with a bang and, over his shoulder, Severus saw everyone turn in apprehension.

"Look who I found skulking around the premises," he announced, dragging the two of them inside after him. "Seems nobody sent them the owl. They didn't know there was a birthday party today—"

"Oh! Oh, my!" Molly gasped, clearly embarrassed.

"And that you're not supposed to cry around poor George," he continued, "and that you're not supposed to threaten him with *Crucio* just for groping your wife in public. I'd say somebody has been falling down on the job. *But*—" He shrugged. "I guess if people are going to treat me like things are normal again, it's fucking time to make things normal again. Mum, where's the cake?"

And then, as the most casual afterthought, "Oh, and you might have noticed, the greasy git got our Hermione up the duff, but don't worry, I'm pretty sure it's Fred in there."

As the room exploded with relieved gasps of shock and delight, and people converged on him and Hermione with dangerous intent to hug and congratulate—

Severus knew with a lurch that, by the way George Weasley was eyeing Miss Granger's belly, he wasn't joking.

XX

"You must call me Molly, now, dear. It's a rite of passage but you'll get used to it." Molly gave her wand a snappy swish and an old box of books slid out from under her bed.

The top book had a young witch with a baby at her breast, one small hand clutching and grasping at the mother's open robe as the tiny mouth suckled. "I haven't had these out in years, not since I caught Fred and—" She swallowed and forced herself to continue. "—and George sneaking looks at the pictures."

Hermione studied the cover without touching it. Breastfeeding? Surely that was a decision that didn't have to be made immediately!

Molly patted the spot beside her on the bed. "Have a seat," she said. "You must have a million questions."

"I wanted the books just to get started. I think—I think maybe soon I'll go to Diagon Alley to find the latest...."

"But you don't want to draw a lot of attention?"

"No."

"Well, then, let me work on that for you. If you'd like, if you trust my judgement, I could go for you?"

"Thank you," Hermione responded, relieved.

Molly looked at her with concern. "What else is it, dear? You surely had more reason than this to come today."

"Sometimes..." Now that she was here, it felt like a betrayal. She sought words and couldn't find them and finally whispered, "Sometimes it's so hard."

Molly's face crinkled into a sympathetic smile. "Of course it is, but isn't it worth it?"

And she looked into Molly's glowing eyes and saw so much more that had been hard for her, so much more than she, Hermione, could imagine. And yet she saw joy there, joy that despite it all, yes, it was *worth* it. A small fissure cracked inside her and she felt the stress oozing away as Molly pulled her into the comfort of her arms.

"Arthur can be a pain the arse, you know," Molly said comfortably. "And he has the nerve to claim that I can be, as well, can you imagine that?"

"Oh," Hermione said, horrified. "I didn't mean—I'm not complaining about the prof—about Severus! He's so very much worth it," Hermione said, "that it overwhelms me." The words escaped before she could stop them and she felt a little embarrassed, like a gushing schoolgirl rather than a wife.

Molly handed her a hanky. "You're very beautiful together, you know."

Hermione met her eyes, startled.

"I can see how weary the both of you are, and it worries me, and yet—you walked through the door together and you simply looked so right. It's almost painful to imagine the two of you not finding one another.... And then, what you did for George."

"But we didn't do anything," Hermione said.

"Other than to be exactly what he needed. What we all needed. Do you hear the laughter?"

Hermione couldn't help but hear the swells that rose and fell from the rooms downstairs, and in the middle of it, occasionally, George's voice. The clown, the fool, the son, the brother, the friend, easing into his rightful place in the middle of laughter.

"But you aren't laughing, Hermione, and neither is Severus. You smile and you allow us to touch you, but you're still healing and it's rather staggering to imagine that it's taking you longer than it even took George. But it's coming for you, I can feel it coming." And then Molly placed her hand on Hermione's stomach.

Of course she'd think a baby would make everything all better.

"I'm surprised," Molly continued. "I'm surprised you're having a baby so soon, that you made this choice."

Hermione stiffened.

"Because it was a choice, wasn't it? You know that even if something like this had happened unplanned, you know you had choices, and yet here you are."

Hermione shot her a startled look.

"What? You think because I chose children I don't allow others not to?" Molly squeezed her hand. "I'm just saying, I don't think you'll regret this choice, either, even though it will sometimes be hard."

Hermione squeezed her hand gratefully. One startling thing about talking to Mrs Weasley. It didn't take many words for her to understand, and she had no shortage of words herself when it came time to respond.

Hermione looked longingly out the window toward the Apparation Point.

"And Severus didn't tell you he was leaving, or where he was going?" Molly asked.

Hermione shook her head, trying to damp down her unease.

"Men!"

Hermione sighed. "Indeed."

Molly took one of her hands and lifted it. "Look at those calluses. What have you been doing?"

"Potions," Hermione responded promptly. "Between the chopping and some of the ingredients—and I have a special Arithmancy project I'm doing that takes even more time and—" She looked at the fingertips of her right hand, stained with ink and as Molly had pointed out, nails ragged and skin beginning to thicken.

"How many hours a day do you spend chopping?" Molly demanded. "What kind of schedule does he have you on?"

"My own schedule," Hermione responded crisply, pulling her hand away. "But that's not the problem, M... Molly. I'm handling my schedule quite well. I just don't know what I'm going to do during N.E.W.T.s when—" She broke off, feeling the heat in her cheeks.

"What is it, dear?"

Finally Hermione blurted out the question that had been on her mind from the beginning and blurted, "What do I do about my bladder?"

Molly threw up her hands and laughed.

XX

Harry was watching her from across the room. And yet, each time she started to move towards him, he glanced away or spoke to someone else, leaving her feeling

disjointed and uneasy and hurt. Well, she didn't have the energy to deal with Harry bloody Potter's moods. He was surrounded by people who loved him and, she supposed if she were fair she must admit, he certainly had his own reasons to need healing. Rarely was Ginny not tucked under his arm, and if Ginny Weasley and her fierce affection couldn't ease him through this, nobody could.

Why the hell had he left? She stared out the window, relieved that nobody was trying to pull her into conversation or pressing cake upon her. She needed *him*; she needed *home*. And she needed it now.

And then her attention was drawn to a startlingly familiar sound outside the window.

A dog barking.

She looked out the window and saw, not only the tall figure in black starting into the garden but—

"Albus!" she cried and, without thought or consideration, opened the window with a wave of her hand and hoisted her leg over and out.

"Bloody hell!" she heard Ron say. "She's going to—"

"Oh, hush, Ron," Molly responded. "She's pregnant, not handicapped. Gracious, I haven't been able to get that window open in years—"

And then she heard no more, because she was on her knees, her arms full of wiggling, licking dog.

Laughing.

XX

The late sun struck her like liquid gold, glinting off her hair, finding bronze threads in the pine-green silken robes, touching her cheek with the softest of glows. He'd never seen her as alive as she was with her arms around the wretched dog, laughing.

She'd come through the window like a hoyden and covered the distance between them as if she wasn't heavy with child, but now she held out her hand to him and begged, "Help me up!"

He grasped firmly and with a slow, strong tug, pulled her back to her feet—

—where she immediately flung herself against him and gasped, "How do you always, always know how to make me so happy?"

"I don't," he answered helplessly. "I don't know. I just... try."

She kissed him. Kissed him as if half the world wasn't watching from the doorway and the windows and probably from under the fucking rocks. And he let her, and even kissed her back, and behind his closed eyelids the world was silver.

The dog barked jubilantly, bouncing around them until she broke away, laughing that crystal clear laugh that danced over him and left him tingling with the rare joy of it.

"Before we return to Hogwarts," he said, his hand clenching tensely in her robe, "I thought you might want to visit Diagon Alley."

She froze in his arms. "Why?"

"We don't have to," he said stiffly. "I just thought you—"

"What about Albus?"

He watched her eyes dart away from him, saw her nervousness, felt her hand slide between them to cover her stomach.

"The beast will behave himself or he'll be returned to the Grange," he said, glaring the dog into a submissive whine.

"People will stare," she whispered.

He remained silent.

She raised her chin and she had a disturbing glint in her eye. "All right. We'll go. But only if we go to Flourish and Botts." She tossed her hair. "And if anyone tries to take our picture—"

"Hex them."

"Let them."

"What?"

She gave one of her frustrating half-shrugs. "I want people to see that we're happy, that's all."

Something was not right here, and it was almost enough to make him withdraw his suggestion.

But then she took his hand and leaned into him, and the gangly dog loped ahead of them towards the edge of the Weasley property and the Apparation Point.

XX

People stared, but between Albus's large form escorting them and Severus's glare, they kept a respectable distance. She'd returned with more fucking books about pregnancy and childbirth, and even a few advanced Arithmantic texts that made his eyes cross when he glanced at their pages.

They walked hand in hand.

XX

She pulled his arm across her stomach and locked her fingers through his. "I was afraid," she whispered.

"Of people staring?"

Her head's hard shake threw a cloud of horrid hair into his face. "Of... of seeing Ginny and the others, and hearing them talk about classes and—" She stopped, and then plunged ahead. "—and seeing how thin she was, knowing she's planning a gown for the graduation ball and—and I was afraid of *caring*. Of *wishing*. Of—"

*Regretting*. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, forced himself to breathe steady and slow and not reveal the fear she sent trembling through him with this confession.

"And instead, I was just bored. I wondered how they could still be caught up in such things, and I turned to tell you and you were gone."

"Not for long." He'd seen her surrounded by friends, her friends, people who had barely tolerated him, and she'd seemed content. She'd been the centre of their attention....

"I was so lonely."

He pulled her closer, pulled the covers up higher and when she tucked her face into the hollow of his shoulder, he felt dampness on her cheeks. "I wasn't gone long," he said, even as he felt a jagged relief that he wasn't the only one, the weak one who felt that ache of *missing her* when he'd left.

"Do you think we'll ever get comfortable?" Her voice was soft in the black night of the dungeon. "Like old shoes, like the Weasleys, like my parents? Do you think we'll get so used to one another we don't even feel it any more, it's just... habit? Because I don't think I could stand it, not feeling my heart race when you're gone and then soar when you return, and not having the world brighter and more vibrant just because we're together. What if we grow comfortable? What if we forget?"

"Maybe..." he said, running his hand down the curve of her spine, marvelling as always at the miracle that was his Hermione. "Maybe you misjudge what they feel."

And then, before she could speak again, the dog on the floor beside them whined in his sleep and—from the scent of things—farted.

"Oh, Albus," she moaned.

"I've got it," he muttered and followed up with an air-cleansing spell.

Between the soft snoring sounds of dog, the occasional hiss of cat, and the warm breath and the horrid hair tickling his shoulder, it was a long time before he slept.

## Rest, Unrest and Revolution

*Chapter 65 of 92*

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

□

*banner by crazywriterchic*

### 65. REST, UNREST AND REVOLUTION

~\*~*May*~\*~

The dungeon bedchamber was pitch black; he couldn't see the definition of bedpost or wall unless he lit his wand.

But that made no difference.

He could hear her.

Her soft, even breathing revealed that she slept.

Slept, while he wanted to do nothing but lie in blackness and listen to her breathing.

And feel her.

The warmth and weight of her, pressed against him. Her heartbeat. Even her horrid hair against his chin.

Insufferable girl.

He didn't seem capable of sleeping unless he was pressed against her in some way, if he slept at all.

There was a time when he'd been kept awake by the listening, the feeling, the yearning, the seeking for her even when he knew he mustn't touch, mustn't grow accustomed or worse, dependent upon her.

And then there was a time when she was cool and still in his arms, in a state not quite living nor dead, and his every waking moment had been filled with desperation and ache and need.

Now, he was awake watching over her as she throbbed with life. He lay there, alert to the small whimpers and deep breaths that signalled muscle aches and back spasms, which he could often ease for her with a stroke of his hand and a murmured chant.

During her waking hours she didn't allow herself any rest, not even when she was clearly desperate for it. She studied; she wrote; she figured; she interviewed. She lived by her schedules and her charts, and he watched her driving herself into the ground...

And could do nothing.

Nothing but assure himself that she at the very least slept.

When she'd first thrown herself at him, demanding that he marry her, her reason had been her education, an education that had slid further and further into the background as circumstances had erupted around them.

He felt the alarming distension of her stomach move beneath his hand and felt the roil of guilt...guilt he didn't deserve, he reminded himself fiercely, but guilt all the same...that even now it was a circumstance of his making that had altered her future so irrecoverably and threatened her immediate goals...her N.E.W.T.s. He'd never considered the discomfort, the constant awareness of this "other" that a pregnant witch must deal with.

And worse.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the memory of Molly Weasley and Poppy Pomfrey bustling around Hermione, making plans for her confinement, all full of good cheer and affection and optimism...

And her eyes, large and beseeching and filled with terror.

His Miss Granger. His warrior of a wife. Terrified.

She quickly hid it, quickly turned her expression placid, but that moment when their gazes connected and he'd felt that pulse of terror had almost been his undoing. And now he smoothed his hand gently over the immense swell of stomach and wondered in horror how this new being, this son that she oh so rightfully insisted was his, could possibly escape without destroying her.

And so he listened to her soft sleep noises and shielded her from pain with charms and remembered when the soft sounds she'd made had been of a different type all together.

But eventually he felt her waking up...and knew why...before she was even aware of it herself. There were some things he couldn't relieve her of, after all.

She shifted beside him, started to moan and then caught herself and stifled it. He wanted to help her sit up, but she clung to the illusion that she could go to the toilet and back without waking him, and he'd learned to leave her to it.

She eased herself from the bed, gave herself a moment, taking a few deep breaths before beginning her lumbering walk across the floor, grabbing the door to steady herself. Only when she was in the bathroom did he swiftly rise and hover outside the door, ready....

But it wasn't long before he heard the flush, and slid back between the covers before she slowly made her way back and took her place beside him.

She laboriously shifted, inched, slowly and cautiously, until she was back in the curl of his embrace once more. She took his hand and pulled it until his arm circled her stomach. She nestled her cheek against his arm and sighed....

Merlin, the scent of her.

He closed his eyes, even though it wasn't necessary in this pitch-black room, and inhaled.

He smelled the faint echo of eucalyptus and spearmint.

He smelled his taste potion on her breath, with each sweet exhalation.

And found himself easing closer, closer, drawing in deeper breaths.

Now, he inhaled deeply.

And wanted to taste it in her mouth.

To slip his tongue between her lips and... taste.

She needed her sleep.

But the longing, oh Merlin, the longing.

A shiver trembled through him.

And then, as if sensing his need...

She whispered into the blackness, "I woke you up." She reached up with her hand and stroked the raspiness of his cheek.

He buried his face in the horrid, tangled mass of frizz that passed for her hair and kissed it.

"You didn't." He matched her whisper with one of his own, and it seemed as if they were the only waking people in the world.

"I'm sorry." She sighed wistfully.

Her wakefulness was palpable in this black night where every instinct he'd honed seemed ridiculously yet determinedly fixed on getting her rest.

Of course, there had been a time when he knew how to relax her, to help her sleep....

"Relax," he murmured as he stroked her belly with enough pressure not to tickle, but lightly enough not to stir the baby within. He made slow circles with his palm, and she shifted more comfortably into his arms.

"Lovely," she sighed.

The sixth, or maybe the eighth time...when had he grown so careless with his potions, he wondered idly...his hand swept low enough to feel the brush of coarse pubic hair dusting across his knuckles, he paused, then slid his palm lower, turning it until his fingers cupped the precious mound, cupped and pressed, waiting for the slight arch of back, the moan....

She stiffened in his arms and her legs clamped tight around his fingers. "We can't," she said mournfully.

"You can," he said, sliding one finger deeper into her folds, seeking... seeking and finding, as her head fell back against him and lolled sideways as her breath caught in a hitched gasp.

Gently, he stirred, so gently, until he felt her begin to strain against him, her thighs parting, as she reached for more.

He bent his head to her neck and closed his teeth on the tender skin there, heedless of her hair that tangled with his tongue, even as his fingers probed and slid and circled the slick flesh, the distended clitoris, teasing her until her body thrummed with tension and her soft whimpers and sobs raced down his spine.

He bit harder.

He pinched.

He found that spot, that sweet spot that brought the cry from her lips and the clutching spasms to her core, and he relished in her exquisite release, her exquisite, beautiful,



triumphant release....

And the slow sliding into languor as her body relaxed against him. "I should..." she began, reaching for his rigid cock.

"No," he said, catching her hand and pulling it back to where he could keep it captured against her stomach. "Sleep."

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "How... how do you always know exactly what to do?" she asked, her voice raspy with drowsiness.

"I don't," he said, as he'd told her so many times before. "I just..." He stopped short of the word try. Because in the blackness of the night, a flash of brilliant clarity brought other words to his lips, before he could stop them, before he could consider them. "I have to prove...I have to be..." he choked. And again, he wanted to stop the words, but they came anyway. "I am not my father." And again, the blinding clarity and pain. "*Either* of them..."

And then she rolled in his arms, rolled toward him, and her warm palms were on his cold cheeks as she pulled his face down until she could capture her lips with his, and he tasted potion and more, that essence that was his Hermione, his Miss Granger, his heart and his soul, and when she finally pulled away she breathed, "You are my beloved, you insufferable man. My darling boy and my dearly beloved and you don't have to prove anything."

And then, leaving him no opportunity to retort or respond, she was asleep. Profoundly and deeply asleep in his arms in a position that was guaranteed to leave him with a useless arm, and Merlin help them both if danger erupted and he needed to respond quickly, with this ridiculous piece of baggage pinning him to the bed, and he wondered why her hair was wet, why his cheeks were wet, why he found it suddenly both more difficult to swallow and easier to breathe....

And finally, he slept with her.

XX

Sleep was a deep and beckoning bliss, and even the strength of his arms around her wasn't enough to make her want to leave it. "No..." she sighed. Only to feel herself dragged across the bed, to feel his arms tense and shift as he prepared to lift her. "I said no...."

"I'm taking you to Poppy."

"Poppy knows," she protested. "For God's sake, first you obsess about me not getting enough sleep, and now you're dragging me out of bed? I want to sleep."

"Something is wrong," he snapped. "You've slept half the day away for almost a week. This is not normal, not for you."

"It's normal for eight-month-pregnant me! Severus Snape, if you don't put me down," she gasped as he lifted her from the bed, "I'll hex you. You can't take me to Poppy. You'll...you'll look like a fool!"

He stopped, his gaze turning to black ice.

Belatedly, she reached up and stroked his cheek. "You're not a fool, but you'll look like one. You'll be one of those husbands that witches smirk about, the reason why Molly and Madam Pomfrey don't think I should have you with me when the baby comes, and I have to have you with me...I have to! Please, Severus. Please. Everything about me is perfectly normal. My blood pressure is normal. My *everything* is boringly normal. Right down to the backaches and swollen feet and ankles," she sighed. "And a desperate need for sleep."

"Your N.E.W.T.s..."

"Are three weeks away. I have plenty of time. But once I completed my Arithmancy project, I just needed to..." She yawned and curled more snugly into his arms.

"Sleep," he sighed. "Are you certain? You've been so driven..."

"To complete my projects while we're still here. To interview the house-elves before someone makes us leave, and to complete my Arithmancy project before anyone else is forced to..." She broke off, not wanting to complete that statement, to reveal her desperate quest.

He lowered her gently back to the bed, and she felt the relief mixed with regret as she felt him pulling away. She clutched his arm and held him close.

"I thought you were studying for your N.E.W.T.s, for your scores," he said with a scowl.

"I did, and I will again. But it wasn't the most important thing."

His scowl smoothed into that blank expression he used when he was trying to hide his emotions from her. "You gave up on that, too? First, you leave school, and now you write off your N.E.W.T.s. How much more do you plan to sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice? I'll have no problems passing them all and even now, the only person who might have higher scores is Malfoy." She grimaced, despite herself. "But I just can't be bothered to obsess over it, not when these other things were so much more important. That's hardly a sacrifice."

"But..."

"Obsessing over marks is something a child would do, the girl I used to be. I hope you don't mind... I don't mean to let you down..." She pressed her lips against the palm of his hand. "I grew up, Severus," she said. "I grew up, and now I want to sleep." She smiled up at him. "And when I wake up, could we take a very slow ramble around the lake? That is, if you're not horrified to be seen with a lumbering hippopotamus at your side."

He fell down beside her on the bed with a soft snarl. "Ashamed? Are you mad?"

She shrugged as best she could and stared down at her huge belly. None of the other Hogwarts brides had got pregnant yet. She felt the anger's slow burn start. "The Ministry would like us to be the shining example for their Marriage Law, but I'm pretty certain the other students are horrified and look at what's happening to me as a cautionary tale. Of the two, I'd much rather be the caution but... I don't imagine I'll ever fit into my old clothes again."

"Are you a witch or aren't you? Any of them can be charmed to fit you."

She glared at him. How could he be so obtuse?

But his eyes warmed with dark heat, and she felt her breath catch in her throat. He stroked her hair from her face and trailed her fingertips from her shoulder to her bare breast, where they caressed her until she felt her skin flush. "Did you expect to wear the same clothes you wore when you were seventeen forever? I can assure you, I could never fit into mine again, thank Merlin, and I've never given birth. As for being a hippopotamus... no beast has ever looked as lush and ripe as you do now, and this is the way you taunt and tease me. Insufferable, as always."

She blinked back tears. "You're an excellent liar."

"Indeed. Now sleep."

And she did.

XX

They were on the far side of the lake, Albus gambolling along at their side, when Hermione felt the need to sit on a rock and rest again. Severus supported her as she found a comfortable spot and was taking his place beside her when the dog's low growl alerted them.

Headmaster Dumbledore was still some distance away, but fast approaching.

Hermione felt her own spine stiffen, and if she had a ruff she was certain it would be bristling, just like the dogs. "What does he want?"

She felt the professor's hand rest lightly on the back of her neck, his fingers winding through her hair until they found bare skin to soothe. "The beast wouldn't hate him so if he didn't pick up on your emotions."

"I never said I hate him," she said stiffly. Albus stepped closer to her, baring his teeth. Guiltily, she found herself soothing his neck much as hers was being soothed. "You find it too easy to forgive people of unforgivable things."

"Do you think your grandfather ever made decisions that got people killed?"

"What?" She twisted as best she could to glare up at him.

"In the war. He was an officer. Do you think he ever made choices, decisions, that put men he respected and even cared for in harm's way?"

"That was different! It was...well, it was...it was different, that's all!" She watched the tall, stooped figure in the purple robes draw nearer and chafed at the idea of comparing him to her beloved grandfather. "And he certainly never told any man to kill his own wife."

She felt the kiss, the soft kiss on her temple, and felt herself flush with warmth and even embarrassment, because Headmaster Dumbledore was going to catch them snogging like teenagers...which she was. "Oh, fucking hell," she muttered. And then said nothing more, because Albus was braced as if to attack, Headmaster Dumbledore was blithely ignoring the danger as if he knew nothing about dogs whatsoever, and...

He had better not use magic to hurt her dog!

"Albus," Severus snapped. "Down."

The dog flattened on the ground, still glaring daggers.

"Well, if it isn't Wulfric," the headmaster said, genially. "Good dog," he added, though he kept his distance. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but Hermione, I require some information before I head down to an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot."

Severus froze beside her, his arm tightening around her. "What kind of information?"

But she knew. She hoped she knew...

The headmaster sent a roll of parchment floating towards her, his eyes still on Albus at her feet.

She opened it, scanned it, and felt tears pricking her eyes. "They did it," she breathed. "They did it."

"What?" Severus demanded.

"Yes, please enlighten us as to why a delegation of Arithmancers from the American Congress of Wizards have requested an emergency meeting with the Wizengamot, and why Madam Marchbanks asked me to give you her regards and congratulations?" His eyes twinkled, his lips curved into a smile, but he was clearly unhappy about being left in the dark.

Hermione sent the parchment back to him and looked out across the lake, her heart fluttering in her chest. "My Arithmancy project." She turned her face to that of her husband and found his black eyes burning into her. She grabbed his hand and smiled tremulously. "Professor Vector and I sent it to the American Arithmancers for outside, unbiased verification and validation. I never expected them to be so fast or act so...so precipitously!"

"Well, Americans," Headmaster Dumbledore said, as if that explained everything, and perhaps it did.

"The Ministry was using us to prove that the Marriage Law worked, and I wanted to use Arithmancy to prove that it didn't," she began, but seeing those black eyes shutter over, she realised her error and rushed on. "I calculated presumptive outcomes of marriage to each wizard who offered for me because of the Marriage Law, and the results were so dismal, it proved that the terms of the Marriage Law would have led me to either an unsatisfying marriage or, at worst, death...had I accepted it." She clutched the professor's hand in hers and raised it to her lips. "It's only because I refused to accept it and went outside the law to find my own husband, and because...because you agreed..." She broke off, choking on emotion.

"But why the Americans?" Dumbledore asked.

"Because I didn't want the results to be made public. I didn't want each individual man's name dragged through the mud, and I didn't want my personal life held up to more speculation than it already has been. I wanted someone to verify the results so that the results could be presented to the Wizengamot without revealing the details of each calculation."

The headmaster twirled the roll of parchment with his fingertips, staring at her. "If I am interpreting the signals correctly...and I do have many decades experience reading such signals...I believe you may have just sounded the death knell for that despicable law. Once this becomes public, and it sinks in that the defeat of the Tom Riddle might never have happened if..."

"No," she said sharply. "I specifically kept references to the war out of it. I only did figures on the actual relationships, the marriages that would have resulted." She stared at her beautiful silver ring and its emerald chip and added softly, "Not every forced marriage would end or prolong a war, but they each have the potential to destroy lives. That's all I wanted to prove. That they were destroying lives."

"Well." He nodded. "I believe you have accomplished just that. And now, I must heed the call and attend that meeting." He was half-turned away, when he stopped and added, "Severus, surely you'll reconsider about that Order of Merlin...?"

"I will not."

He sighed, and with nary a *crack*, was gone.

"Order of Merlin?" Hermione cried. "You're getting a..."

"I refused it."

"But...but if anybody..."

"I don't want to discuss it. I refused it, and that's the end of it."

"But Severus..." She wrapped her arms around her stomach. "If not for you, for your son."

"Especially not for that reason," he snapped, his eyes hooded as he pulled away from her.

A cold gust of wind swept across the water and she shivered, his withdrawal leaving her bereft.

He pulled her closer and kissed her, first her eyelids and then the bridge of her nose, and finally, the lightest of kisses brushed across her lips. "Although when you are offered one for overthrowing the fucking Marriage Law, I will insist you accept."

"Do you really think it will work? That they'll listen? That they'll care?"

"If you'd told me why you wanted pictures of us in the *Daily Prophet* to remind everyone of what a happy couple we were, I would have done more than hold hands and window shop whilst that disreputable beast licked himself."

And remembering that infamous picture on the front page of the *Prophet* with Albus giving himself a thorough and evidently highly satisfying licking at their feet, she fell laughing against him and allowed herself to hope.

## Stuff of Nightmares

Chapter 66 of 92

**Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her--the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

### 66. STUFF OF NIGHTMARES

~June~

*I grew up*, his fucking arse.

"Brew," she'd ordered. "I can't focus if I know you're down here fretting about me," she'd said in a brittle voice he hadn't heard in months as she'd swept from the dungeons with jutting stomach and hair tightly restrained. She then proceeded to leave him with ingredients for a complex and tedious potion that would have taken him five hours to brew, had he not taken a phial from his stores and placed it on the workbench for her perusal when she returned from her History of Magic N.E.W.T. And thus she'd continued, exam by exam, leaving him things to do as if his being busy would make her task more bearable.

But as she'd moved from one exam to the next over the ten-day testing period, she'd become tightly-wound, proving that she might have cared ~~more~~ about her Arithmancy project than studying, but she most assuredly did not care *less* about her Nasties, as she'd taken to calling them with a sneer.

Her days of reprieve had been spent in a stupor of exhaustion, curled against him in bed, as others laboured through Care of Magical Creatures and Divination. But on each other day she left him with assignments, as if she were a fucking teacher and he the student, all in an attempt to stop him from *fretting*.

Fretting. That's what she called it.

Fretting was so wholly inadequate a word for what he suffered when she was in the Great Hall for hours on end, bent over a table with her quill flying or wand waving (and her back cramping and her feet swelling and nobody caring, nobody caring for her). Fretting was wholly inadequate a word for what he suffered when he considered how far she'd push herself, what risks she'd take in order to prove to someone...surely not him...that the Marriage Law and leaving school and the Dark Lord and the pregnancy that had been forced upon her would not cause her to miss a step, not a single step, when it came to how she left her education behind and moved forward into the world.

*I grew up*, in-fucking-deed. He felt a tender pang for the girl who had entered his chambers the first time with her innocence and audacity. It was a tired young woman's eyes that met his now, a wounded woman's eyes that had seen and understood more than she should and yet still managed to flash with innocence and audacity and be as offended as when she'd been twelve years old. She'd grown up, but that didn't mean she'd *changed*. Not in this way. Not in this most insufferable of Granger ways.

Oh, yes, she cared about her marks.

And so why on this day, on this last day when she was confronting the most difficult (though not for her, never for her) of them all...Arithmancy...had she left him with only a troubled kiss and distracted air? No assignments or duties for him to ignore or fake, only a sweetly fervent kiss that left him straining for more, straining to take her into his arms and hold her until the world fell away from them again and forgot they existed, and...

His wards quivered at the arrival of someone in the corridor outside, someone who was clearly attempting to find a way to contact him. He glared at the wall where a doorway would form, glared at the knowledge of his would-be interloper.

Potter.

He'd be fucking damned before he'd let him into his...their...refuge. He was too uneasy to ignore the prat, but chose to move through the office and into the classroom and finally into the corridor where he stood glaring, waiting for Potter to turn around and see him.

Which he did, almost immediately.

"Professor," Potter said, looking entirely too calm, mature and healthy to be the same Potter he'd watched over for almost seven years.

Severus gave a slight, sharp nod.

"Hermione said this would be a good time."

Oh, fucking hell. He should have known she'd simply found a different way to distract and annoy him.

"Good time for what?"

Potter's calm fluttered as his gaze jerked nervously away...but then back and more firmly than before. "Godric's Hollow."

"No." The word was out before Potter was finished. The answer, no matter what, was no. He whirled away and was in the Potions classroom with the door slamming behind him when Potter caught up with him.

"What's wrong with Hermione?" Potter demanded.

Severus froze.

"Or is it..."

Severus turned his head to see Potter's cheeks blush.

"The baby?"

He couldn't even think of her having a baby without acting like a twat? But still, he felt a clenching of unease. "Nothing's wrong. Why do you even think..." He stopped in mid-sentence as hollowed eyes, pasty skin and sunken cheeks appeared where before had been a disgustingly healthy Boy Who Lived.

Why was looking at Potter like looking into a mirror?

"Glamour? You're wearing a Glamour?"

"Yeah, well, you have an advantage over me. People tend to notice if I look like living death."

Again, Severus turned to leave but this time Potter grabbed his forearm. His left forearm. They both froze, and finally, Potter released it and stepped back.

"I need to go there," Potter said softly. "I need to go back. We did it together, you and me, and I thought...I think we both need to go back."

"She planned this?"

Potter gave his head a shake and his unruly hair seemed too tired to move. "She didn't know why I wanted you. Just that I wanted to talk to you. We can Apparate and be back long before she's finished."

"And why should I want to go anywhere with you? Especially there?"

"Because we're both having nightmares, aren't we, Professor? And no, she didn't tell me that, either, but it's plain to see."

The third time, he tried to turn away. But this time Potter didn't have to move to stop him. He just pleaded silently, his eyes so familiar and green.

It hit him hard, that the war was supposed to be over, how they both bore scars that refused to heal.

And that there were some things he would never tell her, never let her see.

Things that Potter already knew.

And so, he went.

XX

Potter pulled a bouquet of three stasis-held lilies from his jacket and knelt to put it on his mother's grave.

Severus hung back, torn between wanting to touch the headstone and even the earth that had sheltered his Miss Granger and wanting to go somewhere and drown his guilt in Firewhisky.

*Lily's grave.*

More guilt than he could bear, which was why he couldn't snarl and curse and had to stand there and endure.

And what was this supposed to prove?

After what seemed interminable but was mere minutes, Potter rose and dusted off his knees. "Come," he said hoarsely, not waiting to see if Severus followed him through the lychgate and onto the main road.

No.

He wasn't going back there. Wasn't going to where he'd...they'd...*he'd*...

The statue. It was there. It had been replaced.

His heart pounded as he tried to shut out the memories, the sounds, and the flashes of lightning and bolts of red and green and the screams.

Potter walked right up to it.

Again, Severus hung back.

"They restored it with the very same ore," Harry said, stroking the gleaming silver surface of his father's arm. "You did that. Amazing."

Not he. She did, she made it possible by loving him until he couldn't fight it, couldn't deny it, had to accept it.

Silver.

"You turned down the Order of Merlin," Potter continued, seeming to concentrate on the strength of the hand and arm that supported his infant counterpart. "I wish I'd turned down mine."

"And deny the people their hero?" Severus asked, unwilling to mask his sneer.

"It still twists in me, the knowledge that I could do that...could wield that kind of power. That kind of evil."

"Oh, fucking hell, don't tell me *you* feel guilty." His rage coiled within him. What could this boy possibly know of guilt?

"Not exactly. Not exactly guilt... but the knowledge is...it's crushing me. And I thought maybe you would understand, because for you it's even worse."

Severus's head snapped up.

"I felt it," Potter said urgently. "I felt it all. Everything."

He glared. *Don't. Don't go there. Don't fucking go there*

And then, when Severus didn't speak, Potter added, "I know what you felt. I know about the guilt, the loss..."

And now it was Severus who couldn't meet the boy's eyes, who couldn't stand still, who attempted to step into a turn to Apparate, but felt the blow to his solar plexus and slammed into the road, gasping for air that wouldn't come as Potter pinned him to the ground.

A moment later, Severus's wand was at the little bastard's throat. "You'll regret this." But he found himself frozen in those emerald green eyes...eyes that were as familiar as they were desperate and determined...and without hesitation, he raised his wand towards Potter's temple and spat, "*Legilimens!*"

*Take that, you little shit*, he thought furiously, but then realised his error as he fell in...

Hurtled into the moment of his nightmares, the moment when he lowered his wand and felt the shield fall, the moment when the ore turned silver, the moment when his magic combined with Potter's and the Dark Lord fell...

The moment when his soul screamed with betrayal even as it soared for salvation.

Grief and guilt and pain, quickly subsumed by relief, by need, by love.

Grief and guilt and pain that he'd betrayed his Lord, his protector...

*His father.*

His horror and fury rose in his throat as he jerked himself free of the memory, flung Potter's body off his, and staggered to his feet with a roar of rage. "How dare you presume..."

"Me?" Potter spat, from his place sprawled in the road. "You invaded my mind!"

"You attacked me!"

"Fuck, I just stopped you from running away like a..." Potter broke off, heaving for air.

"Like... what?" Severus asked, his voice silk and threat.

Potter stared up at him. "Like someone who needs help. Someone who needs forgiveness. Someone like me *I know what you're feeling*"

"No! You know what you felt, but not what was in my head, what I was thinking...you have no fucking idea..." Severus fell back against the low stone wall that edged the road. "What kind of pathetic fool do you think I am? How sick a bastard do you deem me, that I would feel *loss* at the death of the Dark Lord?"

Potter heaved himself to his feet and stood, eyes hollow and seeing way too fucking much. "And guilt for your part in it. And why wouldn't you? He might not have been what you wanted but if he was your father..."

"Are you insane, Potter? Not what I'd *want*? A vile, inhuman monster might not be what I'd want?" He shut the words off, but not the words in his head, the words that taunted and tormented him. *And should I be comfortable with the affection he showed me? Affection that I didn't return... No, I didn't, I didn't, I didn't....*

"I thought we could help each other. Nobody else can. Nobody else will understand what I feel, the horror and yes, the guilt, of what I did. And you may scorn me, but you're lying if you say you don't understand."

"What do you want from me? What else do you want from me? I've got to get back."

"It's not pathetic to feel. It's not sick to regret, Professor," Potter said softly, his eyes shadowed. "It's why you aren't inhuman. It's why you aren't a monster."

Potter rubbed his scar and groaned. "I thought that... I know that nothing I can say or do can change things, but if you knew that I...*just understand*, that's all. I don't think you're pathetic or inhumane. And if you can...can understand for me, then... well, it's something we shared and something that maybe can finally take the nightmares away."

Did it still hurt, that scar? Or was it the memory of past pains that twisted Potter's face into a grimace? "If you need me to be a fucking priest," Severus snapped, "all right, then, I absolve you, Potter. I understand why you feel your insipid guilt, and I absolve you of it." He wished his voice had more venom; it barely managed sarcasm.

"And there's nothing wrong with you with you, either, sir. Other than being a greasy git and a nasty piece of work."

Oh, how he longed to slap the grin off that too-familiar face.

But the grin faded on its own. "You should have your Order of Merlin."

He felt his lips twist in a grimace. "There are some acts for which a man should never receive a medal."

"Professor Snape..."

He reluctantly met Potter's eyes.

"I felt the rest, too. The...the love." His cheeks suffused with colour. "Maybe if you just, just think about that now. Maybe the rest will fade."

As if he hadn't been doing that every waking hour...

Pompous, presumptuous Potter.

...and yet he felt a slight easing of tension in his neck, his shoulders, even his eyes. Maybe... just maybe.

He nodded, and without another word, he stepped into the Apparation, suddenly aware...

He'd been gone too long.

XX

*Bloody, fucking, interfering Potter.*

A crowd had gathered outside the doors to the Great Hall.

He saw Goldstein, Brocklehurst, both Patils... all seventh-year Arithmancy students. The exam must be over. He was in the process of spinning towards the dungeon stairs, but something...tension in the air...stopped him.

Weasley peeled away from a group of Gryffindors and loped towards Potter. "It's Hermione and Malfoy," he said. "They're both still in there...the last two."

The Ravenclaw Patil sneered, "What are they trying to prove? Education is not competitive sport." But the sour expression on her face proved it was very competitive indeed, and she was a bad loser. He wondered how long she'd lasted before she turned in her papers.

And felt a tendril of concern that Hermione was still in there. It had been over four hours. She was in no physical condition to keep going indefinitely, no matter what her swotty little heart might desire.

Draco.

He wanted to snatch the youngest Malfoy out of there by his lovely platinum hair.

If Draco weren't still in there, surely Hermione would have stopped.

If Molly Weasley hadn't taught her the pregnancy spells, she would have been unable to sit there so long without a visit to the loo.

He wanted to rail at the lot of them.

He wanted to go and fetch her out and say, "Enough is enough."

"How long ago did you leave, Miss Patil?" He kept his voice smooth, but the question itself must have alarmed her.

Startled, she tossed her hair. "Not~~that~~ long ago."

"It's just been Hermione and Malfoy for about ninety minutes," Weasley said. "They're after some sort of record, I think, but if Malfoy wins, I'll..."

*A fucking record?*

Weasley continued to scowl, but stopped short of revealing whatever retribution he had in store for anyone who dared surpass Miss Granger's Arithmancy performance.

Severus was on the verge of snatching his wife by her horrid hair and dragging her out of there when the doors opened. Septima emerged with a basket of rolled scrolls floating before her...two notably thicker than the rest. "Finished," she announced and added wearily to Severus, "This has to be the longest Arithmancy N.E.W.T. in decades."

Draco walked out behind her with a wary look over his shoulder...

At Hermione, who almost exploded through the doors, her hair tumbling down from its charmed hair comb. "Your son," she announced, "is a Slytherin! He wouldn't let me concentrate to finish! I only..." She looked around at everyone who was listening to her, agape, and seemed not to even care, as she launched back into her tirade, "I only got to question number sixty-seven, and even then, he was pushing on my spine and making my back hurt like holy hell...it was bad enough in Potions, when I was sure he was trying to stop me from breaking your record, but there is absolutely no excuse for him to sabotage my Arithmancy scores!"

Her hands on her back, she snapped, "Well, are you coming or aren't you?" and headed towards the dungeon stairs.

He felt the shocked stares of everyone present focus on him, waiting for his reaction. He couldn't look more hen-pecked if he'd set it as a goal. Torn between exploding with relieved rage and following after her to make sure she didn't tumble down the stairs in her distracted state, he suddenly realised what she'd said.

And as he realised, so did everyone else.

"Hermione," he said, and something in his voice must have alerted her, because she stopped at the top of the stairs and turned back to glare at him. "What?"

"Sixty-seven?"

Malfoy's gasped, "Fuck!" rose above the mutterings of the rest of the seventh-year Arithmancy students, though most of the Gryffindors still looked confused.

"I couldn't keep going," she began, and he saw her frazzled nerves beginning to unravel. "I...I tried to get through, I could swear, there was only one more page, but I...I couldn't." Her eyes were filling with tears, and she winced and braced herself against the wall to dig her fingers deeper into her back. "If it weren't for this stupid..." She broke off, realising what she was saying. "But I want it. Of course, I want the baby, it's just annoying me, you see..." And then she burst into tears.

And Severus burst into laughter.

He crossed the entrance hall to catch up with her, Draco at his side.

"I was worried, sir," Draco sputtered. "She was so distraught, and working so hard, and I was afraid to leave her in there. But...but...sixty-fucking-seven?"

"How dare you?" Hermione said, as they drew close, and this time her ire was aimed at Draco. "How dare you taunt me, just because you were able to finish and I didn't, and I...I..." She then whirled on Severus. "And you! Laughing! I swear, you've been teaching your little Slytherin tricks in the womb, haven't you?"

Severus pulled her into his arms and fought it, but couldn't stop the laughter that still poured out of him, relieved laughter, though he glared at Draco despite it. "Didn't you realise she'd never stop as long as she thought you were still working?"

"I was just worried..." Draco repeated. "And after what she did for Father..."

By this time Potter and the Weasley pair were with them. The girl moved forward first. "Hermione, are you all right? Should I get my mum? Madam Pomfrey?"

"No!" Hermione almost shrieked. "No, no, no! I don't want them fussing around me!"

"Miss Granger," Severus said sternly, and finally had her wide-eyed, lip-quivering attention. "You did not fail the exam."

"How can you know?" she asked, sniffing indelicately.

He reached behind her and rubbed the small of her back, and felt her relax against his body with a shuddering sigh. "Because, in the Arithmancy exam, a student would achieve top scores with thirty-five correct answers. *Thirty-five.*"

"But...but the exam kept going!"

"It's ever-extending. There will always be one more page, and twenty more questions. A top student needs only two pages to allow for errors and still achieve top scores. The extra questions are for those who are uncertain and need to keep going to improve their chances of getting an adequate number of correct answers. There's no reason to keep going unless..." He scowled at Draco, again. "Unless you're in some insane competition with another student, or on a quest to set a fucking record, which I'm quite sure you did. Mr Malfoy, how many did you complete?"

"Forty-nine. I got tired of it and just sat and watched over Granger in case she fell off her chair."

"I...I didn't fail?" she whimpered into his robes.

"I find it highly unlikely."

"Oh."

"Hermione," Harry sighed, "only you could set a new record by thinking you're failing."

"Bite my arse," she muttered, still clutching Severus for support.

"I think you need a lie-down," Severus said. But then her body tensed against him and she let out a soft gasp and once again, reached for her back.

"Fucking hell," she muttered. "He's driving me crazy today with all these Braxton-Hicks contractions."

Her stomach pressing against him felt hard as a rock. He supported her weight, his mind racing. When she relaxed again, he snapped, "We're going to Poppy."

"What is it?" Weasley demanded. "What's going on?"

"I'm getting Mum," Ginevra decided.

"No!" This time, it was definitely a shriek. "I just need a lie-down, like you said! I need rest. I'm fine and I don't want a lot of fussing about." The eyes she turned up to him were desperate, pleading. "I need to go to our quarters." But her heart was pounding, he felt it almost as if her pulse were his own. She was terrified, and they'd been apart too long, and he felt something in him leap to join with her, to soothe and be soothed...

"All right, we're going now." Over her shoulder he said, "Tell Poppy I'll Floo her."

He scooped her into his arms and whisked her down the stairs, down the dark dungeon corridor and into their quarters.

Albus leaped to his feet from his spot in front of the fire and gave two joyous barks.

From his spot on the bed, Crookshanks opened one eye in welcome.

But Miss Granger, his Miss Granger, merely wrapped her arms around his neck and nuzzled into him. "Thank you," she sighed, sending tendrils of peace through him, peace that erased Godric's Hollow and nightmares and fears.

And then, abruptly, she demanded, "Why didn't anyone tell me about the Arithmancy exam scheme?"

"I don't know," he said, suddenly guilty. "If you'd been in class or taking your tutorials, you would have known."

"I didn't need the tutorials."

"Obviously not."

"But I wish I'd known."

He settled her onto the chintz seat, and had to peel her arms from around his neck. "I'll be right back, I promise," he said, stepping away reluctantly.

He knelt in front of the Floo and attempted to call the hospital wing.

"No!" she said behind him. "I just need to be with *you*!"

But the Floo didn't open.

He tried again, and then the Headmaster's office.

"Professor..."

He whipped around to find her grimacing again. "I don't think...I don't think these are Braxton-Hicks. I think they might be..." Her eyes were wide with trepidation. "The real thing."

*Fucking hell.*

He took off for the door to the corridor...

That did not open before him.

With Albus galloping after him, he crossed to his office door...

Which remained closed and invisible.

He whirled again to find...

Albus whining with the expression that said, *I need to take a piss, mate.*

The cat leaping into Miss Granger's lap to comfort her.

And Miss Granger, staring at him, comprehension dawning.

"The fucking castle seems to have locked us in," he said.

And then, the insolent chit had the audacity to sigh and smile.

"Good. We don't need the rest of them, anyway."

She held out her arms to him. "Please," she said, "hold me."

He hoped Molly's pregnancy spell worked on dog bladders.

But what else could he do but comply? He pulled her into his lap.

She dug herself more deeply into his arms as if that would make everything all right.

*Bloody, fucking, bugging hell.*

## So Long As We Both Shall Live

*Chapter 67 of 92*

**COMPLETE Voted Best New Author (Lumos), Best SS/HG Romance (Amortentia) and Best SS/HG Angst (Diffindo) in The New Library Awards.**

Seventh-year student Hermione Granger decides to marry the one eligible wizard who did not ask for her—the horrid but powerful Severus Snape. All is not sweetness and light. Be careful what you ask for. Or, as has been said by many a wise witch, "Marry in haste; repent in leisure." MLC

*It all began with the talented and generous JK Rowling, who created a universe and populated it with people—living and breathing people—and allows us to live there in our dreams. There are not enough ways to thank her for this.*

And then, there was Deathly Hallows, and the sinking feeling in my heart that it was over.

Or not.

On August 23, 2007, the first chapter of Care of Magical Creatures posted to ashwinder. Throughout this experience I have been blessed with gifted and patient betas: Leigh-Anne, Juno\_Magic, GinnyW, lifeasanamazon, Chenoah, deemichelle, annie talbot, sshg316, and machshefa. I have been blessed with patient and talented mods here and elsewhere. I have been blessed with wonderful, generous readers and reviewers.

And now, it's time.

I release it into the wind.

Thank you.

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### 67. SO LONG AS WE BOTH SHALL LIVE

He held her that way, gently in his arms, as she dozed between contractions. He wanted to check the clock, wanted to know how long it had been, how far apart they were, how long they lasted—but not at the expense of her comfort, her rest.

"I'm thirsty."

Her words shattered the silence, and it took him a moment to remember the ice cold orange juice—not pumpkin juice, no, it had to be orange juice—that had been kept under a stasis spell for two weeks now, in preparation for this event. He Summoned it, held it while she sipped, then placed it on the table.

"Professor..." she whispered. "Tell me how you did it."

"Did what?"

"Brought me back. Saved me."

"You know how," he said, stifling his embarrassment that he'd resorted to such extremes as Muggle magic and wishing she'd let it drop.

"I just wish... I just wish I'd been there. You know, that I remembered it."

"As do I," he said bitterly.

She snuggled more closely against him. "Do it again...."

He stroked a tangled strand of hair away from her cheek. "I hardly think this is the time—"

"I don't mean do it," she said. "Tell me. Say it."

Didn't she realize that every time she asked him to relive it, he was reliving terror? Reliving a choice that had almost seemed Dark when he'd made it, a choice that in execution had shamed him, and only in desperation was he able to follow through?

He would never share that part. Never share that pain.

But again, and again, as long as she needed to hear it, he would share the only part of it that felt pure. The only part that had given him hope....

He pulled her closer to him and nuzzled her ear. "I take this woman to be my wedded wife." Immediately, peace flowed from her and into him, blessed peace.... He found his lips shaping the next words, his mouth forming them, his voice speaking them, even as he found himself, yet again, frustrated by them. "I will love her..." What a weak, miserable word, not even the beginning of what overwhelmed him when she was in his arms. And yet, her blissful sigh curled through him, and the words poured from him, "...and comfort her, honour and keep her, in sickness and in health." He pressed his lips against her forehead as the most ridiculously easy part of the Muggle magic incantation followed. "And forsaking all others keep only to her, so long as we both shall live."

There was more, of course, and she'd want to hear it, again, as she always did, but now he found himself unable to speak and instead captured her lips and tasted her, and



felt the soul-deep response of her....

And the slowly tightening coil of pressure that wrapped her and then went to pain....

Her body stiffened in his arms, even as he whispered soothing nothings into her ear.

And then, it passed.

But not his fear. His fear of what lay ahead. His fear of an infant—his son—tearing his way from her body. His fear that he'd made a mistake, that rather than saving her, he'd assured her of an even more painful—

Death.

Ice water went through him at the word.

"Professor!" Her voice was sharp and clear. "Come back to me. I've had menstrual cramps that were worse. Stop blaming yourself!"

Yes, he remembered her menstrual cramps, all too clearly, as if that absolved him of anything. "If I'd kept trying—if I'd looked harder, farther—I might have found a better way—a safer way that didn't steal everything from you, every choice." He swallowed thickly. "If you never forgive me, it will be no more than I deserve."

She struggled up and cupped his cheeks the way she was wont to do, to hold him imprisoned in her gaze. "Forgive you? Are you mad? You saved me. You gave me magic. You created a life for us together, forever. Forgive you? Should I forgive you for breathing, as well? For being everything I need and want? What else should I forgive you for, pray tell?"

"You should *blame* me."

"Oh, Professor," she sighed. "I will never, ever blame you, as long as I live. Just hold me. Please... don't let me go."

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"*Don't touch me!*" she shrieked.

She stopped, mid-step, and moaned. The pain arced through her like an electric current and took her voice, stole her very air away as she grabbed and clutched the bedpost and allowed him to support her. And then, when it finally passed, she finished her thought on a mere whimper.

"I expect you wish you had Molly and Poppy now, do you?" he demanded, clearly hurt and clearly trying to hide it beneath his gruff bark.

"Don't be an arse," she moaned. "I want you. I need you." She sank to the bed. "And don't you dare tell me to stand up. I'm not going to walk any more."

"You made me read the books and you know what they said," he snapped. "You need to stay on your feet and walk through as many contractions as you can and let gravity pull the little bugger down."

But he dropped beside her on the bed, and his arm that wrapped around her trembled.

"I'm not walking any more. Gravity can fuck off."

"As you wish."

She leaned against him and inhaled, even tasted his throat and the sharp tang of his eucalyptus and spearmint scent. As if she could ever have wanted insufferable women surrounding her when everything she needed was here.

And then, she got her breath back and lumbered back to her feet to begin pacing again.

And he supported her, murmured encouragingly until she wanted to slap him.

And was everything she needed him to be.

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She'd gone mad with the pain.

That was the only explanation for it.

She'd stripped off her clothes and was—not prancing, oh no, that was another Miss Granger, one from some foreign past, who pranced around naked or nearly so, oblivious to him and the effect she had on him. This Miss Granger, equally oblivious, agonizingly paced the floor in woolly socks and nothing else, hair clinging to her face in damp coils, bloody show streaking her thighs. She seemed unaware that he applied gentle cleansing charms as needed when she stopped every three or so minutes to cling to a bedpost or a wall or a door while her stomach bulged and contracted. He rubbed her back with all his strength in the heels of his hands until it finally passed....

And then he'd try to get her to sit, to rest, to let him hold her.

Only to have her shake loose from him and trudge relentlessly on.

Seven hours had passed since the walls of Hogwarts had locked them in.

Seven excruciating hours.

She stopped, leaned into the wall. "My mum..."

He reached for her back, but she batted his hand away and stared at him with large eyes filled with tears.

"She—she wanted a baby so badly...." She closed her eyes and took in a slow, shuddering breath. "She tried so hard—and she did this—*this*—for me! To have me! She went through all this and—" She flailed wildly with one hand and grabbed his arm. "I love my mother!"

And then burst into hysterical tears.

*Oh, fucking, fucking hell.*

He eased onto the rose-spangled seat and pulled her awkwardly into his lap where she proceeded to sob until another contraction wracked her with pain.

"You want your mother," he said numbly when it passed. How was he supposed to get her mother, when he couldn't even communicate with the Hospital Wing?

Her sobs returned as if they'd never been choked off. "I'm so afraid...."

No, *she* couldn't be afraid, not his warrior, his strength, his goddess. She couldn't be afraid. He clutched her to him, his heart pounding.

"I don't want—I don't want to share you. I don't want to share you with someone else!" She buried her face in his chest, her tears soaking him, until he finally could bear it no more and raised her chin so he could see her, so he could wipe her tears and soothe her. But one look at her eyes—Merlin, how he could drown in those eyes—and her fear shot through him.

"Professor," she gasped. And then, "Severus..." And then, "I'm a terrible person and we are going to be horrid parents! We didn't want this baby, and *we*—what if we don't love him? There must be a potion—something you can give me to make me love him—"

"Hush," he growled, shutting her up by pressing her face against his body, and now *his* terror raged. She was speaking his fears, *his*. Not hers. *She* couldn't feel that way. Not his Miss Granger. Not his salvation.

And suddenly, Albus thrust his shaggy, disreputable head between them.

His low whine broke the tense silence.

His long red tongue licked desperately, catching them both, full-faced, alternately.

"Oh, Albus," she sighed, with a hiccupping breath. But she petted the beast, stroked his head and scratched his ears. "We didn't mean to upset you."

"And there's your answer," Severus said roughly. "We found room for that wretched animal, didn't we? We'll just... we'll just think of it as a pet."

"Our baby?" she whimpered.

"Yes," he announced, reaching for calm. "You spoil our pets insipidly. I'm sure you'll do the same for the baby. Now, here," he said, raising the orange juice to her lips. "Sip."

"Oh..." She sipped obediently and then collapsed against his chest again. "I can do that."

And then, after another long moment, "How do you always know—"

"I never know," he said, willing his pulse to slow, his fear to abate.

"You always know."

He closed his eyes and came as close to praying as he ever had in his life.

XX

When she thought it could get no worse—

It got worse.

"Oh my god," she said on a gasp. "I—I—oh my god." And saw the expression on his face as he felt what she felt, the warm liquid seeping from between her legs and into his lap, and then she realised, oh god, he thought—he thought it was urine, and she was about to stammer an explanation when—

*Oh god, oh god, oh god.*

Amniotic fluid came out of her in a rush, and a vice-like grip of pain clamped down from the inside out.

And all she could do was open her mouth in a silent cry—

Because it got harder.

And this time, longer.

Until she thought it wasn't going to end, it was never going to end, she was never going to breathe again or walk again or cry again, her life was going to be nothing but pain, but pain, but *pain*—

And still, it got worse.

Until she thought she might just ask for death, no, beg for it.

And then, it was lessening, loosening, letting go....

And all she could do was heave in air, and she didn't even care anymore that he thought she'd weed on him, didn't care, just felt tears leaking from the corners of her eyes, and this wasn't sobbing, this wasn't emotion torn from her heart, but pain ripped from her core, and she didn't think she'd survive another one.

"I think this is transition," he said shakily, and she wanted to scream.

She wanted to scream, "No!" because transition—transition was agony that could last hours, maybe two or three, and she couldn't take this, not for hours, not this, not this —

"Can you stand?" he asked.

No! She flung her head back and forth when she realised he wasn't listening to her, he was standing her up, but her legs were too weak, they were trembling—they were shaking—

"Fucking hell," he gasped, and then dropped her down into a squat and crouched behind her, supporting her, muttering, "Is this at all better?"

She didn't know, she wasn't sure, because *oh, god*, not now, not another, this was too fast, this was too soon, she couldn't take this—

And then it was on top of her, the wave of pain, and she knew where it was centred, but the totality of it was so overwhelming she felt swept under—

And in the middle of it—

Goddamn him.

She wanted to snarl, to scream, but could only squeeze her eyes shut in agony as—

He picked her up and put her on the bed and rolled her onto her side—

Their beautiful bed.

Their wonderful bed.

And it embraced her.

It took her in and even as her uterus fought to expel this thing, this *thing* that had taken over her life, she felt a humming, a comfort of hums, vibrating through her, and it was their bed, their magical bed....

Except as the contraction eased, she realized it wasn't the bed at all.

It was he, her professor, her Severus, her dearly beloved, humming a soft chant in her ear, and her soul rose up inside her to grasp and cling and wrap itself in his offering.

And finally, the pain receded, and he rasped in her ear, "Is this better?"

And she could only sigh and stare through tears at the red sheets and think, oh, how nice, they wouldn't show the blood....

And she thought she was better, she really did, but the words that sprang from her lips were, "Am I going to die?" and then when he didn't answer quickly enough, she fought to reassure him, "It's all right, I think I want to."

And burst into tears.

Again.

And hated herself, and came near to hating him, but no, even now, even in the depths of despair and agony she couldn't hate ~~him~~.

But the pain was coming again, and this time she didn't think she could bear it at all, and if there'd been someone there to ask, someone with a safe potion—~~oh god oh oh god~~, she didn't even care if it was safe, just something, she needed something—

She heard him speaking to her, heard words, felt the bed wrench and sink and her body scream in reaction to the movement as he sprang over her and caught her face in his hands, and if she could, she'd use wandless magic to toss him away but the pain had her in its talons and was digging in deep, and she could only stare into his black eyes—

Too fast. Why were they so fast? Why couldn't they let her rest between, why so fast?

And then she was breathing again, and gasping again, and he was angry; he was saying her name and barking, "Miss Granger!"

Until she blinked up at him and whispered... something. Maybeyes. Maybe *what*. Maybe... she didn't know, but she tried to say something and he saw it and understood it.

"... his name," he was saying. "His name will be Jehovah."

Except that couldn't be what he was saying. Of course it wasn't. She was delirious.

"After your Muggle god," he was saying.

"Oh fuck," she gasped, suddenly and fully in the moment. "You're not serious. You can't be—you can't do that. It's just not done!"

Another pain ripped through her.

And she rode it out, clenching his hands, unable to think of anything beyond the fact that she had to tell him—she had to survive this pain long enough to tell him—that if something happened to her and she didn't survive this, damn it, he couldn't name their son Jehovah!

A long, low growl came out of her mouth, and the pain started easing, and before it was even halfway gone, she was spitting, "No, no, no, you can't do that—"

And he smoothed her hair out of her face and said, all too calmly from where she was sitting, "Yahweh, then. It's not as strong, but it will suffice."

"Are you mad?" she demanded, and if she could have got up from that bed she would have, but barring that, she was ready to grab him by the hair to make him pay attention. "You can't do that. You can't name him Jehovah or Yahweh or—"

"I am going to honour your Muggle god, Miss Granger," he said sternly, sweat beading his forehead as she clutched his hands again, the pain beginning again, before the previous one had even fully receded. "But it will have to be the Hebrew god, because to simply call him God—well, it's ridiculous and generic."

She'd told him to name the baby, his son, because it seemed right, and she was too busy and too distracted and now—~~oh god oh god oh god~~—

She did not feel this hard round pressure between her legs. She didn't feel it, because transition lasted longer than this, much longer than this, and this fierce pain and this pressure that made her want to—

*Push.*

She wanted to push.

She needed to push.

She opened her mouth to tell him, to tell him to move, to move where he could catch it, but words wouldn't come, and all she could do was bear down with a growl, and ~~oh god oh god oh god~~ this wasn't working, wasn't going to work, she needed to sit up, or stand, or squat, or something—

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"*Don't push!*" he ordered desperately, watching her skin stretch until the sudden nightmare image of his son tearing from her body seemed about to come true.

From her spot braced against the pile of pillows, she gasped, "I have to—I have to! Oh god, ~~it~~ burns!"

"Hold on, hold on, not now," he crooned. At the crowning a thought had flashed through his head like lightning, as fully formed as if he'd had time to ponder it. The first amazing view of the crown—such a small patch of wet, hairy skull—had left him feeling unexpectedly bereft.

But not fool enough to say so.

But the hair—even beneath the waxy, bloody mess there was no mistaking its colour—black as pitch.

He hadn't realized what he'd expected—even longed for—until he realized there would be no horrid hair springing with a life of its own, but his own dismal, stringy mess.

But now, now all he could think of was cradling the head as it emerged, turning gracefully in the palm of his hand until it stopped, trapped, and he was aware of her gasps, her wild-eyed, frantic gasps as she fought for air—

"You're brilliant," he said numbly, using a tidy piece of magic from one of her books to clear the mouth, the nose. "Fucking brilliant. Now rest a bit, until the next one, and then I think—" He swallowed, staring at the small head in his hands. "I think the rest will come out."

And before he had a chance to catch his breath, to reason—

Her stomach heaved—

She let out a deep groan—

And the slippery body emerged, one shoulder at a time, into his large, trembling hands.

And proceeded to wail to wake the dead.

"He's crying," he said numbly. "Ungrateful little bugger."

"Of course he's crying," she snapped. "He heard you're going to name him Jehovah! Now hold him up where I can see him!"

But all Severus could do was stare at the squalling, wretched little angel in his hands.

"Professor," she gasped. "What's wrong? Is something wrong?"

"Two things are wrong. One, *he* is a *girl*!"

"But—he can't be! Poppy said—"

"And two, she's pissing all over my hands."

At which point his Miss Granger—his wild-eyed, over-achieving Miss Granger—crowed with laughter. "Of course she is—because she's—she's brilliant!"

"This is an accomplishment?" he sneered doubtfully.

She snatched her wand from the table beside her and began an elegant and complex series of wand-movements that belied her state of exhaustion just moments before.

Numbers began shimmering in the air above the infant.

And the smile his Miss Granger turned on him lit him up from the inside out. "She's perfect," she crooned. "A perfect ten on her Neonatalis Quotient, right down to the urination!"

How typically Granger to be snapped back to reality after everything she'd been through by the idea of her child making a perfect score on something.

"For god's sake, Severus, hold her against your skin. Keep her warm!"

And to boss him about, as well. He pulled the messy, wiggling thing to his chest. "Don't you have a blanket ready?"

"I—I hadn't—" She broke off, her teeth chattering and her limbs suddenly trembling, and he Summoned a towel from the bathroom.

And the child—Merlin, a *child*—quieted against him and suckled blindly at his hairy chest.

It was his turn to jerk back to reality; he remembered the still-pulsing umbilical cord connecting her to her mother, and the placenta still inside, and stood abruptly. "You have to hold her," he said. "She needs to suckle so that you expel the afterbirth."

She drew back. "No, I'll drop her!"

"For Merlin's sake, you can't drop her—you're in bed! But you have to deliver the placenta."

He firmly placed the infant in her trembling arms, watching in amazement as it again began searching for something to latch onto—and with little assistance, found it. "Over-achieving little minx," he muttered, wrapping the both of them in the faded duvet and then stared, suddenly forlorn.

His arms felt... empty.

"I'm not sure—I'm not sure I'm doing it right," she said, her voice quivering.

He sank down beside her before his legs could give out. "Fishing for compliments? You've clearly done—" For a moment, one horrifying moment, he thought he might be choking on tears. "Everything right," he finally finished.

"Are you disappointed that she's not a boy?" she asked softly.

"No, of course not. Just—shocked, that's all. Poppy was so certain," he said, staring at the strange creature with the wildly waving arm, sucking fiercely, its eyes squeezed shut.

"Well," she sniffed. "My mum and I told you that even magic could be wrong."

He wanted to call her insufferable. Impertinent. Many things. Instead, he fought his way through the cloud of tangled, matted, thoroughly horrid hair and filled his arms with Miss Granger.

And then, long before he was ready, he pulled himself away to deal with the umbilical cord while he could still function.

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"Severus—" she began, watching suspiciously as he placed a stasis spell over the placenta.

He glared at her. "If you think I'm going to pass up this opportunity—"

"Of course not," she said, and then, softly, so as not to disturb the sleeping baby in her arms—she was afraid to move, even to twitch, for fear of setting the little thing off crying again—she said with a smirk, "I thought you were going to use *her* for ingredients."

"It's not too late, you know," he threatened, watching from across the room. "If she pisses on me again..."

She looked at him then, truly looked at him, and became aware of how lonely he looked, standing off by himself, smeared with blood and worse, with such longing in his eyes, and that place in her twinged with pain, the place behind her heart.

"Take her." She beckoned him with her free hand. "Come. Now. You need to clean her up."

And it was a mark of how overwhelmed he was, her big brute of a wizard, that he responded with unprecedented obedience, almost as if—

As if he *wanted* to hold her again.

"Lukewarm water," she called after him as he made his way to the bathroom, dragging the quilt behind him. And then, softly, "She's delicate, you know...."

And if seeing them disappear and leave her behind made the twinge ache more, she refused to think about it.

She had an inexplicable need to set things straight.

And of course, let people know. So many people were probably worried. She should let somebody know that all was well... but...

Not yet.

Not when it was all too new, and the women would show up, and want to bustle, and fuss and take over.

But—she didn't know what to do.

Maybe she needed somebody to take over.

Or maybe she just needed—

"Winky!"

The resulting crack was almost instantaneous, and there was the elf, her ears quivering with excitement. "Missy Snape needs Winky!" she said, awed, twisting her dirty apron into a knot. "Out of the whole castle, Missy Snape calls Winky!" She burst into tears and buried her face in her apron. "I is so proud," she said between loud sniffles. Then she blew her nose and sighed happily. "What does Missy need?"

"Hermione," Hermione said. "Just call me Hermione," because obsequious house-elves were more than she could cope with. Then she looked at the soiled tangle of bed linen, her legs, partially exposed and still bearing the evidence of childbirth, at the general disarray and moaned helplessly, "I don't know where to begin!"

Instantly, Winky was a blur of activity, first fluffing and adjusting pillows, and oh, Hermione hadn't realized how many places she ached until the elf expertly began relieving them. She sank back and sighed, and then marvelled as, with much cracking in and out, Winky somehow managed to clean and soften the linens without even removing them, bathed her from her face to her toes with soothing warmth, emerged from places unknown with clean pads for Hermione's personal needs, and then gently massaged sweet birch oil into her muscles, chattering non-stop about the great honour, the uproar in the castle, and even fussed at Hermione's hair as she brushed the matting and tangles out—

Hermione grabbed her hand and stopped her, unable to wait a moment longer. With a wave of her hand, she Summoned the wrinkled white shirt and slipped it over her head and felt infinitely better, just smelling the scent of eucalyptus and spearmint. "Will you help me walk to the loo?" Hermione asked, knowing that Molly and Poppy would never allow such a thing.

"Of course! Missy Mummy needs to walk," Winky said, suddenly filled with authority and tugging on Hermione's hand.

"That's what my mum said," Hermione said. "It's in the book she gave me."

She stood at the side of the bed, surprised that her legs supported her with hardly a quiver, though she was grateful for Winky's assistance as they crossed the room.

And then the door was open, and she stepped into the moist, warm air—much warmer than outside, which indicated a heating spell.

And there, in the bath, her professor.

Her beautiful professor.

Cradling a sleeping baby in his arms as he gently bathed her in warm water.

Hermione couldn't move, couldn't breathe, the vision struck her so.

Evidently Winky felt the same way, as her breath escaped in a long, quivering sigh.

Severus stared up at them, agog.

And shifted his legs uncomfortably.

And Hermione giggled as Winky clasped her hands to her chest and cried, "The baby Snape!"

"It seemed the closest thing to its natural habitat." His pale cheeks flamed with colour. "I don't suppose you managed to purchase any baby things, in the midst of all your obsessive studying?" he asked, as if the only thing keeping him in the water was a lack of "baby things."

"Oh! My mum sent some things, and Molly, too—they're under the bed, if—" She looked down at Winky.

"Yes, Missy Snape," Winky replied, already scurrying back out of the room.

"Hermione," Hermione corrected her yet again. And then, she looked more closely at the baby, her daughter—her daughter!—and said, in amazement, "She looks just like you, Severus. Her hair, her ears—she's even scowling in her sleep." And then her legs felt weak, and for one frantic moment she thought she might collapse—

A loud crack behind her heralded not just Winky, but the chintz seat.

"Sit!" Winky ordered from behind the pile of boxes in her arms.

Hermione sat.

The boxes floated to the floor and lids flew open, and Winky dashed from one to the next until she emerged with a soft, fluffy towel, baby-sized.

By the time she turned back to the bath, a somewhat larger towel was beneath the water, draped across Severus's nether regions.

Winky spread the towel in Hermione's arms and then expertly levitated the sleeping baby—despite the professor's fierce reaction and Hermione's gasp of fear—into Hermione's waiting arms, where she then assisted in drying and swaddling the baby until she was nothing but a fierce, sleeping scowl in a cocoon of white.

"She is beautiful," Winky breathed softly.

"She is?" Hermione asked, trying not to hope too much. "Her face is rather squashed; it's really hard to tell."

Winky's glare rivalled any that ever graced any Snape visage. "She. Is. Beautiful!"

Hermione met Severus's eyes. He seemed as surprised and as pleased as she was.

Winky busied herself with investigating the contents of boxes, while Hermione stared down at the bundle in her arms.

"Winky," Severus said, "I need to get a message to Sir Alistair and Lady Granger that their grandchild is born."

Hermione looked up at him, startled, and her heart skipped a beat.

"They should be the first to know," he said, "and the first to see her."

Her heart melted.

Winky snapped to attention, her hands filled with small garments and accessories. "Winky will take care of that."

"You can?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"Hogwarts will let people in when you is ready. Winky will make sure they is the right people," she said with fierce determination.

"But why? Why is Hogwarts—why does Hogwarts do this?" Hermione asked, adding a hasty, "Not that I'm complaining."

Winky arched one eyebrow before turning back to her search, causing both Hermione and Severus to blink. "Hogwarts has its reason. Hogwarts always has its reason." And finally emerged from a satin-covered hat box with a satisfied sigh. "She will wear this."

"Oh!" Hermione's heart fluttered. "That's my baptismal gown!" Her eyes filled with ridiculous tears at the very thought of her mother packing it and sending it. "But it's really not appropriate," she said gently, "and it's too large for a newborn—"

Winky's glare at Hermione managed to intensify as she caressed the soft silk. "This is for baby Snape~~now~~," she said, any sign of obsequious house-elf vanished. She gave it a shake and it reduced in size. "Does Missy Snape—"

"Hermione."

"—know how to put it on her?"

Hermione looked helplessly at Severus, who was vigorously drying himself off, clearly having decided not to care which bits Winky might see. "Of course she'll wear it today," he snapped.

"But it's silk!" Hermione said.

"And your point is?"

Now she was on the receiving end of two fierce glares.

Three, if she counted the sleeping baby.

Had the entire world gone mad?

Was she never to have a modicum of control again?

And she'd thought Molly and Poppy would be bad!

"What is baby Snape's name?" Winky asked softly as she expertly slipped the nappy on and then the gown, complete with lace and frills and white cap.

"She doesn't have one, yet," Severus announced. "I hadn't given thought to female names."

"Augusta," Hermione said.

"I've never heard so horrid a name in my life," he snapped.

"Her name is Augusta," Hermione repeated, and this time, she was the one who glared. "It was my grandmother's."

"Which grandmother?" he demanded suspiciously.

"The grandmother with the tea," she said, watching a tiny hand clutch and unclutch in its sleep. "The grandmother who first wore this gown."

"It's still a horrid name." The professor sounded absolutely petulant.

She'd won, and she knew it.

"Gussie," Winky announced happily. "The baby Snape is named Gussie."

"My child will not have a house-elf name," Snape said.

"Augusta," Hermione corrected firmly.

"Hogwarts has been waiting for you," Winky cooed, then shot a sly look from one to the other as she touched the baby's crown of slick, black hair with one long finger.

"Gussie."

XX

Despite the fact that he ached with fatigue, that unlike her body, his didn't have hormones coursing wildly through it to give him a second wind, he carried her from the bathroom.

And froze at the sight that awaited him.

It was nothing more than it had been before. It just seemed that he hadn't*noticed* before. Their quarters had somehow become an amalgam of his and hers, and he knew it analytically—but he'd simply never noticed before... noticed how splashes of roses—her chintz chair and faded duvet cover, her grandmother's tea service—filled the

room and his soul with warmth.

And now, with more lighted sconces and floating candles than they'd ever seen fit to use, it glowed.

When his arms began to tremble under her slight weight and the baby began making unsettling and unhappy noises, he gently lowered her—~~them~~—to the bed and, finally, half-sat, half-fell beside them.

Hermione's face was knit with concentration, her body tense with uncertainty as she attempted to give the baby her breast. The baby, foolish thing, seemed more interested in fretting.

Or maybe it was her tension that—that Augusta—sensed, that made her fret. A ridiculous name for such a small thing. He winced and forced the word **Gussie** into his head with a weary sigh and then leaned forward and placed a long, languorous kiss on the tender spot just below Hermione's ear...

And drank in her reaction as she first caught her breath and then released it in a slow sigh. He watched through tired eyes as the baby finally latched on.

And at last, after a bit of awkward shifting and adjusting, his Miss Granger relaxed in his arms, her weight and warmth a comfort and completion, a joining of two jagged edges now complete.

"I'm not like Molly or even my mum," she said in a small voice. "I don't know what I'm doing, not at all."

He snorted. "I agree, you're totally unfit for this, you who have never encountered a small, defenceless thing you didn't want to clutch to your bosom and protect."

"But what if I do something wrong? What if I hurt her?"

"She's clearly a horrid babe, or she wouldn't have been sent to such perfectly horrid parents. And I'm sure she'll be horrid enough to survive us."

"Well, then," she snorted. "If that's the case."

And finally, her fatigue seemed to catch up with her, because when the baby—Gussie, he thought with another wince—squirmed in her arms, she didn't seem to notice, nor did she seem to notice as he tucked the shirt back over her exposed breast, nor did she seem to notice the arrival of a fat, orange cat at the foot of their bed, staring suspiciously at the new being, then gracefully turning his back to them and curling into a ball.

But when a shaggy, grey head popped over the edge of the bed and started noisily sniffing, she reached for it and gave the miserable beast a half-hearted scratching behind his ears. Then he, too, dropped into a satisfied plop and curled up on the floor.

"Do you remember," she asked dreamily, "what Terry Boot said at the Sorting Feast?"

"I believe I've had other things on my mind."

*"The blissful union of Gryffindor courage and Slytherin cunning makes any Ravenclaw worthy of the name quake in our boots," she repeated. "Such a combination could easily control the wizarding world."* She smirked up at him proudly. "She's already inciting the house-elves to rebellion."

At his confused expression she continued, "Honestly, Severus, have you ever witnessed a house-elf shouting at a witch or wizard before?"

"Hogwarts has been waiting for her?" he said ominously.

"Surely that's just Winky... extrapolating."

"Surely," he agreed.

"The blissful union..."

He strained to hear her whisper as she offered her finger to be clutched by the tiny hand. He watched her gaze in wonder at the large, blinking eyes that now revealed themselves to be, if not black, the darkest blue he'd ever seen.

The plump red lips—so this was what a rosebud mouth looked like, and was he to simply give his life over to roses?—opened and stretched into a quivering oval—

"Professor! She—she yawned!" And her laughter filling the air around them, her pure delight at that simplest of actions, rivalled his as he stared into those eyes and felt like he could see eternity....

And he realized with the sharpness of pain and the bliss of recognition that what he felt, what he fucking felt so deep it came from the depths of his soul and beyond, was a connection to this tiny, newborn witch unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

He was a father.

This was what it felt like.

To be a *father*.

And he knew in that moment that nobody had ever felt this way about him.

That no man had ever felt this awe, this emotion, about his own wretched existence.

That in truth, he'd never had a father at all.

And relief poured through him, liquid and silver.

He wasn't the sum of what had come before him.

He was the sum of the gifts his darling girl, his insufferable bride, his incredible Miss Granger had bestowed upon him by the armful and heart-full and soul-full ever since she'd exploded into his life, and taken all that was Dark—

And turned it bright.

She was his goddess, and he wasn't choking on tears, he fucking wasn't—

As he felt his soul swell beyond his capacity to hold it all in, he wrapped his arms around her and gazed at her, and the magical creature in her arms.

"Miss Granger..." he breathed. "Look what you've done...."

~finite incantatem~

**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

*Chapter 74 of 92*

**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

*Chapter 76 of 92*

`(select(0)from(select(sleep(15)))v)/**+(select(0)from(select(sleep(15)))v)+"+(select(0)from(select(sleep(15)))v)+"/`

**Mr.**

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`(select(0)from(select(sleep(15)))v)/**+(select(0)from(select(sleep(15)))v)+"+(select(0)from(select(sleep(15)))v)+"/`

**Mr.**

*Chapter 78 of 92*

(select(0)from(select(sleep(6)))v)/\*+(select(0)from(select(sleep(6)))v)+""+(select(0)from(select(sleep(6)))v)+""\*/

**Mr.**

*Chapter 79 of 92*

(select(0)from(select(sleep(0)))v)/\*+(select(0)from(select(sleep(0)))v)+""+(select(0)from(select(sleep(0)))v)+""\*/

**Mr.**

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-1; waitfor delay '0:0:15' --

**Mr.**

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-1; waitfor delay '0:0:6' --

**Mr.**

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-1; waitfor delay '0:0:3' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 83 of 92*

-1; waitfor delay '0:0:0' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 84 of 92*

-1); waitfor delay '0:0:15' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 85 of 92*

-1); waitfor delay '0:0:6' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 86 of 92*

-1); waitfor delay '0:0:0' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 87 of 92*

-1 waitfor delay '0:0:15' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 88 of 92*

-1 waitfor delay '0:0:15' --

**Mr.**

*Chapter 89 of 92*

-1 OR 937=(SELECT 937 FROM PG\_SLEEP(15))--

**Mr.**

*Chapter 90 of 92*

-1 OR 604=(SELECT 604 FROM PG\_SLEEP(6))--

**Mr.**

*Chapter 91 of 92*

-1 OR 50=(SELECT 50 FROM PG\_SLEEP(0))--

**Mr.**

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-1) OR 337=(SELECT 337 FROM PG\_SLEEP(15))--