

# Flight of the Prince

*by Southern\_Witch\_69*

Although on different sides of the war, Severus and Hermione work together, each for their own reasons. This is my take on the events following HBP and will lead up to the Dark Lord's demise.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 30*

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**Disclaimer:** J.K.R. owns these characters. I'm simply borrowing them, but I'll Scourgify them before sending them back home.

*As always, I'd like to thank my lovely, brilliant beta, Charmed Nay. I also want to thank Pearle for reading this over and helping me decide on a few things.*

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*Crack!* The sudden Apparation startled Narcissa. She jumped up, wand drawn and pointed in the direction of the noise. "Who's there?" she asked worriedly, flinging her long, blonde hair away from her shoulders. In the next instant, her pale, flaxen-haired son stepped out of the shadows. "Draco!" She hurried to him. "Why are you here? Is it done?"

"He's dead."

"You've succeeded?" she asked, tears welling in her blue eyes. "You're unscathed!" She pulled him to her for a tight hug, only to have him pull away.

"Snape..."

"Oh, no, is he dead?" she asked, truly alarmed and guilt ridden. He'd died because of her request?

Draco shook his head. "I couldn't..."

Narcissa straightened. "You've failed? But the Unbreakable Vow would kill Severus!" *What have you done, Draco?*

"He *killed* Dumbledore. He saw that I couldn't do it, and he walked right up and killed him." He shook his head, eyes wide with shock and bitterness. "The headmaster would have fixed things for us. He said he could hide me...hide all of us. He said that Father is safe in Azkaban, but they could have come for you and kept you safe."

"No, that was trickery, Draco! No one can hide from the Dark Lord!" She hugged him again and felt his body shuddering, though she heard no sobs. "Severus has saved you, my son. I knew he would. It's why I went to him."

"At what cost, Mother? We'll be outcasts. Our good name will be far more tarnished than Father ever made it! What good are money and perfect bloodlines if we're shunned from society?"

Narcissa pulled back and shook him roughly. "Don't you *dare* speak of your father in such a manner! He's done much for this family and for the Dark Lord. Things will work out. Your father..."

"Can't even defeat Harry Potter and a few of his ruddy friends!" Draco blurted. "Potter had him landed in Azkaban. You heard the way he spoke to us...to you...when I was getting fitted for my robes!" Draco ranted, months of anger, confusion, and agony coming out. "He followed me about all year and knew I had something planned! He was there tonight. It had to be him, though he didn't show himself. There were two broomsticks!"

"He knew you had something planned, but he wasn't smart enough to figure it out," Narcissa said, trying to soothe him. "And if he didn't show himself, why, that proves that he was afraid of you, that he's inferior to you!"

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He simply backed up to sit on a chair. His normally pale complexion had taken on an odd pallor, and his pointy chin quivered with unleashed emotion. Tears slid down his cheeks, and he began to rock back and forth.

"You're worrying me, Draco! I've not seen you so distraught before. You weren't even this bad when your father was sent to Azkaban last year!" Narcissa said worriedly.

"It's not what I thought it would be," he finally said, not looking her in the eyes. "You didn't see him... sliding down the wall weakly and still trying to help.... I don't want this."

"You will stop this right now," Narcissa snapped. "We are free of the obligation! Dumbledore is dead, and your father's mistake has been rectified!"

*Crack!*

Narcissa whipped around while Draco simply looked to the corner of the room where their personal Apparition point was located. The enraged, sallow face of Severus Snape emerged from the darkness, dark gaze piercing mother and son as he strode forward.

"We haven't time to dally, Draco," he said, coming to a halt next to his chair, ignoring Narcissa. He reached out and pulled Draco up roughly by his robes.

"Now, see here, Severus, he..." Narcissa attempted to say.

"You will rescind the Unbreakable Vow *right now*," he said, turning to stare at her coldly, as if daring her to object. "I will not continue to cover for this boy when it is clear that he is a failure and cannot handle the smallest of tasks or take direction." He sneered at Draco. "You will act as the Bond-Reliever."

Draco pulled away from his grasp. "I don't have to listen to you," he said angrily. "You aren't my professor any longer!"

"That's right," Snape whispered dangerously, eyes glinting with malice as he stooped down to look into Draco's eyes. "I am no longer your professor. Therefore, you'd better watch how you talk to me from here on out, *boy*. There will be no more coddling, no more soothing over your mistakes." He yanked Draco closer to his mother. "Now... hold my oath fulfilled."

Shakily, Draco pulled his wand out and hovered it over Snape's hands, which had gripped Narcissa's. He pointed the tip closer and held it steady as his mother began talking. A fiery snakelike rope appeared over their linked hands.

She quickly asked, "Did you watch over Draco as he attempted his duty?"

"I did."

"I... I hold your oath fulfilled." The thick, fiery rope loosened into three linked strands; one broke away and vanished with a pop.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"D-did you do your best to protect him from harm?" she asked, voice cracking.

"I did."

"I hold your oath fulfilled." A second rope broke away and vanished with a pop, leaving only one fiery strand circling their joined hands.

Snape nodded. "Go on."

"Severus, maybe we should wait and see..." Her voice trailed away, and her hands began to tremble.

"Narcissa," he said, a hint of a threat in his voice.

"Did you step in and do the deed once you realized that Draco had failed?" she asked, glaring at Draco when she voiced the last of it.

"I... did." Snape's voice was nearly inaudible.

"Then, Severus, I hold your oath fulfilled. You owe me no more since you've kept your word," she said, jumping as the last fiery rope disappeared with a bang that was louder than the others.

He released her hands abruptly and looked to Draco. "We must act quickly. The Aurors will be here soon enough," he said. "Gather what you think you will need in the coming months and pack them. Get two broomsticks and wait for me in your father's second dungeons...his true office."

"Yes, *sir*," Draco bit out resentfully.

As Draco left the room, Narcissa exclaimed, "Severus, you're bleeding! Look at your arm! Look at my floor!" She quickly summoned a house-elf and instructed it to clean her floors while she pulled her wand to heal his arm.

"I think I am quite capable of healing myself, Narcissa," he said.

"Oh, come now. It's the least I can do for you. After all, you didn't have to act as you did," she said soothingly, pulling apart the shredded sleeve of his robe.

"Didn't I?" he asked, voice taking on a deeper tone that sent shivers through her.

"What I mean to say..."

"Say nothing," he said, flicking his own wand over his wounds before placing his hand and silently chanting healing spells. When he was done, a quick Tergeo siphoned the blood away. He put his wand away and stared at her.

"What is it?" she asked. His gaze was unnerving her. She'd never seen his cold, dark eyes so alight with malice and... emotion.

"The *least* you could do?" he whispered, stepping forward, hands clenching and unclenching at his side.

"Severus, you're frightening me," she admitted, stepping back from him. He grabbed her arm tightly. "And you're hurting me."

"The *least* you can do is give that which you promised," he said silkily, bringing up his free hand to touch her chin before his fingers slowly traced the curve of her cheek.

Trembling, Narcissa tried to move back. "Why, Severus, I... Whatever do you mean?"

He leaned closer, brought his lips to her ear, and whispered, "I have done all that you've asked and am risking punishment." When she didn't reply, he added, "Do you not remember saying that you would do anything to have your son protected? Looked after? Saved from death?"

"My family is important to me. Yes, I remember," she said, fear flooding her body as she pulled back to look at him. What did he want? What did he expect of her?

"Do you know what I saw flashing through your mind as you said those words?" he asked, smirking slightly. "You were so afraid that you'd have to spell it out in front of Bellatrix." He shook his head as he delved into her mind. "No, Narcissa, not Galleons."

The moment the image of her naked and straddling him in her bed flashed through her mind, she gasped. "You expect me to betray... my marriage... with you?"

The hand on her face drifted down, trailing over her throat and collarbone, making its way to her cleavage while his other hand continued to grasp her arm. "Is that not what you offered?" he asked quietly, bringing his cold black eyes back up to meet hers.

"I didn't think you would seriously want that. You never look at me with desire. I... What of Lucius? You are one of his oldest friends!"

"Your husband is of no use to you right now, nor has he been for the past year," he said, slowly pulling her closer. "I have sacrificed much for your family."

"I appreciate what you did, but you don't surely expect me to..." Her words trailed away as his lips slowly descended to hers for a firm kiss. He pulled back to gauge her reaction. "Severus, Draco is here." She needed to find an excuse to not give in to him, tempting as that may be.

His eyes narrowed, and his hold tightened on her. "I fully intend to take what's due me, Narcissa."

"No..." she said, forcefully pulling away from him. "Not... not tonight. Draco, you see, I don't want him to..."

"Enough," he said curtly.

For an instant, she stared into his forbidding eyes and saw a brief flicker of indecision, causing her to hope he'd relent. Instead, she found herself being pulled by the hand out into the hall, up the stairs, and into the bedchambers that she'd shared with her husband for all their years. He released her and went about warding the doors. She quickly moved across the room and onto the other side of the bed in hopes of putting space between them.

"Undress," he said when he turned back to her. "I want to see you."

"Please, Severus, I really don't want to do this. Think of Lucius. He's been your friend for years," she implored, thinking of pulling her wand out.

He strode forward purposefully and stood in front of her. In a voice she'd not ever heard him use, he said decisively, "You will do this for me tonight, Narcissa, if nothing else. The way I feel right now... I could just..." The fingers on his raised hands curled as if he were about to choke the life out of her.

When she noted the shake of his normally steady hands, the anger and resentment in his eyes, and the cruel sneer of his lips, she began to unfasten her robes with unsteady fingers. Trying to use her wand on him would only anger him further should she fail in changing his mind or subduing him. Not only did she have herself to think of, but she also feared that he might harm Draco in his enraged state. She realized that he blamed her for what had happened. Whether he was glad to be rid of Dumbledore or not, it was apparent that it had taken some sort of toll on him. His usual aloof, uncaring demeanor was slipping away. It would not do to fight him. Of course she'd always fantasized about having an affair with him. She'd simply never thought it would be realized. Didn't most women dream of some tall, dark, and handsome lover...personally someone they liked...coming to their bedroom and giving them pleasures only someone with deviant tendencies would be able to give?

She pushed her robes away from her body, and he was suddenly against her, lips crushing hers brutally, teeth nipping, and tongue moving. Narcissa wanted to tell him that he was being too rough, but he'd suddenly become someone else. Her pleas would fall upon deaf ears. This was not how she'd imagined sex with Severus. A hand roughly kneaded one of her breasts through the fabric of her dress, and the other was keeping her body pinned against his.

When she was finally able to move her swollen mouth from his, she said, "Not so... Oh!" He released her and was pulling her dress up and over her, throwing it to the floor to land in a heap. To her surprise, he pushed her back onto the high bed, keeping her legs dangling over the side. He was leaning over her in an instant and pushing her bra up so that her full breasts sprang free. His lips and hands frantically and roughly explored her, making her hurt yet want more. In the midst of his ravaging, one hand reached down and pulled at her knickers, forcing them down to her knees. He then brought one of his knees up to guide them down to the floor while his hand caressed her center.

"Wet already?" he asked smugly, pushing in three fingers roughly. "Oh, yes, you are."

"Ow," she said, jerking away from his touch.

"It's been very long since you've been fucked, hasn't it?" he asked, not really seeking an answer.

"Severus, please... You are not yourself," she said breathlessly, arching into his touch as his thumb found and ground down on her clitoris. "We've time to be slow. The wards will let us know if someone approaches. Do not be afraid to..."

"*Afraid?* You think me a COWARD?" he asked loudly, voice suddenly demented, expression fierce. "You dare say that to me after what I've had to do tonight?"

"No, I didn't mean that you were a coward. I meant, oh, my God, yesssss," she exclaimed as he stimulated her frantically, nearly painfully.

Severus was suddenly over her and then slamming into her, muttering that he was no coward, had done his duty, and would kill the next person that called him that. His body was bent over hers on the edge of the bed, making him perfectly level with her breasts. He sucked, licked, and bit every inch of flesh his mouth came in contact with as he pumped into her...hard and steady. To keep her legs from continually banging against the bed, she lifted them up to close around his waist and lifted her arse up a bit. His hands slid beneath and squeezed her cheeks forcefully, keeping her elevated and giving himself a new angle of penetration, which brought her to a screaming climax nearly immediately. He was right; it had been too long.

Severus slowed his strokes and watched her as she succumbed to her orgasm, making him even more aroused. She noticed him watching her and began running her hands over her breasts, wanting him to want her. His thrusts became short, choppy, and fast, leading him to his own climax. To her surprise, he pulled out of her, not wanting to release himself within. That wasn't how she'd imagined things either. She wanted nothing more than to pull him back to her, but he disentangled himself from her legs and straightened his underpants and robes, casting a quick charm to clean himself.

*He didn't even undress to have sex with me/she thought indignantly. I feel so cheap, so used.*

"Don't just lie there. Clean yourself off," he said snidely.

Narcissa opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind as she tugged down her bra, but he was already striding towards the door. "Is that it?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes," he said casually, appearing at ease with what they'd done, his normally unruffled demeanor magically restored with their coupling. "I thank you." Opening the door, he left without a backward glance. He seemed more relaxed and had calmed down considerably. Was he only with her to rid himself of some pent up emotion? As quickly as he'd reached climax, it must have been a while since he'd had a woman, too.

"My God," she said, moaning in distress. "What will Lucius say? What if Draco knows?"

She heard Snape bellowing to Draco moments later about being slow as she was cleaning herself of any evidence of their shared sin. She wanted to bid her son farewell and find out what they were planning, but the faint pops of Disapparation told her that they'd already gone.

What should she do? The Dark Lord had said that if Draco failed, he would kill every Malfoy alive. Would this still be considered as a failure? Why exactly had Snape made her rescind that vow? Surely it wouldn't have continued to force him to protect Draco, as it had been fulfilled. "Oh, my God. He knows that the Dark Lord will likely punish us still: me for going to him and Draco for failing. I must go into hiding, too! Why didn't they take me with them?" *Perhaps Severus knew I'd be safe. He wouldn't have sex with me and just leave me to fend for myself while taking Draco off with him.*

A house-elf appeared and announced that she had guests waiting out at the gates. With fear etched into her heart, she tidied herself up and moved down to greet them, trying to clear her mind of what she knew.

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Hermione frowned as Ron and Harry spoke in low whispers across from her. They'd been quite secretive the entire morning. They'd had an entire week alone while she was forced to spend a little time with her parents and to make arrangements for their pending adventure. She hoped that they weren't planning on leaving without her. Harry had gone home to spend one night with the Dursleys, and the Weasleys had gone to retrieve him bright and early the very next morning. She was uncertain if they simply didn't want him to endure the family's unkindness or if they didn't trust him to not take off on his own.

"What are you two talking about?" she asked, finally snapping her book shut and moving to sit by them. "And don't you dare say you're talking about the upcoming wedding!"

"The, uh, *Prophet* says that Snape and Draco still haven't been found," Harry blurted, obviously lying.

"Is that right?" Hermione was no fool. They both looked guilty.

"Yeah," he replied. "Narcissa Malfoy is still missing, too."

"That is not what you were talking about, and you know it!" Hermione said. "Out with it right now! What are you two planning?"

"Er... Well, you see... Harry and I have decided that, uh, that... well..." Ron's ears reddened.

Leaning forward, Hermione said, "If you are going to say that I shouldn't come along to help find the," she looked around and lowered her voice to a whisper, "remaining Horcruxes, then I'll hex the both of you." She looked into Harry's sad yet determined eyes. "I told you at Hogwarts that I was with you on this. I meant it."

"Thanks," Harry said, reaching out to take her hand. "I appreciate that." His eyes left hers and drifted to the doorway where Ginny had entered. His smile faltered, and he looked down guiltily.

Sighing and not stopping to speak with them, the youngest Weasley made her way to the stairs and quickly disappeared.

Hermione shook her head. "Harry, you should talk to her. You can't just turn your feelings off and on like water from a faucet. What's wrong with continuing things...except on a more cautious level?"

Harry nodded and looked at Ron, who simply shrugged and nodded back. Without another word, he quickly followed Ginny's path, leaving Ron and Hermione alone.

Patting the empty space next to him, Ron invited Hermione to take Harry's seat. She quickly did so and allowed him to hold her hand, caressing her palm with his thumb. After a moment, he leaned closer, and with wide eyes, pressed his lips against hers. She pulled back and looked towards the doorway, making certain that nobody was about.

Once she saw that they were alone, she turned back to him and boldly pressed her lips to his for a quick kiss. Upon hearing his slight moan of approval, her lips parted in invitation. It was their first kiss since they'd left the Hogwarts Express, and even the one they'd shared then hadn't been so intense and full of feeling.

Finally parting for air, Hermione breathlessly said, "Wow." Not one of McClaggen's kisses had made her feel anything near the way Ron's kiss had. Even Viktor, whom she had truly fancied on some level, hadn't ever made her feel the way Ron did. She wanted to be so close to him that she would be part of him. *No wonder Lavender and he stuck together like eels.* She pushed thoughts of her ex-friend from her mind and concentrated on the feelings she had for Ron. Why worry about the past? He was with her... not Lavender. He'd told Lavender to leave him be.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, smiling goofily, yet gazing at her with serious eyes. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For never saying it before."

"Saying what?"

"For saying that I really like you, Hermione."

"Oh," she whispered, quite pleased, and quickly found his lips again. Their kiss quickly deepened, and she felt his hand upon her breast. She didn't pull away, allowing him to carry on and enjoying the new sensations it caused. When one of his fingers scraped against her hardening nipple through the fabric, she gasped and pulled back, as she'd felt a jolt of electricity flow from his fingertip.

"Sorry," he said quickly.

"N-no, it's all right," she admitted shyly. "I liked it."

"You know, Hermione, these next few months while we're helping Harry with the Horcruxes... We'll be staying close together... really close. Things will change for us, but they'll be better." His ears and face were as red as his hair, but the hopeful expression in his eyes was quite endearing.

"I know that, Ron," she said, eyeing the doorway again. She leaned forward and whispered, "I feel the same. I really like you, too, and have for months now," and she meant it. The past year had been torture for her, what with his moodiness and his relationship with Lavender. Finally, her dreams were coming true.

Gently, he cupped her cheeks and kissed her again. This time, the clearing of a throat parted them. They both moved apart quickly and guiltily gazed at Molly Weasley.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" she asked kindly, smiling at the each of them.

Ron took Hermione's hand and said, "Hermione and me... We've decided to give it a go."

"A go?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding vigorously.

"What Ron's trying to say," Hermione put in shyly, "is that I'm his girlfriend."

Molly smiled and moved to hug her. "Welcome to the family, Hermione, not that you weren't part of it before, but now, it seems to be official."

"Thanks."

"Right," said Ron, rising and pulling up Hermione with him. "Er... we'll be off. I wanted to show her that wicked new magazine that I got in."

Straightening, Molly said, "Ronald, I am going to tell you both right now that I don't want any..."

"Say no more, Mum," Ron said, holding his hand up and pulling Hermione forward. "We heard the talk you gave Fleur and Bill last year... lot of good that did."

"We won't disrespect your home, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said uneasily, seeing the woman swell in annoyance.

"Oi," Ron said cheekily, "Harry missed the big talk last year. Seeing as he and Ginny are together right now... alone, you might want to clue him in."

"What? I thought they'd decided to stop their relationship?" Mrs. Weasley asked, looking towards the stairway worriedly. "Send them down to me." After they took a few steps, she added, "And don't go getting comfortable up there yourselves. The food's nearly done, and I might be popping in to let you know."

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**Southern's Notes:** Yes, I know: You don't like Narcissa getting a piece of Snape's action or the Ron and Hermione bit that I've included here. The story will develop soon enough though. There is always a method to my madness.

Also, I'd like to say welcome back to all those who normally follow my stories. Here we are again, eh? Yes, this will be another long one, but now that my life has settled, I shall be able to update regularly. Thank you so much for all of your support and for always letting me know how you feel about things. Cheers!

I'd also like to mention that my mate, CocoaChristy, has always been very encouraging, supportive, and listens to my daily ramblings on our messengers.

**Nay's Notes:** Interesting start. Where, oh, where is your twisted mind?

## Chaper 2

*Chapter 2 of 30*

Snape receives instructions from the Dark Lord that fit nicely with his own plans. The trio have plans of their own.

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*As always, I'd like to thank my lovely, brilliant beta, Charmed Nay.*

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"But, Master, she deserves to be treated with more..."

"You are quite lucky that I have not extended her fate to you, Bella. As I recall, you had a part in this." Their Master glared at her until she flinched in fear. "My decision is final," he said sharply, giving her no leave for argument.

"Forgive me, Master," Bellatrix said, bowing her head.

"Severusss, you've something to say," the Dark Lord stated, gaze boring into his most trusted servant's eyes.

"I do."

"And that is?"

"My Lord, I don't particularly need anyone else about," Severus said bitterly. "It was bad enough that I had Wormtail afoot last summer. A woman would just be in the way even more so."

"You'll not be out much for obvious reasons," his Lord replied, waving his hand to dismiss Snape's words. "Narcissa will enable you to pass time more easily." Here his lips spread into a nasty grin. "While you will no longer have Wormtail to bother you, you will have to share quarters with others needing refuge eventually, as there will be others that need the safety of my protection."

"As you wish, my Lord, but if I might ask, what of Lucius?"

"He will give thanks to you, Severusss, for speaking up and saving his son's life," the Dark Lord said, glaring coldly at Narcissa. "And he will appreciate that his wife was not forced to endure a cold bed."

"But my L-Lord," Narcissa began, faltering and looking away, cheeks red with shame.

"Do not try to deny that you'd rather be anywhere else other than in Severusss' bed, Narcissa, if you had a choice," he said before she could object, slitty red eyes glinting dangerously. "Your pathetic attempt at Occlumency hides nothing from me."

Severus closed his mouth and went over this tidbit of information. She *wanted* to be in his bed. While he'd taken out his frustration on her the night he'd killed Dumbledore, he'd never intended to have her again. He'd crossed the line as far as his friendship with Lucius was concerned. There was no going back, as he was certain that Lucius would find out. Shrugging these thoughts away, he gazed back at her and smirked. She seemed utterly embarrassed at having the Dark Lord reveal her most secret desire to all present, her sister included. His eyes moved to look at Bellatrix's disbelieving expression.

He could see that she was bursting to say something nasty, fingers clenching and unclenching at her sides. Unable to resist, he gave her a smug smile, which only incensed her further. It was always fun to rile her up. However, he didn't want to infuriate the Dark Lord. "Master, do I take this to mean that I shall not be returning to my home?"

"That is a correct assumption. I've... ah... acquired a comfortable place for you and others to stay. No Muggles or even wizards shall find it; that I can assure you." He brought a pale, thin hand to his chin. "There are other matters that you and I need to discuss." His next words were to Bellatrix. "Get your sister some changes of clothing and anything else she might need for her stay."

"How long will she be gone, Master?" Bellatrix asked, forcing her words slowly, cheek twitching as if restraining herself.

"That depends on a few things and is *my* decision," he said curtly. "Go now." He nodded to Draco's unconscious form. "Take the boy with you." He stood then and glanced around the room. "Leave us," he said to the others. "I will contact you when I've need of you again."

Once the room was clear, Severus relaxed his stiff stance and took a seat, waiting for his Lord to speak. He watched as he slowly walked to the window and watched the swirling mist move about in the dark night.

"Dumbledore is no more," he said finally. "The world even looks different without that codger in it." He made a show of inhaling the air with his flat nostrils and turned to face Severus. "You have done well, my loyal follower. I do hope you enjoy the gift that Lord Voldemort is bestowing on you..."

The words hung between them. Severus simply inclined his head to show that he was pleased, not trusting his voice to speak.

"I know that you have already enjoyed her, haven't you?"

It was not meant to be a question, not really, but Severus chose to answer anyway. "I was able to lose myself in the moment, yes."

"So, it's true that you aren't exactly pleased about this arrangement," the Dark Lord said, striding back towards Severus.

"I would prefer someone who did not happen to be one of my fellow Death Eaters' wives... someone for myself," he said, making certain to sound slightly bitter. He knew that his Master would understand the want of something unobtainable. "I nearly had Madam Rosmerta eating from the palm of my hand...until young Malfoy failed to do as bidden and changed all of that."

"She can still be yours. Say the word," the Dark Lord offered. "It wouldn't be too high a price to pay to reward my most loyal advisor. I am certain Hogsmeade could do without its saucy pub owner."

"No," Severus said disdainfully. "Anyone who can fall for Draco Malfoy's trickery and unpracticed Imperius Curse is no one that I care to choose for a consort."

The Dark Lord cackled at this, nodding his agreement. "She's definitely weak of the mind." A long silence stretched between them before he spoke again. "I will strive to grant you this one request, as it's where I have failed you in the past. Keep Narcissa until you find someone acceptable."

"Thank you, Master, that's most gracious," Severus said with a nod of his head.

"Now, on to business," the Dark Lord said, waving away Snape's gratitude and seating himself. "I have things that I need you to do for me, but these are to be kept between the two of us only...no one should hear of this. Do you understand?"

"I do, my Lord."

"Excellent. This may take a bit of time, what I need you to do, but we've all the time in the world." Here he paused to gaze out towards the window again as if expecting something to burst through. "With Dumbledore gone, it will only be a matter of time before I make my move against Harry Potter. He won't be able to hide for long, and when I'm ready, I shall destroy him."

Severus nodded. "I should have brought him here to you, Master." He hung his head low in a show of regret.

"Things have worked themselves out, haven't they? I believe we couldn't have planned things better. Scrimgeour and his lot are trying to protect him while he's pushing them away, according to my source. If their eyes are trained on him and only half on us, things will be much easier for me."

"Are you planning something, my Lord?" Severus asked boldly.

"I think it's time to take back what's mine." He closed his hand, making a fist, and squeezed it so tightly it shook. "My faithful followers are in Azkaban still, and I will see them out... soon."

Masking his surprise, Severus said, "I will be ready to help you, of course, at a moment's notice."

"No, I fear if you were involved something might go awry. People are seeking Dumbledore's assassin right now, so if you were spotted, things wouldn't go according to plan. I prefer to keep you doing only those things that will bring you in the least amount of contact with others as possible." He stood again, towering over Severus. "I need you to search for something that remains hidden...something precious, a treasure above all others."

Intrigued, Severus asked, "What is it, my Lord?"

"It is something that belonged to my mother."

The words were quietly spoken, shocking Severus. He'd never known his Master to be sentimental about anything or anyone, and he'd never heard him speak of his mother before.

"It was passed down through all of Salazar Slytherin's descendants and given to her," he added. "The weak wretch sold it, but I was able to find it and hide it away. Needless to say, it's of great importance. I need you to retrieve it and bring it back to me."

*Now that sounds more like the Master I know. He hasn't any sentimental feelings for his mother as it had sounded, only for Slytherin.* Severus thought as he stood. "Where shall I start, Master?"

"There is a cave near the place I used to live as a child. I shall explain more when it is time for you to go. I will have to ask that you bring Wormtail with you on this first mission only. There's a part of the task in which you will need him. For now, I want you to remain indoors for the next week or two. It is too dangerous right now...even to venture into a Muggle town." He pulled a small stone from his pocket. "This is a Portkey to the hideout I've procured. Take Narcissa with you. I will keep Bella and the young Malfoy here with me. I will call you when I am ready for you to venture out."

Taking the stone, Severus bowed slightly. "Yes, my Lord."

"Use your time with her to your advantage," his Master added. "I should think that Lucius will be very sorry about his failure indeed."

Severus nodded. "Yes, my Lord." He quickly left the room and walked down the corridor towards the rooms that Bellatrix inhabited in order to collect Narcissa. He was quite pleased with how things had turned out. Not that he wanted *her* with him, mind. No, he had plans of his own, and he could search out what he needed while doing the Dark Lord's bidding. There were some parchments that Dumbledore had stowed away, and he needed to get them. However, he'd have to wait before venturing out. The Dark Lord was right in saying it was dangerous now. Aurors, Order members, and the magical community were all looking for a sign of him. He would let things calm down before daring to return to Hogwarts, which was where he needed to go to first to get the notes he'd left behind in his haste to leave the castle.

He doubted seriously that anyone had yet to invade his private chambers. They were warded tightly and would prove hard for anyone to get through... without injury.

Opening the door to Bellatrix's room without knocking, he heard Bella say, "Your husband will be so disappointed, Narcissa. Make no mistake that he will find out. And to think it's that bl..."

"Pardon me, ladies," Severus said in his most condescending voice, "but I believe that it's time for Narcissa and me to leave."

Quickly snatching two stuffed bags from the bed, Narcissa made her way to his side. "I'm ready." Her chin lifted, and she gazed right at him with her cool eyes, blue as a clear sky.

He could sense that she was angry with him and the situation. He leaned closer and whispered, "You've no one to blame but yourself, you know."

"Shall we?" she asked, ignoring him.

"Indeed," he said in amusement. He pulled the stone from his pocket and waved his wand over it to activate it. "Hold on tightly." He lifted his arm and put it around her waist as she held onto his body determinedly and placed a dainty pinky on the stone. His eyes met the glare of Bellatrix Lestrange. "Pity you cannot accompany us," he said, giving her a mocking smile. He nodded at Draco, who was lying down on the bed, likely still exhausted from the hexes he'd received from the Dark Lord. "You have some babysitting to do." Pulling Narcissa even closer, he said, "As do I."

Before Bellatrix could reach them in her rage, Severus felt a tug behind his navel, and the room blurred away as he and Narcissa were Portkeyed to their destination.

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Ron closed the door to the bare cupboard. "I still don't see why we can't just stay at the Burrow... where there's food at least," he grumbled. He then eyed Hermione as she bent over. "Then again, we should have come right away, eh?"

Harry frowned. "I hate being here, too, but it's all we've got." Shrugging, he added, "I can't stay at your place and risk anyone interfering with our work."

Hermione straightened, pulling a kettle from the cabinet. "You mean you don't want your feelings for Ginny to cloud your thoughts?"

"No, that's not what I mean," he said. "I know how the twins like to listen in. They're always in and out for meals and such, so we can't be certain if they're about or not. Fleur... she's worse this year than last, what with her mothering Bill and all. And sorry, Ron, but your mum would be like an interrogator each time we'd try to leave." His voice lowered, "And I don't want Ginny trying to come with us or learning what we're doing." He gave Hermione a small smile.

Rinsing out the kettle, she said, "I think we'd better make a list of the things we need here. It's not like we can just go traipsing off to the market at any given moment. We'll need to get many things at once. Stock up."

"Now you're talking," Ron said, seating himself at the table. "Say... who knows how to cook?" He eyed Hermione. "Do you?"

"We can all try. It's not that hard, is it? There's an old recipe book just there." She pointed towards a small shelf littered with parchments and a couple of small books. "It'll be like following instructions in Potions class."

*Blast!* she thought, eyes quickly darting over to Harry. Any time she mentioned Snape or anything related to him, Harry began a rant. She tried to busy herself with the tea.

"Never did learn much in Snape's class," he quipped. "Oh, unless murdering your friends is something he intended to teach."

Ron shook his head. "Come on, mate. He'll get his. Don't dwell on it."

"How can I not?" Harry said in annoyance. "It's all I think of." He closed his eyes and brought his hands up to his temples, rubbing them as if erasing his memory.

Hermione moved to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sit down, Harry. We have to talk about what we're going to do first and how we're going to ward the house."

"It's warded already," Ron said. "We need to make a list of things we want to eat." When Hermione glared at him, he added, "What? We'll work better on full stomachs is all I'm saying."

After Harry sat down, Hermione retrieved a quill, ink, and blank parchment from the desk in the study. "Ron, get the cups," she said as she sat down. When he rose, she said, "Oh, and looks like the tea's done. You can pour that as well."

"Anything else, your majesty?" Ron asked, playfully bowing.

"That will be all, thanks," she murmured, eyes on her writing. "Now then." As quickly as she could, she wrote down the things she knew they needed and read them aloud to see if either objected or had anything to add.

"We'll need to get some money from my vault," Harry said as he eyed the list.

"My parents opened an account for me as well," Hermione said proudly. "There's not all that much in it, but we can use that for what we need, too." It was then that she noticed how quiet Ron was. "What's wrong?"

"I haven't much money at all," he said quietly, ears and face reddening with embarrassment. "I never thought to ask Mum for any. Even though things are going better, I'm just so used to never..."

"S all right, Ron," Harry said. "We'll use what we have for now."

Ron simply looked away, shame in his expression.

"Look," Hermione said, widening her eyes to Harry so that he'd go along, "you can just use our money for now, and when you get the chance, you can pay us back. It's only like a loaner then, you see."

"Right," Harry added. "We'll get Hermione to keep track of things."

Nodding, Ron said, "Make sure we keep records of it all. I will pay both of you back."

"Done," Hermione said, breathing a sigh of relief as Ron's expression lightened. "With Professor Dumbledore...er...gone, we should think about naming another Secret-Keeper for the house."

"Why?" Ron asked. "The secret died with him, didn't it? Only the house owner, Harry, can disclose the location now."

"Yes, but..."

"And the wards are still up that he placed," Harry said with a shrug. "I don't know how to do a Fidelus Charm anyway."

"There are books to learn from," Hermione scoffed. "There are others we can ask!"

"But we can't do that!" Ron thumped the table to get her attention. "The Order members use this as Headquarters. We can't just tell them to bugger off, can we? We need to let them come here still. It's the only safe place."

"But, Ron..."

"Right," Harry agreed. "And they'd better not think of excluding us."

"Will you both listen for a moment?" Hermione asked angrily. "What I'm trying to say is that *Snape* knows this location."

"He still can't tell anyone! Same as before," Ron said.

"But he can come here," Harry said, finally understanding what Hermione meant. "We won't be safe here if we don't do something about that."

"Exactly," she said. "Who could we get to be the new Secret-Keeper then? It has to be someone we trust completely. One of us, I'd say."

"Why not just set wards to let us know if *Snape* comes around?" Harry asked suddenly.

"But why would we want to do that? He'll still be able to get in," Hermione said heatedly. "What if he dismantles them?"

Ron looked at Harry in horror. "If it's all the same with you, I'd like to live in a *Snape*-free place, thanks. I don't want to wake up during the night to find that git standing over me with a wand!"

"I *want* him to come here," Harry said, eyes glinting dangerously.

"Er?"

"Sorry?"

Harry nodded. "I want him to think he can just come on in so that I can capture him. He'll think we're too stupid to set a trap for him."

"He's not that thick," Ron said suddenly. "He'll suspect that the Order at least set a trap for him and stay away." He turned to Hermione and lowered his voice. "If he," he nodded to Harry, "feels better doing this, so be it. We know that the git won't come here. Let's just let Harry have his way on this."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here."

Hermione frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't like it. It's a stupid plan...one that could get one of us hurt or even killed." She sighed when they said nothing. "What if he just waltzes in and snatches Harry?"

"We'll know the minute he comes up the walk," Harry insisted. "There are wards we can use. Old Slughorn had some that alerted him when Dumbledore and I went to see him last summer."

"And it's not like *Snape* can just Apparate in either," Ron said, nodding his head. "And maybe we would luck up and catch the git. They'll be talking about the three of us for years, catching Dumbledore's killer and all. I hear the Ministry's got a reward for it."

"I don't like it," Hermione said. "It's reckless."

Harry stood. "I'll be right back."

The moment he left the room, Hermione tried to talk some sense into Ron. "This plan won't work. *Snape*'s too good a wizard to have simple wards keep him out."

Unable to help himself, Ron reached over and touched her cheek. "I've been hoping to have some time alone with you."

"*Ron*, stop," Hermione said with a hiss. "We have to talk Harry out of this."

"It won't work," Harry said from the doorway. "Here." He placed a thick book on the table in front of her. "I saw this when I went in to light the grate. It was on the mantle."

Hermione's eyes lit up as she flipped through the book. "Harry, this is great! There are spells in here that I've never even heard of...many for placing wards and dismantling them!"

Ron, who had dropped his hand from her face to rest on her shoulder momentarily before sliding it down to rest on her thigh, said, "Give her a book, and she's lost."

She pointedly looked down at his hand. When he squeezed her in response, she smiled shyly, "So long as you don't try this tactic for... other things."

"Oi!" Harry said, making a face. "Get a room."

Hermione's smile faded. "Speaking of which, where will we all be sleeping? I don't think it's necessary for us to leave the whole house open. It'll take longer for it to cool and heat. We only need this floor."

"And just close off the other floors?" Ron asked, aghast. "What if others come for a visit?" He nodded towards Harry. "I think he and I would like a little privacy now and then, each having our own room!" Giving her thigh another squeeze, he asked, "Unless... maybe you and I could share a room?"

"No!" Hermione said quickly. "I promised your mum that we would not share rooms."

"Who's going to tell her?" he asked with a sly grin.

"Guys?"

Hermione and Ron turned to face Harry. "Sorry," she said, recovering first. "First and second floors only then. Harry, you and Ron can share as usual or pick out your own rooms. I'll keep the same one that I usually share with Ginny."

"All right," he agreed. "Let's find some intruder wards."

"How close will he get before we know he's coming?" Ron asked.

"We can decide that for ourselves," Hermione replied. "He'll probably do some sort of test for wards upon approaching, so we'll have to use one that's harder to detect." After skimming over a few pages, she said, "There are some in here that are so rare he probably wouldn't think or know to check them."

"We've all night to decide," Harry said. "After we do this, we can get our supplies and then go over all we know about the Horcruxes."

"We'll need to do some research," Hermione said quickly. "Hogwarts might have something on them...in the Restricted Section of course."

"Maybe we should get Dobby to come back here with us," Ron said. "He wouldn't mind helping us cook and the like."



Hermione glared at him and pushed his hand away from her. "Exploit Dobby? He's our friend."

"Well, we could pay him," Ron said quickly. "I've got loads of old, odd-colored socks back at home."

"No," she said firmly, daring him to argue.

"I don't want Kreacher here either," Harry said, "but I wouldn't mind Dobby so much. He could be helpful in a pinch."

"Harry!" Hermione admonished.

"I meant with his magic, Hermione, not his housekeeping skills," Harry said angrily. "Stop trying to read things into what we're saying!"

"Just say what you mean, and there won't be any misunderstandings," she said tightly, eyes narrowing. "Keep your hands off of me, Ron. We've got work to do."

"What we really need is a Pensieve," Harry said thoughtfully, running his hand through his messy hair. "We could put all of my memories about the Horcruxes there, and maybe one of us will notice something that I'm not thinking of."

"Makes sense," Hermione agreed.

"But where do we get a Pensieve?" Ron asked dejectedly. "I heard my dad mention once to Bill that they cost loads of money."

"Simple," Harry said. "We'll use Dumbledore's."

Hermione nodded. "While you get that from Professor McGonagall, I could check in the library for any books that might help us."

"We'll need your cloak and the map," Ron said. "Just as precautions."

"Fair enough. When should we go?"

Hermione frowned. "I think we should get the house in order first and owl Professor McGonagall as to what would be a good time. Usually it's only Hagrid and Filch there during the summer anyway."

"Mum said a few others are there, though, getting things back to normal. Might still be there," Ron said. He grinned suddenly. "And if it's only Filch and his mangy cat, they'll be easy enough to get by to sneak into the library."

"But not into Dumbledore's office," Hermione pointed out, "which is why we need McGonagall's approval, but if she's there and agrees, we can go as soon as possible."

"Oh, right," Ron said with a shrug.

"To Hogwarts it is," Harry said. "I'll get Hedwig and send an owl to Professor McGonagall."

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**Southern's Notes:** Sorry this has taken a while, but I was waiting for things to calm down over at the new SH before uploading so that I could upload simultaneously, but I couldn't wait any longer. I hope you've enjoyed this part. I'll have the next one uploaded next week...back on schedule.

Next: The trio will go to Hogwarts...and so does Snape! And what's Dumbledore's painting have to say about things?

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 30*

Snape is nearly caught by Hermione and the others. He retrieves what he needs and makes more plans. The trio are able to make some progress in their Horcrux hunt.

**Disclaimer:** J.K.R. owns these characters. I'm simply borrowing them, but I'll Scourgify them before sending them back home.

*As always, I'd like to thank my lovely, brilliant beta, Charmed Nay.*

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From his position behind the last greenhouse, Severus was in a good position to watch those coming and going from the castle. He'd been there for nearly an hour, watching and taking note of everyone on the grounds, everything's location, and even counting each step made of stone on the steep slope from the back of the castle that led down towards the gardens. From what he'd gathered, Sprout was not at the castle any longer. She'd already warded the greenhouses and set her enchantments in place to make certain her plants had the right amount of water and sunlight when needed, and she'd taken care to ward them with the same spells she'd always used...only known to the staff of Hogwarts.

He smirked. The dumpy witch likely assumed he'd never have need of her greenhouses and hadn't bothered to change it. No, in fact, she probably simply hadn't thought of changing it. She never was overly bright. It had been so easy to make his way onto the grounds. He'd used his Apparition point in the forest and trekked down the path he'd always used to travel towards the castle. It brought him directly into Sprout's gardens, which were at the rear of the greenhouses. They were surrounded by shrubbery, enabling him to pick a quite comfortable spot in which to lie down and spy on the goings on of the castle. If his calculations were correct, there were only seven people at the castle: Minerva McGonagall, Argus Filch, Rubeus Hagrid, Poppy Pomfrey, Irma Pince, Horace Slughorn, and Austrina Sinistra.

Minerva had walked out with a group earlier and had seen them to the gates before returning to the castle herself. Darkness was finally pushing the last of the light from the sky. All he needed was a little less light, and he would disillusion himself and make his way out to his private entry to the castle.

His careful plans and patient planning were ruined an instant later when he heard some rustling from his left. Someone or something else was making use of the same location as he. Quickly casting the charm on himself, he tried to press against the wall of the greenhouse as much as he could, hoping he'd not be noticed. The deep shade from the last of the day's light hitting the shrubbery would help him remain unseen.

"Ouch! You're on my foot, Ron," said a feminine voice.

Severus placed it immediately: Hermione Granger. And if she was talking to Ronald Weasley, then that meant that Potter wasn't far behind. The idiots were sneaking onto castle grounds? What business did they have there? Shouldn't they be hiding from the Dark Lord?

"Well, it's not my fault. It's right hard to move with the three of us hiding under here," Weasley replied. "Take it off, Harry."

The three of them became visible, all crouching down and huddled closely together. "I don't think we'll be doing much more of that, the three of us," Potter said, putting his cloak into a bag that was strapped onto his back. "It's dark enough for us to go in now. The grounds are safe. McGonagall said that they'd be gone by now, right?"

"Yes," Granger answered.

She was perilously close to where Severus was lying, her foot merely a few inches from his face. He could see the tiny scuffmarks on the brown leather all along the sides of her shoes and noted that the lace was partially untied.

"I'm going to go start looking for books in the library while you two go and talk to Dumbledore's painting," she continued. "There's got to be something in the Restricted Section at least. A quick Summoning Spell should send the books to me easily enough."

"Don't you want to hear what Dumbledore has to say?" Weasley asked, reaching out to place his hand on her lower back, where it rubbed her reassuringly. He leaned closer and whispered, "Think Harry could do with your support, too."

"Yeah, I guess I'd have to be deaf not to hear you," Potter said in annoyance. "Come on." He strode out from the shrubbery leaving Weasley and Granger behind.

"Coming then?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Oh, let me tie my shoe."

"Right. Boy, Hagrid's hut still hasn't been rebuilt. Poor sod's living in the castle right now," Weasley said as he followed Potter.

When Granger squatted down to tie her shoe, the strong scent of fresh oranges wafted over to him. *Good Lord, she must have squeezed oranges into her bath or rubbed their juice directly on her flesh*, he thought, willing himself not to sneeze. To his horror, she began mumbling to herself.

"Undo... cross... pull... loop... go around... another loop... There, all done now." She patted the top of her shoe affectionately and stood. "Please give Harry the strength to deal with this." In the next instant, she was gone as well, hurrying to catch up with her two friends.

How had someone like her become mixed up with Potter and Weasley? She had her faults, of course, but the friendship with those two had done much to influence her, causing her to become as troublesome as the boys. The best thing that could have happened to the little swot would have been to be sorted into Ravenclaw...away from the Dream Team. Although she was always respectful to him, he could tell that his indifference and cold words affected her much more deeply than her two friends. They would simply respond cheekily while she would remain silent or look as though she wanted to cry. He'd waited for her to snap, to respond with a flippant remark worthy of Potter, but she never had, even when he'd tried pushing her harder. He couldn't really say why he enjoyed intimidating her, but he knew that it was partly because of the way Weasley and Potter would swell indignantly with rage. And he supposed for the most part that it was simply because he could. And why not?

Shrugging the thoughts away, he gazed at Potter, noting that his strut was quite like the one his father had used when he'd been at school. "Potters," he said in disgust. "All alike." Sudden pent up rage tried to make its way to the surface of his mind, his hand unconsciously gripping his wand. How he'd love to hex the brat. The little bastard didn't know or appreciate that everything that had been done had been done for him. Dumbledore had opted to die for him, and yet, he still had the nerve to strut about as if he owned Hogwarts, bossing his two faithful followers around, toying with their compassion.

"We'll see who has the last laugh, Potter," he whispered, pushing up from the ground, not bothering to brush the leaves or dirt from his robes. Still Disillusioned he made his way to the castle. Once he neared the small statue of a griffin, he took seven steps to the left and tapped three select stones with his wand. The stones silently moved aside to allow him passage. He slipped into the castle undetected, for there were no wards placed to detect anyone's entrance this way. No one alive knew of it...Dumbledore had made it for him specifically. As the stones sealed behind him, a candle lit just ahead, casting light for him. He began walking down the damp, sloped path, another candle lighting every few feet and the ones behind him going out the moment he was far enough away. It didn't take long to make his way to the door to his chambers.

"*Fawkes*," he said softly. The door then opened slowly, and for the first time in weeks, he entered his old chambers. Nothing had been changed. He snorted as he realized that Minerva likely had no idea how to enter his rooms, as he'd long before warded them to close upon his exit and not open for anyone but him...or the late headmaster.

He quickly went about his business of searching for the small, locked chest that contained parchments that Dumbledore had given him, dismissing all thoughts of Potter and his pesky friends from his mind. He had work of his own to do...important work in fact. He went to the large trunk near the foot of his bed, opened it, took out the chest, and unlocked it quickly. He'd never actually read what was on the parchments. Dumbledore had given him a few details and ordered him to not open it until the time was right.

"I'd certainly say that now is that time," he mused aloud as he broke the seal. He swallowed thickly as he recognized the familiar handwriting of his late friend.

Severus,

*I can safely assume that you are reading this because the time has come to bring into action the plan we'd discussed. I know that you felt some trepidation about doing this, but I trust you will see it done nevertheless. I have faith in you. Unfortunately, I have not disclosed all details here. I've hidden them away at Grimmauld Place. I am certain that you will have no trouble finding them.*

*Go to the study, have a glass of whisky, and remember our last conversation we had in that very room. The location of the information will come to you. I apologize that this is so short, but as always, I have other things to attend. All you need to know will be on the next parchment you read.*

Thank you, Severus.

Albus

Shaking his head in annoyance, he folded and sealed the parchment again, placing it back inside the chest. "How the bloody hell am I supposed to get in there? Surely they've changed Secret-Keepers by now." He snorted. "Perhaps not." He had to find a way to go there undetected. There would likely be wards if nothing else. Thinking of Potter, he thought of Weasley and Granger. If anything, Granger probably directed them to make the place more secure...if they were even staying there. It would be much easier if it were still vacated.

"Weasley," he said slowly, an idea coming to him. If there was a weak link in amongst them, it was that boy. "I suppose I should start brewing some Polyjuice then," he said and quickly began gathering things that he'd need to bring back to his new home. Getting into Grimmauld Place wouldn't be hard at all. Hell, the berks had been right next to him earlier and hadn't even known it. The next few weeks would be taken up with potion brewing and spying on Grimmauld Place. If he could still see it, they'd not changed their Secret-Keeper. He hoped this was the case, as it would be easy enough to detect their wards and find an undetectable way in. Once that was done, the rest would all fall into place.

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"Albus?" Minerva called. "You have visitors." She smiled as he opened his eyes and stretched.

"I must have fallen asleep," he said with a kind smile, looking out at them.

Harry moved forward, raising a hand to the portrait, stopping as he neared the canvas. "S-sir?"

Hermione had tears in her eyes, and she noticed that even McGonagall seemed touched by Harry's reunion with Dumbledore. To her great pleasure, Ron pulled her closer and put his arm around her. She could tell that he was choked up as well. Who wouldn't be, seeing the headmaster again after all that happened?

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Are you all right?"

"I..." Harry seemed to have lost his voice for a moment. "I need your help...some advice if you don't mind."

"You can have it." Dumbledore looked out at Hermione and Ron. "Hello, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger."

"Hello, sir."

"Hi."

"First," Harry began, "I'd like to use your Pensieve." He gazed over to the last place he'd seen it and noted that it was gone. He looked around and saw that the office had changed somewhat. He supposed that should be expected, as there was a new headmistress of the school, but it just didn't seem right.

"I have most of his things still in his chambers," McGonagall said gently, realizing what he was looking for.

"You may use anything of mine that you need, Harry," Dumbledore said, giving him a small smile. "I trust you have questions about what we talked of last?"

"Yes."

Noting that McGonagall seemed rooted to her chair, Dumbledore said, "We'll have to save that for another time it seems when we can speak alone. For now, have you any other questions you want to ask?"

"I have a lot of things I want to ask."

Hermione noticed that Harry's voice had taken on a bitter tone, and she didn't want him to plague Dumbledore with questions about Professor Snape, so she spoke up. "Sir, it's about Grimmauld Place. I think we should find a new Secret-Keeper, but Harry feels that there's no need. What would you have us do?"

"Grimmauld Place is as safe now as it was before," he said evenly.

This confused Hermione. Did that mean that it wasn't very safe before with Snape knowing the address or that he still trusted Snape even after all that had happened? "Er..."

"I don't want to change anything," Harry said, looking back at her.

"Voldemort will never find his way inside," Dumbledore said with a nod. "I can assure you of that."

"What about Snape?" Ron blurted.

Hermione quickly elbowed him and shot him an angry glance. "Shut it, will you?"

"He'll never give out the address." Dumbledore's smile faded into a stern look. "When I say that you are safe, you must trust me."

Harry moved closer and lowered his voice. "He's worried that Snape might come in, not that he'd be able to tell anyone."

"It would have to be a very good reason for Severus to go there." He looked over towards Ron, and then his eyes lingered on Hermione. "You have nothing to fear from Severus."

Exploding, Harry yelled, "Nothing except the Avada Kedavra! Don't you remember what happened to you?"

"I am aware of all that has happened, yes," Dumbledore said, tone unwavering.

Turning to look at Headmistress McGonagall, Harry rudely blurted, "Do you mind?"

When Hermione noticed her eyebrows rising in indignation, she quickly moved forward. "Professor McGonagall, if I could have a word please... er... privately."

Stony gaze lingering on Harry, she replied, "Indeed you may, Miss Granger. Come." She strode past Hermione and took a small flight of stairs to another section of the office, enabling her to keep an eye on the goings on above near Dumbledore's portrait. "Well?"

"I have need to do a bit of research in the library here, and I was wondering if you would speak with Madam Pince on my behalf." She smiled hopefully. "I would be in your debt, and I won't take anything from the library. I've got a quill that can quickly jot down the information that I need." In truth, she wouldn't want Madam Pince or anyone to know what books she looked at.

"Are you returning to school this September?" her mentor inquired.

"I... I would like to, Professor, but I don't think that I'll be able to, what with Harry needing my help and all." She bit her lip, mentally berating herself for what she knew would come now.

"And what sort of help does he need exactly?"

"Honestly, I cannot tell you. I promised that I would keep his confidence in this matter, and if you don't agree to help me because of that, I will understand...only I hope you don't hold it against me. You trusted me with a Time-Turner and prefect duties, so I do hope that means you'll trust me on this." Seeing her old professor wavering between agreeing and denying, she added conspiratorially, casting a furtive glance over towards Harry, "I can give you my word that the information I need is vital to helping Harry carry out Dumbledore's final wishes... things the Order needs us to do."

Nodding slowly, Professor McGonagall said, "Very well. I will inform Madam Pince that you are to be allowed access to all parts of the library and will not be leaving with any books. Austriana... pardon, Professor Sinistra is utilizing the library this summer as well, so you may see her there. I trust that won't be a problem."

"No, ma'am," she said quickly. "I'll not interrupt her work, keeping as quiet as possible." She paused. "Why are you all still here?"

"The select few who are here are working on different projects to ensure the safety of this school. There are important measures that are needed...else the parents won't allow their children to return." She frowned and shook her head. "Not that I can blame them. I always thought that with Albus here..." Her voice trailed away.

Hermione could only guess that her professor meant to say what she'd always believed as well: that Hogwarts had always felt so safe with Dumbledore around. She placed a hand on McGonagall's shoulder affectionately. "Somehow things will be all right. It'll work out."

Nodding and composing herself, the headmistress said, "They've had long enough to talk, I think. Come along."

As Hermione began to follow, a picture on a small shelf drew her attention. She stopped to quickly look at it. Professor McGonagall was smiling and shaking hands with the old Minister of Magic, Fudge, clutching a parchment to her chest. It was obviously some award. What caught Hermione's eye were the two people in the background: Headmaster Dumbledore and a much younger Professor Snape. Dumbledore was talking animatedly, making large circles with his hands as he did so, and Professor Snape's face had a carefree expression as he watched. Both suddenly looked towards her as if knowing she was there. Dumbledore waved, beaming brightly, while Snape simply nodded, small smile still on his face.

Before tears could well up, Hermione fled, wanting to catch up with McGonagall. Trying to push what she'd seen from her mind...at least for the moment...she tuned in to what Harry was asking McGonagall.

"Professor, he's told me that you noticed a corridor that you'd never seen before near the Ravenclaw dormitory. Is that right?"

"If I told him that I saw it, I saw it," she said, seemingly annoyed.

Dumbledore began chuckling. "Forgive her, Harry. It's just that I never had the pleasure of witnessing it, and Professor Flitwick claims there is no such corridor."

"Well, it was there, I tell you," she replied heatedly. "It's not often that I venture over to Ravenclaw Tower, but I needed to speak with Flitwick. After leaving his office, I was about to descend the stairs when I noticed an opening just behind that statue of Balfour Blane at the top. The sun was so bright as it filtered in through the large window, I thought I was seeing things or that it was just the statue's shadow. When I moved closer, just at the entrance, a sconce lit just beyond it, lighting the way should I want to proceed."

"Did you?" Hermione asked.

"No, I did not," she replied tartly. "I went to get Filius to come with me, and when we returned, it was gone. There was no doorway, only stone."

Hermione nodded and spoke. "How about the sunlight? Was it still as bright or had it hid behind a cloud or moved down?"

"What's that to do with anything?" Ron interrupted.

"Some places are enchanted to only show up at a certain time of day or when the sunlight hits it a certain way," she said primly. "Think of Hamunaptra over in Egypt. Don't you remember learning that when your family visited?"

Ron shuddered, muttering, "The City of the Dead..."

"I'm not certain," said McGonagall, "but both of us checked for any warding or sign of the corridor and found nothing." She gazed at Dumbledore, who was smiling serenely. "It was there."

"Indeed, indeed. I believe you," he said. "Our castle holds many secrets, I'm certain."

"Tomorrow," Hermione said, "would you mind terribly going there at the same time...when the sun's just as bright to see if anything has changed?"

Harry stepped forward. "I'd like to be here...just in case."

"Well, what's this to do with you?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"Er..."

"You know," Ron said with a wink, "we can't say anything. Official business for Dumbledore, you see."

To soothe things, Hermione said, "Perhaps it was a corridor made by Rowena Ravenclaw herself, and if so, we would like to check it over for... for something we need." She smiled when Dumbledore nodded his approval. "It's important to us."

"I will allow you to be here," she said, relenting finally. "However, you may not take anything from the corridor or chamber if we are able to find a way in."

"With all due respect, Headmistress," Hermione began, "I..."

"I don't like being out of the loop," McGonagall said in annoyance. She looked at Albus accusingly. "You've told them not to tell me, yet they need my help. Do you not trust me Albus? Am I less worthy of your trust than bloody S..." She stopped abruptly, wincing as if her own words had hurt her.

"Minerva, you know that I trust you as much as anyone else that I hold dear to me. I've only told Harry to keep this to himself and his two closest friends because I knew they would keep his secrets and help him without thinking of consequences or, dare I say, allowing rules to stand in the way of what needs to be done."

"Though I may not approve of things, I am not above rule bending...at times."

"Yeah?" Harry asked sarcastically. "Couldn't even let me go to Hogsmeade with my classmates because my uncle didn't sign a note. You knew how they treated me!" he accused.

"I was trying to keep you safe here at Hogwarts! I'd thought Sirius Black was out there, waiting to snatch you away," she said in her defense.

"How do I know you won't be trying to keep me safe by using what I say against me? By telling someone else?" Harry asked, tone angry.

Hermione flinched. She'd never seen Harry speak to McGonagall that way, and she'd never known for her old Head of House to stand for impertinence. She knew there would be a confrontation soon.

"Mind your attitude, Potter. I demand respect," she said coolly.

He looked down, abashed. "Sorry. It's just that many lives are at stake."

"And you think I couldn't be trusted."

"Well, I sure as hell wish I could say yes, don't I?" Harry retorted bitterly. "It would make things much easier for me."

"You have my word that I will not stand in your way if you openly speak to me about your plans," she said quietly, stern expression softening. "You've always been special to me... to us all, Harry."

Hearing his name spoken with such affection, Harry looked up and nodded. "And do I have your word to speak of it to nobody, save us or Dumbledore's portrait?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "You do."

"All right. Have a seat then. I'll explain it to you."

"While you're doing that, I would like to go to the library."

"I'll go with you, Hermione," Ron said, moving to her side.

She smiled. "Headmistress, if I could have a letter of permission?"

"Certainly." She waited while the note was scribbled and sealed with the headmistress' official seal. "We will be waiting for you here."

"Thanks."

They made their way to the library in silence, only the echoes of their steps sounding along the corridors. Before Ron opened the door, he said, "I'm sure he's doing the right thing, confiding in McGonagall like that."

"I'm relieved that he is," she said with a nod. "I felt so guilty by not telling her the truth. She's in charge here and was Dumbledore's right hand, accomplice in all that he did. I'd say she deserved to know."

"I suppose." He smiled sheepishly. "Look, I just wanted to say that you... you were brilliant back there, the way you were trying to handle and explain everything."

"Well, thank you, Ronald," she said, smiling brightly. It wasn't often that he simply came out and gave her compliments like that any longer.

He shrugged and opened the door for her. When they entered, they immediately saw Professor Sinistra, clad only in a thin shift and large blue witch's hat, flicking her wand in a series of sharp movements. Ron cleared his throat, but it didn't disturb her, as she was completely involved in what she was doing, her long, dark locks swaying behind her.

"Shhh," Hermione whispered. "We're not supposed to disrupt her. Come on." She pulled his hand and led him towards Madam Pince's office, not missing the fact that his eyes were locked on to the professor's shapely body. Feeling a smite jealous, she released his hand and stomped ahead.

"Yes?" Madam Pince asked, narrowing her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I have this," she said, holding out the roll of parchment the headmistress had given her.

Making a show of putting her glasses on her nose and opening the missive with slow deliberation, she silently read the note, gazing up at Hermione for a moment and then looking back down to the note. "I suppose I will have to agree." Her vulture-like gaze left Hermione to travel over to Ron, who was still spying on Professor Sinistra. "It doesn't say anything about him being with you," she said suspiciously.

"Do you really expect me to go all the way back to her office to get her to amend the note?" Hermione asked testily. "She's in a meeting with Harry Potter right now!" She didn't like using Harry's name, but she felt it prudent in this instance.

"I will allow it," she said, rolling up the parchment and placing it on her desk. "However, if I should learn that he had no business here tonight, I will make certain that your research is quite hard to complete."

Forcing her mouth to remain closed, Hermione nodded and quickly moved towards the Restricted Section, wanting to try there first. She didn't have to look to see if Ron was following her, as she could hear his loud stomping behind her. "Are you purposely trying to draw Professor Sinistra's attention?" she accused once they were far enough away from Madam Pince.

"Wha...? Eh?"

"Nothing!" she huffed.

"Bloody hell," Ron said, obviously in awe of the stacks and rows of books before them. "I've just realized how hard this is going to be. Gonna be like finding your quill at the bottom of a pile of feathers."

"Oh, honestly," Hermione said, still irritated with him, swishing her wand. *Accio any references with something pertaining to Horcruxes*

After a brief pause, three books zoomed towards them, and Hermione directed them over to a nearby table. When no other books came, she frowned and said, "Looks like there isn't much then."

"Right." Ron pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit. "What do you want me to do then? I'm not too good at this research stuff. Want I should go to the main part and try to Summon something?"

"No," she said, taking the proffered seat. "Thanks."

"All right," he said, plopping down next to her. She reached into the pocket of her robes to fetch her magical quill. "Be ready in case I have notes," she said.

"Sure," Ron agreed.

"Not you, silly," she said with a laugh. "The quill."

"Oh, right. I knew that. Just trying to make you laugh, is all," he said quickly.

She simply grinned and began looking through the first book while he put his head down. After poring over the books and having her quill jot down a few things on a single sheet of parchment, Hermione was ready to go. She nudged Ron to wake him.

"Watch it," he said, swatting at her.

"Ron, wake up."

"Oh, finished, are you?" he asked with a yawn.

"Yes, there wasn't much in there, but it's a start. I found a spell to detect one. That's good if nothing else, but I'm confused on how to destroy it. I'll have to ask Dumbledore about that," she said as she tried to tug him up. Once he was up, he enveloped her in a tight hug. She leaned into him and relished the feel of being held. How long had she wanted someone to do this with her? Viktor hadn't minded holding her when he was at school, and since then, she'd only had that one date with McLaggen, though his type of affection was much more physical and definitely unwanted.

"Oi, what's *she* doing here?" Ron asked, suddenly pushing her away.

Hermione followed his gaze and noticed Mrs. Norris watching them from the front of the first stack, large lamp-like eyes scrutinizing them. She turned and went back towards the exit. Hermione said, "Makes me feel like we've been caught doing something wrong!"

They grinned and left the Restricted Section, only to overhear a conversation behind a nearby stack of books. "Yes, my sweet, you look right nice today." Filch. Locking eyes with Hermione, she made a sour expression. Who was he talking to?

"Why, thank you, Argus," replied a breathless Madam Pince.

This time it was Ron who made the sour expression, pulling Hermione away swiftly. As they approached the main doors, they saw Professor Sinistra fastening her robes. She looked up, startled.

"What are you two doing in here? I wasn't aware of any students on campus?" she asked, pointing her wand at them.

"We're here with permission from Headmistress McGonagall," Hermione said nervously.

"Is that right?"

"It is," Ron said. "We gave the permission note to Madam Pince when we came in. You were a bit... distracted, so you might not have seen us." He grinned when she blushed. "But, uh, we saw you."

"Oh, I must apologize," she said, obviously embarrassed, putting her wand away. "The series of spells that I have to work produce energy around me that is quite... warm, shall we say? I just can't stand being hot."

"You're definitely hot," Ron said with a grin, gazing at her body. "Oof!"

Hermione elbowed him and stormed off, hearing him apologize to the professor.

"Er, sorry, I meant to say that you seemed to be hot... Good day." When he caught up with her, he pulled her arm to make her stop. "What's your problem?"

"I don't appreciate you flirting with another woman right in front of me!" she said indignantly. "You wouldn't like it very much if I did the same, would you?"

"Flirting? With a professor? Are you mad?" he asked, face reddening. "It was a slip of words, that's all."

Self consciously, Hermione looked down at her body. She certainly didn't have the curves that Professor Sinistra had. Nor did she have the experience that Ron had with others. And she certainly wasn't as bold as Lavender. As it often did, the fear of being found lacking and failing her relationship assaulted her.

"It's just that... you never look at me that way," she said finally, hoping she didn't sound miserably stupid.

"I always look at you that way," he said, stepping closer, pulling her chin up with his fingers. "Trust me, Hermione. You're a looker all right and mine to boot."

He brushed his lips against hers tentatively and looked around to make certain that nobody was about before kissing her again, more deeply. The sound of a door opening drew them apart, but Hermione felt much better about their relationship. "Thanks."

"Anytime," he said, turning around to see who was coming. When nobody came around the corner, he frowned and wrinkled his brow in confusion. "Sounded like someone was coming out of the library to me."

"Same here."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Marauder's Map. "Let's see then." He unrolled it, saying, *"solemnly swear that I'm up to no good"*. The pages came to life with different pictures and movements. "Says nobody's here but us. Sinistra's still in the library, and ugh... look at this. Filch and Pince must be going at it or something. They look like their right on top of each other."

"Ron!" Hermione admonished.

"Bloody fucking hell!" he said, face suddenly pale.

"What's wrong?"

"Snape! He's here in the castle!"

Hermione pulled her wand and whipped around. "Where is he?" she asked nervously.

"He's just outside the castle now. Looks to be going towards Hagrid's hut!" He pulled his wand and sprinted for the entrance hall.

"Ron, you don't mean to take on Snape alone?" Hermione asked incredulously.

He halted and shook his head. "Blimey. We need to get Harry."

"I'll get him," she said. "Watch the map to see where he goes!"

Just as she began to sprint away, Harry rounded the corner with the Pensieve hovering just behind him. "Hey, I was just going to look for you in the library. Been gone kind of long, eh?"

"Harry! Come on! Hurry!" she said, not taking the time to even mention that they'd seen Snape on the map.

He followed anyway, pulling his wand when he saw that hers was pulled, the Pensieve zooming behind him.

"Here!" Ron called, running out onto the grounds.

Once outside, Hermione said, "We saw Snape's name on the map! He's here!"

Harry sped forward and snatched the map from Ron. "Where is he? Where's Snape?"

Hermione blinked at his forceful tone, but said nothing as he looked to the spot Ron's finger was pointing to. Snape was past Hagrid's hut now and just entering the forest.

"Damn!" Harry said. "He'll be off the map soon." He ran towards the scorched remains of Hagrid's hut at full speed, not saying another word.

Hermione and Ron followed quickly and entered the small clearing into the forest cautiously. "Harry," she whispered.

"Over here," he called loudly, waving his hands to get their attention. "He's gone."

They tramped over to his side and looked at the small clearing with interest.

"I've seen him here before. Back in first year, he was bullying Quirrell here. I'll bet that this is where he used to come to Disapparate."

"I wish I would have looked at the map sooner, mate," Ron said miserably. "We'd be heroes if we'd capture him, and we'd get that reward money."

"Come on. We've got to warn Professor McGonagall," Hermione said, turning back towards the castle. Neither followed. "What?"

"We're going to set a detection ward here," Harry said, already flicking his wand and mumbling to himself.

"Harry, no! It's much too dangerous. We need to inform the staff. They're at risk. There's no telling what he was doing here. In fact, for all we know, he followed us here. We came around the long way, too, didn't we?" She heard a twig snap behind her and turned around, shakily pointing her wand. "Show yourself."

Nothing came forward.

"It's nothing," Harry said. "I'll know if he comes here again, and I've got a feel of the place now. We all do. We can Apparate in after and take him by surprise." When she glared at him, he added, "He needs to be comfortable and to think he's sneaking about. It's the only way to catch the slimy git at his own game. Trust me on this, Hermione."

"I don't like it," she said, crossing her arms, "but it seems that you'll do what you want anyway. And Ron seems to agree with you."

"Yeah," Ron said. "He's got a point. We could do this. We owe it to Dumbledore."

"Speaking of him, how did things go during your chat with the professor?" she asked.

"Let's talk over dinner," Ron said. "I'm a bit hungry, meself."

"Good idea," Harry said, turning to clutch the still hovering Pensieve. "Any luck in the library?"

"Some. Come on. Let's go home."

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**Southern's Notes:** I'm getting things set up. I'm certain you see what's coming, eh? Teehee.

Next: We'll see how Narcissa and Draco are doing and learn a bit more about Snape's plans. Ron gets a bit frustrated with Hermione.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 30*

Narcissa puts her family's lives in the hands of Snape once again while he makes ready to advance his own plans. The trio are lucky at Hogwarts--mostly--and Hermione wonders about what truly happened with Snape.

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters of course. Just borrowing.

*Thanks go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay.*

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Narcissa frowned as Severus walked by her and said nothing in greeting. He'd been treating her indifferently since she'd been forced to stay with him. Crossing her arms about her chest, she squeezed herself tightly as if trying to pry out the foreboding that had settled upon her. The Dark Lord had found an old infirmary in a deserted, wooded area that was being cared for by a single caretaker. The man had been killed of course, and wards had been put in place so that nobody else could enter the area. She'd never had the courage to test it, but she assumed that Disapparating had been disallowed as well.

"Severus?"

He paused and turned back to her. "Yes, Narcissa?"

"What are you brewing?" she asked, hoping to make conversation.

As if he was weighing what he should tell her, he said, "It's Polyjuice Potion. I've something to do that calls for me to take another's form." He glared at her. "Since I completed your bloody Unbreakable Vow, I can no longer walk the streets as myself, now can I?"

"Will you always hold that against me?" She moved closer and debated on putting her hand on his arm.

Sighing, he said, "We're to shelter the others, per our Lord's orders. Perhaps you could make yourself useful and see that everyone will have a place to sleep." He turned back to his cauldron before adding, "And to keep up appearances, I'm afraid you will have to share my quarters with me. See to it that your things are moved in with mine."

She looked over to the corner where he'd been sleeping. From the moment they'd entered the place, he'd claimed the far corner as his own. There was a threadbare curtain that had likely once been used to give patients privacy that Severus used as a wall, making a room for himself. Next to this little corner was his makeshift laboratory and library. She'd spent much time reading through some of his texts, as he did little to entertain her in their long days together, sometimes leaving her alone completely.

"Is Draco coming?" she asked suddenly, realizing that she might be reunited with her son at last.

"Mmm. It seems you're going to be having a family reunion of sorts." He turned back to face her, eyes glinting. "Bellatrix and Rabastan will be coming as well."

"What, Rabastan? I thought he was in Azkaban with Lucius and the others?" She paled. "Have... have they escaped then?" What would Lucius do once he found out that she'd been given over to Severus' custody? What would he say about all that she'd done to ensure Draco's safety?

"He's never been back to Azkaban. He made his escape just before the others were captured." He smirked. "You're not privy to all that goes on, my dear. You simply know what you must. Nothing more." He nodded towards the other side of the large room. "Do what you must to make our little, run-down infirmary more welcoming."

She said nothing as he turned his attention back to stirring his cauldron and decided to do exactly as he'd instructed. It wouldn't pay to get on his bad side, especially not when he seemed to be the only one willing to help her...even if he pretended to be sour about it. She was quite certain that he cared about things more than he let on. Quickly, she moved her few things into his room, placing her clothing with his in the large, transfigured wardrobe.

Glancing at the bed, Narcissa shivered slightly. He wanted them to think he'd been sleeping with her all along. She felt her face heat and her stomach tingle as she thought back to their brief, frantic coupling the night he and Draco had fled from Hogwarts. Deep down she knew it to be something that she wanted to experience again. It had been so long since she'd felt that good. The damage had been done. Whether she'd had sex with him that one time or many times, she'd still betrayed Lucius.

And he would understand that she had to do what she must to survive. She was certain it would be no more than he would do if their situations were reversed. Wanting to be with Severus in that way didn't mean that she did not love her husband, she reasoned. She was simply a lonely woman, who feared for her life and the life of her son. If she had to be Severus' paramour to ensure their safety, she would do so. Besides, the Dark Lord seemed to expect it. Her cheeks flamed as she remembered the words he'd spoken in front of the others, making it known that she wanted something more with Severus, no matter how brief it was.

Setting about to do the remainder of her tasks, she began tidying up the small section she and Severus had been using as a sitting area. He'd circled a few tables, lamps, chairs, and a long couch around the fireplace. It was quite cozy and peaceful when she didn't look around to see the rest of the dismal room. After she rearranged the furniture, plumped the cushions, and placed a large vase on the center table, she called out to Severus.

She watched as he seemed to glide over to her. "What is it?"

"Could you please give me my wand so that I can do things right?" she asked. "I've things to move, such as those small beds you stored away in the backroom, and I would like to add a womanly touch." She pointed to the vase. "Flowers and such."

"Narcissa, you are not a prisoner here. Your wand has always been on the mantle of the fireplace."

"Yes, but..."

"But you thought you couldn't use it?" he queried.

"Well, no, I thought that I was..."

"The Dark Lord knows that you will not disobey him, not when he has Draco under his guidance. He knows that even though you did something he didn't approve of that at least your loyalties do lie with him."

"How do you know I won't flee?" she asked, suddenly indignant that they didn't care enough to worry that she might try to leave. How dare they think she was some meek little follower who wouldn't do as she pleased!

"Will you?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

She shook her head. "Of course not." She smiled then. "Thank you, Severus. I appreciate that you trust me."

In a moment of rare tenderness, he lifted a hand to cup her cheek. "I wish that I could do more for you...for all of you, that is. Lucius included." He dropped his hand and quickly fled back to his corner.

Bringing a hand to touch her cheek, she smiled and felt a weight lift from her shoulders. Severus would help her. Severus wasn't trying to treat her as some prize or some common trollop. He trusted her with a wand and wanted her to know that he cared, though he hadn't said it in so many words. *Lucius, I hope you understand all that's happened*, she thought as she made her way to the mantle to grasp her wand. It felt good to have the smooth length back in her hand again. She'd been thinking that Severus had placed her wand there as a test to see if she would try to use it.

"I should have simply asked," she whispered happily. Things were definitely looking up.

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"Well, it looks like you were right, Hermione," McGonagall said in astonishment as the evening sunlight hit the wall behind Balfour Blane's statue, showing them a secret corridor. "I can't believe no one has ever noticed this before."

"No one has ever asked," the Grey Lady said before floating towards another female ghost, who immediately began chatting about how dashing some fellow was.

Flitwick grinned, squeaking out, "I suppose we should be glad to witness this at all then."

Ron tugged on Hermione's sleeve. "Let me go first," he said, trying to sound braver than he felt. He didn't much like exploring something that could have traps or some beast hiding within. They'd discussed the possibility, but since there hadn't ever been any rumors of it like there had been of Slytherin's chamber and the beast it held within, they assumed that nothing of the sort lived here...not with history showing how kind the woman was.

Nevertheless, they'd all vowed to have their wands at the ready. When Harry attempted to enter the corridor, Flitwick stopped him and went in first, looking around suspiciously with each step he took.

"I think things will be fine. The Grey Lady would have warned us to be wary otherwise," Hermione replied calmly, obviously more interested in the new corridor than in appreciating his attempt at protecting her.

Saying nothing in reply, he continued the slow walk behind the others, taking in Harry's determined walk, Flitwick's excited gazing, McGonagall's cautious steps, and Hermione's wonderment. He shrugged and thought, *Looks like any other corridor if you ask me.* However, when the next set of sconces lit up, his breath caught in his throat. "Bloody hell," he said, his words joining the others' murmurs.

They were all now standing at the entrance to what seemed to be a large chamber. Candles began lighting to give them a better view of the room, and it was one of the most beautiful places he'd seen.

"Look at that fountain! It's like we're in an indoor courtyard!" Hermione said, pointing to the center of the room where a large water fountain sat. In the middle of it was a stone tree; water fell from some of its branches into the rocky pond below it.

"See that, do you?" Harry asked, nodding toward the top. "A raven sitting up there." His eyes met Ron's and then Hermione's knowingly.

"Touch nothing," McGonagall ordered, moving off to inspect the bookshelves on one side while Flitwick moved over to a large desk in a far corner.

"I love fountains," Hermione said with a grin. "I always have the insane urge to sit on the edge and dangle my feet in."

"Most people toss money in," Ron added. "What a waste!"

Harry sat on a bench and began perusing the room slowly. "Now, what looks like something that Voldemort would use as a Horcrux? Look around."

"I'll go read some of the carvings in stone around the fountain's walls," Hermione said.

Ron followed her, oddly enjoying the clicking of their heels on the floor, and apprehensively looked at the tree. "Almost looks like another Whomping Willow," he muttered. "Watch it," he added, pulling Hermione back. "You don't know if this thing might have a go at us or not."

"Seems harmless," she said with a shrug. "I'm not going to touch anything anyway. I'm just bending down to read what's engraved here." Her eyes were alight with glee. "Just think! We're in Rowena Ravenclaw's personal chamber! There's no telling what secrets this place holds, and we'll be the first to find them...the first to be here in ages!"

Despite his warning to Hermione, Ron reached out to put his hand under the cool flow of water dripping from a nearby branch. It seemed harmless enough. Something



glimmering caught his eye, and he moved around for a closer look and realized it was the raven's eye...a large sapphire!

"Bet that's worth a fortune," he said, taking in the deep blue color of the precious stone. He eased up to stand on the wall of the fountain so that he could get a better look at it. "It's huge. Never seen the likes of something like this before." A look behind him showed Harry talking to Flitwick and pointing to a marble vase. Eager to feel the smooth, shimmering gem under his fingertips, he reached for it, made contact, and screamed in pain, unable to pull his hand away.

It felt as if his fingers were on fire, as if the blood within them was boiling and trying to melt his flesh and bones. Even as he looked, the tips of his fingers were becoming singed, and the stench of burning flesh assaulted his nostrils. The next series of things happened so quickly that he hadn't time to properly understand what was happening. There were a series of jets of light that hit him...purple, blue, red...and then there was darkness and the dulling of his pain.

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Hermione wiped the fresh tears from her eyes and smiled shakily at Harry. "I'm just glad that Professor Flitwick was with us."

Nodding, Harry said, "Me too. I don't like that we've had to tell someone else about what's going on, but it sort of feels good to have another person to turn to. I mean, I wouldn't have known what to do if we'd been alone." He shook his head. "I can't believe he just touched it like that!"

"I know, and he'd just warned me to be careful."

"Professor," Harry said, greeting McGonagall. "How is he?"

"Sleeping soundly," she said in relief.

"He'll be fine," Madam Pomfrey said from behind her, closing the curtains tightly around Ron's bed. "But he'll be needing to sleep for a while until the potions wear off." She placed her wand in her pocket before adding, "It was Severus who tended to the headmaster," her voice caught slightly, "when this happened to him. Luckily, I was there with him and remembered the healing spells he used." After a small pause, she added, "I can't believe you lot are messing about with things that even the late headmaster didn't quite understand!"

"I think we should go and speak to Professor Dumbledore's painting," Hermione blurted quickly as she saw Harry tense at the mention of Snape's name. "We need to tell him what's happened. I have found an enchantment that's supposed to destroy the... er... what we found, but I wanted to go over it with him before we actually try it."

"Very well," Professor McGonagall said, waving away Madam Pomfrey's questions. "I'll ask Filius to join us as well."

"All right," Harry agreed. He reached over to squeeze Hermione's hand. "We can come back to sit with Ron after. There's nothing more we can do right now anyway."

Making their way to the headmistress' quarters quickly, they set about talking to Dumbledore, and he agreed that the spell she'd found was the one that they should use. He finally told them the tale about how his own hand had been damaged. Much like Ron, he'd made a careless mistake when dealing with a Horcrux. Just finding out all of the details, an intrigued Professor Flitwick asked many questions, both to Harry and to the late headmaster, leaving Hermione free to gaze about at the other portraits in the room. Slowly she walked around the room and found herself drawn to the stairs that led down to the lower section...the very place she and Professor McGonagall had talked the day before.

Without realizing it, she stopped in front of the picture she'd spotted on her way out the last time and gazed down at it, feeling her throat constrict. "Professor Snape," she whispered, "how could you have done this to him? To all of us who believed in you?"

The Snape in the picture eyed her curiously, and from his facial expression, he didn't seem to be unfriendly at all...not like the man she'd come to know during her years at Hogwarts. Making a brash decision, she took the framed photo, shrunk it, and slipped it into her pocket. She wasn't exactly stealing it. No, not at all. She would be returning it. She just wanted more time to privately look at it without worrying about Harry or anyone else happening upon her. She doubted the headmistress would even notice.

*There just has to be something more than what we know. Even Dumbledore doesn't seem disappointed by the things that have happened, and he maintains we can still trust Snape,* she said to herself, trying to desperately find any excuse to explain what had happened and to not think of Snape as the murderer he'd been dubbed.

She and Ron had looked into the Pensieve and had witnessed what had happened that night on the Astronomy Tower, and she couldn't disagree with what Harry had first told them. Snape did truly appear to be every bit the Death Eater when he'd cast that Killing Curse. Frowning, she walked over to look out the window. The evening air was much cooler, but the dark sky was clear, allowing the stars to shine brightly.

Suddenly filled with guilt, she thought about Ron and the words he'd said the night before. She could have easily lost him today, what with the way he'd touched that Horcrux without thinking. At any time, one of them could be killed or harmed irreparably. "I shouldn't have been so mean," she whispered, gazing at the slither of moon she could see.

*Ron's hand slid beneath her bra and cupped her breast, squeezing it gently. "Hermione..." he said, a hint of pleading in his voice. "Let's do a bit more tonight."*

"Ron..."

*"Just a little," he urged, lowering his head to meet his hand and nuzzling the underside of her soft flesh.*

*It felt great and was sending tingles through her body, but she felt as though they shouldn't be doing this when there was so much else to do. Truthfully, she felt guilty about trying to take a few moments of pleasure for herself when Harry was off alone in his room and dealing with the fate of the Wizarding world, the death of people he cared for, and missing Ginny. She felt that she and Ron should help to share his burden. There was only so much someone could take before breaking down or exploding.*

*"Maybe we shouldn't," she whispered uncertainly but moaned and arched into his mouth as his tongue began to lave her hardened nipple.*

*Her hands slid down his back and fondled with his arse, causing him to grind against her. She could feel his hard erection and was smug that she could do this to him...make him go mad with want. Boldly, she moved one hand between them and groped him.*

*"God, yes," he said before sucking on her nipple heatedly.*

*This forced a cry from her...not one of pleasure, but one of pain. "Ouch, Ron!" she said, pushing against him to unlatch his mouth from her breast. "Stop."*

*"Was that...? Eh?"*

*"Good grief. That was a bit rough. I think your teeth grated it," she said as she pulled down her bra and shirt, effectively killing the mood. "We should stop anyway. We've a big day ahead of us tomorrow... and should rest."*

*The disappointment was evident on his face, and she could tell he was frustrated. "You can't just lead a bloke on like that, Hermione," he bit out finally. "You were into it, and then you suddenly change your mind? I love you. Don't you love me?"*

*Her eyes widened momentarily before narrowing. "Of course I love you! I just don't want to rush into things. Okay?" She scowled at him. "And don't try to use words against*

*me. Having sex doesn't prove love."*

*"I just..." His voice trailed away as he stood and went to the window. "I just want to know all of you." With that, he quickly left her alone to dwell on what happened.*

If Ron had died, she would have regretted not being with him for all of her life. Perhaps it was time to take the next step forward with him. She did want to know him thoroughly as well, and it wasn't as though they wouldn't always be together. They'd put aside their problems and had become very close, properly taking the time to fall for each other. Hearing the scraping of chairs from above, she hurried up to see if the others were ready to destroy the Horcrux.

"Mother, we've been here for over a week now, and it's like you're ignoring what's happened." Draco lowered his voice as much as possible without rousing his aunt's attention. "Snape is a cold bastard. We're here under his watch! Once Father gets out of Azkaban, I think..." He gulped nervously. "I think they will do away with us."

Narcissa smiled at her son affectionately. "No, son, I don't believe it. Severus does care about us all...even your father, and he will..."

"Cares about us so much that he's got you sleeping in his bed!" Draco interrupted.

A resounding slap against his cheek caused Bellatrix to look up from her hand of cards. "What's the little blighter gone and said now? Never satisfied, that one."

"He's just being disrespectful is all," Narcissa replied, cheeks flushed brightly. "Draco," she said softly, "it's not like that at all. He's not asking for... anything else." She widened her eyes in hopes that her son would get her meaning. "If you remember nothing else, remember that you can trust Severus to do what's right for us." She took his hands in hers. "Understand?"

He nodded and pulled a hand away from hers to touch his stinging cheek, gazing at her petulantly. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Shh." She squeezed his hand tightly. "I can understand why you would think it. I know it looks suspicious."

"Mother, I've been thinking things that I shouldn't. I know I can shield my mind with Occlumency well enough. Aunt Bellatrix was a good teacher, but I can't stop wishing..."

"Wishing?"

"That I'd taken Dumbledore up on his offer." He glared over at the others. "We wouldn't be stuck here, living like Weasleys all in one miserable room!"

Narcissa straightened. "No, then we would be stuck living *with* the Weasleys." Her expression hardened. "You must rid yourself of these thoughts, Draco. The Dark Lord, he's very powerful when it comes to Legilimency. If he thinks you are secretly siding with the Potter boy and his friends, he may kill you."

"I know that," he said, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I'm just confused, I guess. I hate what we've become, yet I want to prove myself as a faithful follower... that I can be as good as Father." He snorted. "Father let students land him in Azkaban! Won't be hard to be better than that, will it?"

"Don't you speak about your father in such a way!" Narcissa said heatedly. Hooking her thumb behind her in the direction of Bellatrix and Rabastan, she added, "Don't you think I hear enough from them about his incompetence? He's a talented man, but not everyone is perfect, Draco. He made a mistake." She eyed him firmly. "Just as you made a mistake. I trust it won't happen again." She stood and gracefully made her way behind the curtains in the far corner of the room where Severus was already lying down.

After she quickly undressed and put on one of her nightgowns, she sat on the edge of the bed and thought about what her son had said. She, too, wished things could be different, and she hoped that she wasn't wrong about putting her faith in Severus. Her family's lives were at stake. A vision of an angry Bellatrix flashed through her mind. She was sure that her sister would always be on her side as well, whether she completely approved of Lucius or not.

"You're shaking. What's wrong?" Severus asked from behind her.

She turned and could just barely make out his face, the lighting from the other side of the room making its way through the thin curtains. "Draco... he's not thinking clearly about things. He's feeling a bit closed in, I suppose. We all are."

"Is there nothing more?"

"I'm tired of Rabastan and all his jibes. Lucius might not have gone about things the right way, but Rabastan seems to forget that he, too, was in Azkaban once before." She lay down beside him. "And Bella, well, she's not helping any. I think she likes putting Lucius, and even Draco, down."

"Things will change once Lucius leaves that place. He'll retake his place in our Lord's ranks, and the time for their taunts will be over," he said quietly, sounding half asleep. "Good night."

Many minutes passed before she had the courage to speak again. "Severus, do you think that just for tonight you could hold me?" He said nothing, but she'd heard his breath catch slightly and knew he wasn't truly asleep. Rejection was never something she took lightly. In fact, it was rare that she didn't get something she wanted. "I'll never ask it of you again." She slid over and awkwardly laid her head upon his chest and slid an arm over his waist.

He finally resumed breathing again and shifted slightly so that she would be more comfortable. It wasn't until she was nearly asleep that she heard him whisper words of comfort. "I know this is hard for you, and your offer is tempting. However, we cannot go any further or cross that line again. I shouldn't... It never should have happened in the first place."

Deciding not to reply or to pressure him, she remained quiet. Besides, he'd said that it was possible that Lucius would be a free man soon. Perhaps she shouldn't try to further things between them. *Why am I so confused where Severus is concerned?* she wondered.

Long after her breathing slowed and evened out, Severus lay awake and thinking of what the future would hold. He had to get into Grimmauld Place and had found a way to do so. All he had to do was make certain that he could separate Weasley from the others, use one of his hairs in the Polyjuice Potion, and keep them all from being suspicious...during and afterwards. It wouldn't do for them to realize that someone had been there in the boy's place. If his calculations were correct, Granger would be the hardest one to fool.

He'd found a way in through the roof. It seemed that they'd added extra wards around the house and on the windows, but they'd forgotten to place the same ones on the whole top floor of the house. It was safe enough from anyone else, but he was a master at getting in undetected and dismantling wards. He'd been in the house three times and listened in on their conversations. The following evening, they were going to have a few drinks in celebration of "ridding the world of that rubbish." He hadn't been sure what exactly they'd rid the world of, as they'd never said it by name, but he'd had his suspicions, and once he'd seen the Weasley boy's fingers, he knew exactly what the trio had been about.

Severus had no plans on interrupting whatever missions they were doing. He simply had a mission of his own, and the first part of his plan would fall into place the next evening after the little blighters had a few drinks and would be less likely to notice anything out of place.

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**Southern's Notes:** The next chapter is very interesting. It's already in the works. In fact, I know I've been slacking with updates, but with the publication of the next book being announced, I've got renewed desire to finish this story up as quickly as I can. Be looking for regular updates! I hope you are enjoying things so far.

# Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 30

The Order celebrates a small victory while Snape puts Polyjuice to use. What happens when Hermione believes him to be Ron?

**Disclaimer:** The characters still aren't mine, but I do love toying with them.

*Thanks go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay.*

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"Did you hear that?" Ron asked, looking towards the stairway.

"Hear what?" Hermione asked innocently. She'd heard it, too, but she didn't want to admit it. To do so would be to start trouble. It was the sound of a slamming door, which could only mean that Harry and Ginny were arguing. The Order had just had a meeting, and though McGonagall didn't go into details, she explained that something very important had happened and that Voldemort was one step closer to his defeat. There were questions, of course, but nothing specific was given out. Just the thought that something positive was happening in a time of crisis gave the rest of them hope that things would be all right in the end.

Ginny hadn't taken it kindly when her mother forced her to remain upstairs and away from the meeting, saying she wasn't old enough. What'd made things worse was that Harry had adamantly agreed with Mrs. Weasley. Afterwards, when Harry had approached Ginny for a word, she'd stormed off, him hot on her heels.

"Maybe I should have a quick look," Ron said hesitantly.

"Let's just let them talk this out. Harry wants to try to make things right. You know he'd never do anything to purposely hurt her." Hermione paused. "Well, not physically anyway. You know he loves her." She grabbed his hand and squeezed it affectionately. "Why don't we go join the others?"

"All right," he said, glancing at the stairway one last time. "Mind, if Gin's still riled up, it might be Harry that needs helps." He shrugged. "Tonks has some more of that firewhisky, and I wouldn't mind having a bit more of it."

Hermione laughed and guided him back to the kitchen where the others were talking and sharing after dinner drinks. While she didn't mind sipping on some of the wine that Mrs. Weasley had brought over, she didn't care much for anything stronger. Ron, however, enjoyed having drinks with the older Order members. It likely made him feel more mature. Even as she thought this, she saw him pour another glass and puff his chest out as he took a deep drink, trying to hide the burn of his throat and cough with a chuckle. The telltale watering of his eyes gave him away though.

Some time had passed before Mrs. Weasley began to look around suspiciously. "Did Ginny never come back down? What of Harry?" She clapped Mr. Wesley on the back. "Arthur, go on up and sort them out."

"Are you ready to go home then?" he asked, stretching slightly.

"Yes, I suppose we ought to. I've some things to do early in the morning and most of the others have gone." She nodded over to the fire where Fleur and Bill were talking quietly. "Fleur and I have plans in the morning." She grinned broadly. "Wedding business, see."

"Right then."

Hermione hoped that the man wouldn't find Ginny or Harry in a compromising position. She didn't think that they'd ever gone very far in that sense, but after spending so much time apart and then having an argument, maybe they were making up. Smiling to herself, she remembered the plans that she'd made earlier in the day. Ron was completely well again, aside from his blackened fingertips, so she'd chosen this day to be the day that she would take the next step in their relationship. She'd been quite nervous earlier, but the wine she'd had seemed to take the edge off. The only problem was that Ron was now slurring very heavily and looked as though he were about to drop into sleep at any moment. Perhaps she should rethink her decision. Having a slight buzz from the wine, though, was something she felt she needed...something that would give her that extra courage. If she didn't do it tonight, she feared she might lack the courage to be so bold as to say what she wanted. *No, I won't. I can and will do this. I want to do this*, she reassured herself, following the others into the study.

Remus and Tonks left and were followed by Bill and Fleur next. Just as Mrs. Weasley was about to go up to see what was taking Mr. Weasley and the others so long, they all came down the stairs. Ginny's eyes were puffy and red while Harry's were drooping sadly.

"Arthur? What's all this?" his wife asked.

"Ah, these two were talking, and I gave them a little advice." He smiled softly. "I've told Harry that if he wants to continue his conversation with her, he'll have to do it at our home, as I don't feel right about leaving her here without any supervision at her age."

"Ron's here!" Ginny pointed out angrily.

"I'm of age, I am," he said, slurring greatly. "That's right. Nobody has a say in where I go any longer."

Before Mrs. Weasley could retort, Harry quickly said, "I won't be too long."

"Don't even bother coming," Ginny said, though her words had less bite to them.

"Come along then," Mrs. Weasley said, shoos them towards the back exit. "Arthur, Side-Along Ginny. Harry and I will Disapparate on our own."

"Yes, dear."

Ron continued mumbling to himself about being a man while the others left. Hermione frowned, thinking of Ginny. If the roles were reversed, she wouldn't want to be left out either. And who was Molly or Harry to say that she couldn't listen because her seventeenth birthday was a ways off? Sure, they loved her and wished to keep her from harm, but Hermione knew from personal experience that not knowing could cause more problems than anything. She hoped that Harry would talk to the girl before she did anything to get herself into trouble. It wouldn't do to have her following them about without knowing all the details. It could get them all killed.

"Nox," Ron said softly, waving his wand wildly.

The room was suddenly dark, save for the low burning fire in the grate. It was in this instant that all of the pep talking she'd given herself disappeared. Her stomach fluttered nervously, and she felt her heartbeat quicken. "R-Ron?"

Suddenly he was upon her, his body pressing hers back into the couch until she was lying on the soft cushions. "Shhh... Don't think. Just do, just feel."

His body crushed hers nearly completely as his mouth ravished her neck and his hands moved between them to fondle her breasts. "Ron... wait," she said softly.

"I knew it!" he yelled, moving off her so quickly that he slipped and hit the floor.

"*Knew* it?"

"That's right. Knew you'd change your mind when it got down to it!"

"I never said that I was going to do anything tonight," she replied, sitting up and crossing her arms over her chest.

"You've been giving me mixed signals: touching me, letting me touch you, kissing me in the kitchen when we were alone, grinding against me." He frowned and got to his knees and held onto the couch to get up before staggering over to the desk.

"For your information, I *had* planned on it," she said furiously, adding, "but you've completely ruined everything now! I was only going to ask you to move a little so that I could breathe!"

"Eh?"

"Stop," she said, holding up her hand as he made to step towards her. "It's done for tonight. The mood's gone. Your little tantrum just proves that we aren't really ready for this step after all!"

"Now hold up! You didn't say anything about me moving over. You should have just said it." He smiled. "Let me in your room tonight, Hermione. Harry won't say anything."

Frustrated that things had escalated so far over nothing...and also annoyed that she had been a little frightened of the unknown (even after preparing herself)...she wanted nothing more than to go up to her room. "I don't think that would be a good idea." She shook her head. "Look at you anyway. You're swaying, can't even stand straight, and slurring."

"Do you love me?" he asked bluntly. "I know you've mentioned that you do, but what kind is it?"

"I want us to both be sober," she replied, taking his hand. "I thought the wine would take the edge off, but..."

"So... have to get a few drinks before you're able to want me that way then, is it?" He turned towards the door and made to leave, but she grabbed his arm.

"No, it's not what I meant. Listen to yourself." Shaking her head and sighing in frustration, she said, through forced calm, "I think it's best if we just stop this right now. I want our first time to be special."

"Lav... er... love, it *would* be special. Trust me in that, but if you really don't want to, you don't have to."

"*What* did you just call me?" she asked shrilly. "How dare you!"

"How dare I what? What are you on about now?"

"Honestly!" she said, pushing past him roughly and running up to her room.

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*This is working out better than I could have imagined*, Severus said to himself smugly as he followed the youngest Weasley male back up the stairs to his room. The boy and girl were the only two in the house, and both had been drinking. *This will be quite easy*. He glanced into a nearby mirror when he walked past it to make certain that his Disillusionment was still in place. When he saw that it was, he slowly moved on, watching as Weasley stopped in front of Granger's door, obviously debating on knocking.

*Get a move on, boy.*

He was relieved when Weasley's features hardened and he stomped off to his own room. In his anger, he slammed the door, but it conveniently popped back open, not having enough time to catch the lock. As the boy began pulling away his clothing, mumbling all the while, Severus eased into the room, lifting his wand.

"*Stupefy*," he whispered when Weasley was down to his underpants.

The boy immediately fell forward, landing neatly on the bed. Severus then went to push his legs up with the rest of his body so that it would appear that he was sleeping soundly should anyone happen to notice...not that they would. He doubted Granger would be in to check on the berk after the childish way he'd acted.

He roughly plucked a patch of hair from the boy's head. "I'll take that," he murmured. "Thanks, Weasley, you're finally useful, aren't you?" Quickly opening the flask that he'd had in his pocket, he added a single hair to it before pocketing the rest. After shaking it up, he dryly said, "Yummy," while making a sour face and downing a large gulp.

Within seconds, he felt the telltale transformation begin and suffered through the worst of it, willing himself not to vomit. He undressed and rummaged in Weasley's drawers for suitable nightwear. Finding a pair of ghastly, threadbare pajamas, he quickly slipped them on, frowning when he realized they were a couple of inches too short. *Why doesn't the boy get his mother to make something better for him?* he thought snidely. "Surely with Arthur's new promotion they have a bit more money now, seeing as most of the children have left the nest finally." Before leaving the room, he decided to ward it so that nobody could enter. It wouldn't do to have Granger seeing the boy here and possibly seeing him elsewhere in the house.

*Perhaps I should Stun her as well*, he thought suddenly. It would enable him to be about his task without the worry of being seen at all. He paused outside her door and noticed that her light was still on. It would raise suspicions if he would walk in and Stun her. They could put things together if they talked about it, seeing as she was mostly sober, her demanding to know why Weasley would do such a thing and Weasley claiming he hadn't. Deciding against it and hoping she would simply go to sleep after she finished her muffled sniffing, he made his way down to the study.

"Now, Albus, let's see what clever magic you've woven here." As the letter had directed him, he went to the liquor cabinet and procured a bottle of whisky and a shot glass. Moving to stand at the desk, he poured himself a shot and placed the bottle on the side of it. "This had better work," he muttered.

Severus froze as he heard the floor creak behind him.

"Ron?" came a soft voice.

*Fuck! It's Granger*. Knowing he had to think quickly, he cleared his throat and said, "Yeah?" He didn't turn back to face her, hoping she'd have her say and leave. She was supposed to be in her room bawling or sleeping off her anger. He should have gone in to Stun her as well.

"You're right. I love you, so there is no reason to keep putting things off."

Severus straightened uneasily, and after a long silence stretched between them, he heard the rustle of clothing and a zipper being unzipped. "No, not now, not after all that. I need to do a bit of thinking." There. That sounded like a Weasley-like excuse. *Ha! Right*, he thought snidely. *Weasley and thinking do not go together.* To his surprise, he heard her walk out the door and shut it behind her. Breathing a sigh of relief, he brought the untouched shot of whisky to his lips and downed it, waiting for Albus' next set of instructions.

"Haven't you had enough to drink already?"

Startled, he turned around. She hadn't left the room after all. She'd simply closed the door. He gazed at her with an open mouth, taking in the simple light blue bra, the completely unbuttoned, but not discarded, white shirt, and the matching light blue knickers. He swallowed thickly. *What the fuck is Granger doing with a set like those?* Upon further inspection, he saw that she had definitely shaped up nicely. Her nubile flesh was smooth and lightly tanned. Although her stomach and waist was a bit more rounded than he'd previously thought, she was quite appealing to him...especially her plump thighs.

"I told you that you don't have to," he finally managed, remembering the words from the fight they'd had.

"I want to," she said, pulling her shirt away from her body and moving closer. "I want this. Now. Like you said. Why wait? I'd honestly planned on this all day, wanting it to be special, and I don't think a few poorly misplaced words is reason enough to not go through with it."

"Granger, you..."

"What? Ron, you're having a bit of trouble with my name tonight." She frowned slightly.

*Shite.* "Hermione, we can't. *You* were right. Not me. And Harry might come in."

"Harry's not going to be back for a while." She was suddenly at his side and cupping his face. "I'm sorry about what I said and overreacting, just as you did. Don't make me beg. You were right. *I am* ready."

With that, she pressed her lips to his, and in his shock, his mouth gaped open in what she believed to be an invitation to deepen their kiss. However, feeling her tongue touching his tentatively set off an alarm in his mind: tread carefully. He began kissing her back, taking pleasure in the minty taste of her mouthwash. While kissing her, he reached around and gripped her soft arse cheeks tightly, pulling her up against him.

"Oh," she gasped into his mouth, bringing her hands up to shakily tug at his pajama top.

He pulled back and allowed her to pull the shirt up over his head. He had to think of something or else he'd be fucking her... with Weasley's body. He certainly didn't want to do that. He'd been utterly relieved when she'd stopped the boy earlier, making him happy he hadn't had to watch their fumbling. Though she was growing into an attractive woman, she was still Hermione Granger, one of Potter's pesky friends. A mature woman of Narcissa's caliber and shape was more to his liking, so he tried to tell himself, but try as he might, he couldn't conjure the vision of Narcissa's naked body...only Granger's young flesh came to mind...the site of her opened shirt dropping away from her body and her comfortable underwear clinging to her curves.

If he stopped and tossed her out, she'd be bitter and approach Weasley about it. They would possibly realize that someone else had been in their home. He couldn't afford that, not knowing if Dumbledore's parchments would be found. If he did go along with her, Weasley could always claim he'd passed out after all that drinking he'd done... not really remembering anything, but not wanting to deny he'd had sex. However, they could very well end up drawing the conclusion that someone else had been in the house. *What should I do?* he asked himself in confusion. An inner voice answered after a moment's pause. *If you deny her, she'll want to talk about it or try to have a row with you. This is the quickest way to be rid of her. Do it.*

Severus steeled himself to the fact that he would have to be with this girl while using another's body. He still had about forty-five minutes before his potion would wear off. That would be more than enough time to do what she wanted. There was nothing wrong with a hard, fast fuck. *What if I can't get an erection?* he thought sourly, closing his eyes to bring forth the image of a voluptuous woman such as Rosmerta from Hogsmeade. He used to fantasize about having her often, even had her very interested in him and making advances before he'd realized she'd been so susceptible to Draco's inexperienced hexes, but even so, he found it hard to bring her image to mind. Only the feel of Granger's body and her citrus scent filled his nostrils, invading his senses. He logically supposed that it was because he was still annoyed that she'd fallen prey to Draco's weak Imperius. He always did despise weak people, so he thought of her assistant, Denise, instead. Just as he had a perfect mental picture of her and felt the twitch of his erection, the girl in his arms spoke.

"I've always wanted you to be my first, Ron."

"First!" he exclaimed in annoyance. This would take longer, and he would have to imagine far more than one sexy woman. Perhaps thinking of Denise and Rosmerta together would do the trick? Damn.

"Yes," she said, jutting her chin up defiantly. "I told you that I never had sex with Viktor or Cormac! I guess now you'll get your proof!"

Then again... untouched nubile flesh? His cock seemed to spring to life instantly. "Hermione," he said in a reluctant whisper, "I've had too much to drink tonight." He remembered to slur his words this time and even made a show of swaying.

In an answer to his words, she stepped back and gazed at him intently while reaching between her breasts to slowly begin unfastening the clasps of her bra. His breath escaped in a deep rush as she peeled away one side to present him with a perky, heavy breast, its nipple puckered and waiting for his lips. As if in a trance, he backed towards the couch, pulling her with him and seated himself, leaving her standing between his legs. He watched her expression as he brought his face closer to her flesh and noted that she stared on excitedly.

If he couldn't feel the shaking of her legs against his, he would think that she wasn't truly nervous, but he could feel it...the fear and excitement of the unknown...radiating from her in waves. Teasing her taut nipple with his mouth, he lifted his hand and pushed aside the cloth still covering the other breast and began lightly caressing her skin. When she arched against him and moaned softly, he knew without a doubt that he would see his predicament through. While the thought had been quite abhorrent at first, he was only a man beneath it all, and the man in him wanted to take what was being offered. So what if he was Polyjuiced as another and being deceptive? So what if she was an ex-student?

*Damn it.*

He pulled back, releasing her flesh with a wet pop. "I cannot." The word 'student' had brought him to his senses. Granger. Slurring, he added, "I don't think that I can.... The drinks you see."

Her eyes widened slightly, and there was an expression of dismay. "A-are you sure? It's not because you don't like me, is it?" She worried her lip with her teeth and waited for an answer.

"No." He shook his head.

"But you felt hard when we were standing," she prodded. Boldly, she reached down between his legs with one hand and grasped his erection. "You're just being noble," she said with a small smile. "Really. I want this."

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "Being noble has nothing to do with it, my dear." Seeing that he had no choice and enjoying the hand squeezing his cock, he resumed kissing

her flesh, paying attention to the underside of her breasts when his attentions there made her move and arch eagerly. Sliding a hand down her stomach, over her thigh, and then to feel between her legs, he began nibbling and sucking in earnest. The heat at her center was encouraging and utterly arousing. One finger slipped beneath her knickers and gently slid into her.

"So wet," he murmured against her flesh.

"Ah, that feels good," she said breathlessly.

He looked up, wanting to see her expression, and was immediately assaulted with her lips. Expertly, he kissed her, not giving her a moment to think as he added another finger and began pushing deeper. To his surprise, she began to grind her body against him in time with his movements. Not breaking the kiss, he pulled her down to straddle his lap, adding his thumb to the mix...caressing her soft clitoris.

"Mmmm," she mumbled into his mouth in obvious approval, taking it upon herself to ride his fingers.

His eyebrows arched in surprise as one of her hands moved to his chest, its fingers pebbling one of his flat nipples. Increasing his probing caresses and deepening their kiss even more, he began to mentally prepare himself for what would come next. *I'm going to take her. It's not that I set out to do this, but the sooner I do this, the sooner I can be about the business of getting my instructions. This is ultimately for the good of things...not just because I am desperately in need of a woman. I could have Narcissa for this if I choose.*

Suddenly, she tore her lips away from his and exclaimed, "Ah... God! Please don't stop!"

He nearly asked if he'd hurt her because of the way she'd sounded, but she rode against him frantically, apparently needing his two fingers to be something a bit thicker, and her hot insides clamped down around his fingers as she began to convulse in orgasm. She continued to make breathy moans that stripped him of any reluctance. When she began to slump forward, he moved them to where she was lying on her back...for the second time that night. However, there would be no idiotic, fumbling boy to ruin things for her. After pulling down her knickers, he pushed down his pajama bottoms just enough for his ready prick to be exposed and carefully positioned himself between her trembling thighs.

Unable to help himself, he kissed her swollen lips and murmured, "I'm going to fuck you until you beg me again." Just as he was about to make a deep push inside of her, there was a door slam in another part of the house.

In a trice, he was off of her and had his pajama bottoms pulled back up, wand at the ready, creeping towards the doorway slowly. "Get dressed," he whispered.

"Ron? Hermione?"

*Fuck! Potter's back.*

"Don't come in here!" Hermione blurted out. "I-I'm not dressed."

Not listening, the boy barreled into the room, apparently angry and wanting to whinge to his mates. Before Severus could say anything, the boy stopped short, and his mouth gaped open. Looking to the girl, he saw that her knickers were back in place, her bra was fastened, but the shirt was still partially unbuttoned, giving Potter a view of her breasts and upper stomach.

"Sorry," he said, looking away, face red.

It was then that Severus quickly put his wand away, realizing that they would recognize that it wasn't Weasley's wand *Fuck. Where's my head?*

"Go on then," he finally managed, pointing towards the doorway.

"Right. Sorry. I'll be in the shower," Potter said, hurrying out.

Turning back to Hermione, Severus said, "Come. Let me walk you to your room. I expect I'll have to talk to him about Ginny."

"All right."

He'd have to make another trip to Grimmauld Place to get what he needed. This was obviously not the time for it. Next time, he'd make certain that none of them were in the house. It was too bloody risky. A slight twinge of shame flickered through him at the thought of what he'd been about to do. *It was for the good of the world*, he reassured himself, though the words sounded false to him.

At her doorway, he stopped and kissed her and made another show of swaying. "There will be other chances for us," he said softly. He didn't turn away when she placed a chaste kiss on his lips and blushed.

"Good night. Tell Harry we can talk in the morning, okay?" Grinning shyly, she backed into her room and closed the door.

As fast as he could, he unwarded Weasley's room and locked it while he put his own clothing back on, tossing the pajama bottoms on the floor next to the bed and the shirt near the headboard. He then went about positioning Weasley so that it would look as though he'd stripped and passed out in bed, a leg hanging over the side, body partially covered. Potter would be Granger's witness that the boy had indeed been with her and had then slept it off. They would all assume that he'd been too pissed to remember it all. Nodding in satisfaction, he silently made his way back up to the attic, noting that the shower was still running. Potter wouldn't hear him and likely had much on his mind anyway.

Severus Disapparated near the hideout to wait out the rest of the time that the Polyjuice would last. Unfortunately, Draco Malfoy was sitting outside on a rock and gazing up at the night sky. The startled boy fell backwards and frantically grabbed within his robes for his wand. It was for naught, as Severus was upon him in a flash, wand at his throat.

"Be silent."

"Weasley," Draco bit out, "you'd better get out of here!"

"Warning the enemy, Malfoy?" Severus asked. *This is interesting.*

"Who's with you? Potter? Granger? You'd all better clear out."

"No, just me. Found this place all by myself."

"It's Secret-Kept!" Draco said incredulously. "You're not that smart, and I doubt... What the hell?"

Snape felt himself changing and realized how close he'd come to revealing himself back at Grimmauld Place. He must have spent much more time with the girl than he'd realized. It was a mistake that he wouldn't make again.

"Hello, Draco," he said smoothly, moving back to allow the boy to get up once he collected himself. "What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"What are *you* doing going round like a Weasley?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you, but I do find it interesting that you seemed to be trying to warn the boy off. Having a change of heart, are we?"

"N-no! I was just trying to keep him talking until I could get my wand."

"Mm." He bent down and roughly grabbed the boy's robes, pulling him up to his feet. "Get inside. We'll discuss this tomorrow." A hard shove had Draco stumbling into the old infirmary. Severus would ask the Dark Lord if it would be prudent to deny the boy the ability to leave indoors. He didn't quite trust him, especially not after hearing what he'd said when he thought he was speaking to Weasley.

Long after he'd gone to bed that night, he remained awake and thinking about what he'd nearly done...what he ~~had~~ done...with Granger. He hated himself for being weak and wanting the girl. He should have been able to find a way out of that situation without succumbing to the desires of the flesh. Though she might not have had any lovers, she'd still aroused him completely. Normally, he liked his women much older and more experienced, but there was something about the girl that had appealed to him. He simply had to make certain that it never happened again.

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**Southern's Notes:** Close call, eh? Teehee. Snape will be more careful in the future. I will have another update ready for you this coming weekend. Thanks for reading!

Up Next: Hermione talks to Ron about what happened between them. Bill and Fleur get married. Draco decides to devise his own plan. They get information on the next Horcrux and where to find it.

**Nay's Notes:** OOH, you know how to weave a tale! Ron and Hermione's talk/argument was just fine to me. Can't wait for next chapter....

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 6 of 30*

Hermione notices that something just isn't right with Ron, but she can't put her finger on what it is. The trio makes plans to go to Godric's Hollow while Draco makes plans of his own.

**Disclaimer:** Not mine unfortunately, but this is great fun.

*Thanks go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay. She's great and always supportive!*

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"Oh, Harry... I thought you might have been Ron," Hermione said, cheeks flaming brightly. The events of the previous night had been on her mind until she'd fallen asleep and since she'd opened her eyes that morning. "Sleeping in, is he?"

"Lump's been out since I got out the shower," Harry said, stretching out for a yawn. "Went in and he was in bed already...barely anyway."

Hermione giggled. "He was quite pissed, wasn't he?" She placed a stack of toast on a plate and pushed it over to Harry. "Might as well dig in before Ron comes down to eat the lot."

"About last night," Harry began, not quite meeting her eyes.

She held up a hand. "It's all right. Really."

"Okay."

They both began eating their toast and made small talk about the party until Hermione finally decided to bring up the quarrel he'd had with Ginny. "How did it go at the Burrow?"

He shrugged. "Ginny's still angry. Feels left out."

"Well," Hermione said, wondering how to phrase her words so that he wouldn't get angry, "when you and Ron were thinking of leaving me out, I didn't like it either."

"But that's different."

"How so?"

"Well, you've always been with us. No need for us to leave you out. We work well together...us three, I mean." He grinned. "I trust you can take care of yourself... and our arses, too, if needed."

"But you don't think Ginny could?"

"I'm not saying that I don't think she's clever or can't handle herself, but if she came with us, it would break my concentration. I'd be worried about her more than other things, and I think I should make certain to get things done the right way before I try to advance my personal life."

"She is quite clever, you know."

"Yeah, just like at the Ministry when she got hurt. You saw how it was then. All of us there made it harder."

Hermione frowned. "I don't know about that. Good thing Neville was about, I'd say. He carried me around while injured himself after I was hexed. And for that matter, look at Ron. He was a bit worse off than Ginny!"

Chuckling, Harry nodded and said, "I suppose we all could have done things better. I just don't want any more people dying because of me." He shrugged sadly. "Ginny told me that she wouldn't wait for me."

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry," Hermione said with a small gasp, reaching over to squeeze his hand for a moment.

"Said she loves me, always has, but she's waited all these years, and while she thought she could let me do my thing, it really bothers her that I won't confide in her or trust her enough to join." His gaze hardened. "It's not a matter of trust, you know. I'm just doing it the way Dumbledore would have wanted, and it's my instinct that it's better this way for the both of us."

"I can understand how you feel." She gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm sure that she'll come round once things are over."

"Hermione, do you ever think about the end?"

"Always."

"No, I mean really think about it. What if one of us dies? What if I can't handle another meeting with Voldemort?"

"Do you not think you're ready? Want we should practice hexes and study some counter-curses?"

"Maybe we should," he admitted. "I'm not scared exactly...at least not for myself, but it's for all of you. I just don't want to let any of you down, don't want to be responsible for any other lives being lost."

"We've chosen our parts in this and know the risks, Harry. Think of the good we'll be doing for our world if we are successful. There's no way that I wouldn't want to be a part of that."

He nodded. "Girls are confusing, you know. As I was leaving last night, she kissed me and told me that I'd better stay safe or else." Sarcastically, he added, "This is after she told me she'd not wait for me, mind."

Hermione laughed. "She was obviously just trying to shake you, make you see things her way. You're quite stubborn. Actually, the both of you are. I don't see how you've got on this long to be honest."

"Is that right?" he asked playfully.

"What are you two on about so early?" Ron asked, coming in and holding his head. "Wish I had something for this hangover."

"That'll teach you," Hermione said, cheeks flushing again as she met his eyes.

"Ah, still angry I see," he said sourly and plopped down next to Harry. "I figured you would be!"

"Why would I be?" she asked, clearly puzzled.

"Probably because I interrupted," Harry cut in. "And sorry about that, mate. I didn't realize you two would... er... I didn't know... I mean to say..."

"What the bloody hell are you on about?" Ron asked, snatching a piece of toast from the dish in the center of the table. He nodded towards Hermione. "We had a small row, and she stormed off."

Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion. "But I went back in and talked to you."

"Yeah? Came to talk to me in my room, eh? Well, I was a bit busy sleeping and didn't hear it. Came to apologize, did you?"

"I don't like your attitude," Hermione huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "Are you... Do you mean to say that you don't remember me coming back to the study to talk to you and, uh, anything else?"

Flashing her an incredulous look, he said, "I was going to go to your room, but I changed my mind and went to my own."

"And you changed into your pajamas and went back down for some more drinks," Hermione said softly. "I went there to talk to you."

Ron smirked and shook his head before looking at Harry. "She's mental. I didn't come back down here."

"Er... I hate to say it, Ron, but you've gone mad. Don't you remember when I got back from the Burrow? You and she were in the study and had been about to..." He looked over to Hermione. "Sorry, Hermione."

Tears stung Hermione's eyes. "You've gone too far this time," she whispered and fled the room.

"What'd I say? What do you mean she and I were in there? I don't remember that."

"You were right pissed if you ask me," Harry put in. "You were missing your shirt, and she was trying to hurry and get dressed again. I saw that both of you looked ruffled, not to mention a bit miffed at my interruption."

"Bloody hell," Ron said, realization finally coming to him. "Do you mean that I was about to," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "shag and can't bloody remember?" He viciously stuffed the remainder of the toast into his mouth and chewed open mouthed. "Last I remember, we had an argument over a misunderstanding. Well, it's quite fuzzy, really, but the last thing I remember is going to my room."

"You were with her...making up apparently...and when I went to the room to talk to you about Ginny, you were already passed out." Harry snickered. "Drooling, one leg hanging off the bed, shirt partially over your head still."

"Suppose I should go talk to her," Ron said quietly. "She probably thinks I was just being a git, but I really don't remember." He stood and snatched another slice of toast for his walk up to Hermione's room. "Thanks, Harry."

"Anytime."

He paused in the doorway. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Walking back to Harry, looking behind him to make sure Hermione wasn't lurking near the doorway, he asked, "How did I look?"

"Sorry?"

"I mean to say... Did it look like I had things under control?"

Harry shrugged. "I stormed in and didn't really notice at first, but I saw that you looked angry...no shirt, pajama bottoms riding down low. That's when I realized that Hermione wasn't all the way dressed. She was buttoning her shirt."

"What'd you see?" Ron demanded, jaw clenched and eyes wide.

"Don't worry. I didn't see anything else." He shrugged. "In fact, I don't know who was more embarrassed...me or her."



"Oh, I know, mate. I didn't think you were gawping or anything. Just wondering, you know, what exactly was going on when you came in."

"You should take that up with Hermione, Ron," Harry said, looking uncomfortable.

"Right." With that, Ron bowed and quickly left the room.

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Draco watched through narrowed eyes as his mother stirred Snape's cauldron and smiled at something he was reading to her. He hated that they seemed so close. Although she claimed that nothing intimate was going on, he'd overheard his aunt and Rabastan talking, and unfortunately, they believed that there was definitely something going on between the pair...Rabastan even claiming to have heard them going at it once or twice.

Believing in his mother, he assumed that they were simply speculating and believing the worst. Smirking, he thought of his father and what he'd have to say to Snape about things. His smirk faded as the image of the Dark Lord flitted through his mind, narrowed red eyes coldly glaring into his, his high-pitched laughter enjoying the torture of those who'd failed him. Would his father suffer the man's wrath? Would they all be discarded?

Snape had told the Dark Lord that he'd found him outside, and now he was restricted from even stepping foot outside the old infirmary. All he'd wanted was some fresh air and to think about things, and he'd ended up being confronted by someone he'd thought to be Weasley. He was certain Snape had become suspicious of his motives and reasons for being out when it'd seemed like he was warning Weasley. He was grateful, though, that Snape hadn't informed the Dark Lord about that. He supposed he did owe a debt of gratitude for that at least.

*There has to be something I can do,* Draco thought desperately. Kind words found their way into his memory, as did the gentle, though weak, eyes of Headmaster Dumbledore. As much as he hated to admit it, there was only one place he could turn. However, he didn't think he could lower himself enough to go beg for help from someone he'd never got on with and had always despised. Besides, what would his father say if he knew the traitorous thoughts drifting through his mind? Dumbledore's words had sounded confusing and good at the time, but that chance was over.

So there was indeed no place he could turn... unless he had something to bargain with, which he most certainly had, come to think of it. Nodding and bringing a hand up to his chin, he began plotting a way out of his situation. Perhaps there was something to what the old codger had said after all. He only hoped it wouldn't get his family killed.

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"I guess it just hurt that you didn't even remember what happened between us. It was amazing," Hermione said with a small smile. "At first, I thought you were just being a prat and pretending to not remember."

"Maybe you could show me in the Pensieve?" Ron asked hopefully.

Hermione's cheeks flushed as she shook her head. "No, that would be odd for me."

Nodding, Ron said, "Bloke's got to try, right?" With a lopsided grin, he leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. "I'm sorry about last night. I don't remember exactly what was said, but I expect I was being a right foul git."

"Not just you," she admitted, taking his hand in hers. "I jumped to conclusions and let my nervousness speak for me. I..."

"What?"

"This feeling between us is wonderful, isn't it? I've fancied you for a while, and I can feel it all growing...the love...each day. Last night... I thought I might burst with affection for you, especially after we came together in such a way." She bit her lip for a moment, gathering her courage, and boldly whispered, "I want to feel that again soon."

Swallowing thickly, Ron nodded and grinned, leaning closer to kiss her before saying, "I'd like that, too."

Opening her mouth to deepen the kiss, Hermione eagerly tangled her tongue with his in hopes of rekindling the intensity they'd shared the night before. Unfortunately, he seemed overeager and had reverted back to his normal wet kissing. She idly wondered if the whisky had affected him as it had with her...giving confidence and the ability to be quite smooth. When he pulled back, breaking their kiss, she quickly said, "Don't stop."

"Hermione... Harry knows we're up here talking, and I don't think he'd miss us for a while." This was said with his eyes not quite meeting hers and shyness lacing his voice.

He wanted her to be the one to suggest that they pick up where they'd stopped the night before. Deciding to do just that, she moved away from him and flicked her wand towards the door, warding it for privacy. That done, she placed her wand on the small table nearby and pulled her jumper over her head, baring her scantily clad abdomen to him.

Getting the hint, he quickly pulled his shirt from his trousers and tossed it aside, once again showing her his pale, freckled chest and the ginger hairs sparsely dusting its center. Once her fingers moved to her waistband to unfasten and then push down her jeans, he did the same with his, nearly tripping over his trainers, which he'd not kicked off before trying to step free of his clothing.

She grinned and reached out to steady him. After his shoes and trousers were kicked away, he drew her closer for another kiss, hands moving over her back and gripping her arse. "Mmmm," he moaned in approval as her breasts crushed against his chest.

Enjoying the way he responded to her, she slipped her hands between them to unfasten her bra, allowing her breasts to spring free and press against him, flesh on heated flesh. His hands quickly grabbed the straps and moved them down her arms so that the garment would fall to the floor with their other clothes.

The excitement was nearly too much to bear, and she could feel herself becoming aroused as his hands began to fondle her breasts. He wasn't as gentle as he had been the night before, but she enjoyed his touches nonetheless. Eager teeth began nipping at her hardened peaks, causing her to moan.

"Off," she said, tugging at his underpants.

"And you," he murmured while hurrying to do her bidding.

Feeling only slightly shy about being naked with him in the daylight, she pushed down her knickers and waited for his comments. When he simply grinned and nodded dazedly, she dared to lower her eyes to see his already aroused state, which was jutting from a nest of light-colored curls.

"All right?" he asked.

"All right," she replied.

He held out his hand and gestured towards the bed with his head. She placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her to the bed where she lay down next to him and accepted his attentions.

After a few minutes of snogging and heated caressing, she felt a little frustrated that he wasn't nibbling the undersides of her breasts as he had the night before, and his fingers seemed a bit rough as they greedily groped and explored her center. Finally having enough, she reached down to still his hand. In a soft voice, she said, "Go slower and press on *this* like you did last night." She placed his index finger on her clitoris and moved it in circles. "Just a little more pressure," she said, enjoying the sensation.

While he continued to touch her as she'd directed, she bent slightly and reached down to close her hand over his erection.

"Oh, yeah," he said, nodding vigorously. "A little tighter." She tugged and pumped him a few times before he spoke again. "Can't put it off any longer," he mumbled and moved between her thighs. Within seconds he was pushing his hard, swollen prick into her, and she tried to open a little more to accommodate him. However, there was an immediate, piercing pain that rendered her immobile and caused her to cry out faintly.

"Ah..."

"Yeah, yeah... me too. Ooh, Hermione," he mumbled, continuing to move in a steady pace.

Not feeling comfortable enough to move with him, she buried her face in the safe spot where his neck met his shoulder. It didn't take long for him to shudder and pronounce that he was nearly done. Clutching him closely, she ran her hands over his back as his body quaked with his release.

After what had occurred so quickly sunk in, he peppered her face with small, happy kisses. "Wicked. You felt so good! Way better than... er... anything else." His mouth found hers briefly. "I can't wait to do it again...maybe go slower."

She nodded and closed her eyes, pretending to be content. Something was bothering her, though, and she couldn't quite place what it was. It wasn't that she was disappointed in the lack of orgasm for her, but it was something else. *First times aren't all sunshine and flowers*, she thought logically. *We'll get better with time.*

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The next few days passed by quickly while everyone prepared for Bill and Fleur's wedding. Hermione had been able to take the time to read over as much information regarding Godric Gryffindor and the other founders as she could. Things with Ron hadn't been awkward at all after their lovemaking, but he did seem to think that it entitled him to constantly have access to her body in some form or other. She didn't mind his attention, but she wished he'd put that much effort into the research they needed to have done. Harry tried to help as much as he could, but he sometimes went off to his room alone to go over some hexes in one of the books they'd found in the study. Hermione knew that he needed to do that more than anything. She hadn't told him, but she was also worried about the next time they'd meet Voldemort. However, she had faith in Harry and his ability to do things that nobody else could do.

"Any luck?" Harry asked, plopping down next to her.

"Yes, this map supposedly shows a way to his house."

"Godric Gryffindor's?"

"Yes." Hermione nodded. "I think it's authentic because part of its been blasted off...see the corners? I'm sure they tried to damage the map, not wanting anything of Gryffindor's in their home, but the part with directions to his home couldn't be touched. Look." She showed him the map. "Not even a small scorch or anything."

"Well, why would they keep it then?"

She shrugged. "I guess just to have it. I mean, they do have all of this Slytherin information here. I suppose they thought it funny to have something so many others would cherish. They likely wouldn't want to give it up, thinking someone else would go there."

"I wonder if they've gone there then?"

"It could be," she replied. "I don't like this at all. There's no telling what sort of wards or traps are in store for us. And how would Voldemort have found this? There's nothing about his old home in anything else... only these papers."

"Maybe," Ron said, joining them with a bowl of crisps, "they tried to find it or go there, but they couldn't get in. We don't know that they actually found it or not."

"We have no choice but to try," Harry added.

"It's likely that it's here only because Voldemort gave it to one of the Blacks to hold. Sirius' brother didn't mind joining his ranks. The whole lot was probably on his side."

"True," Hermione conceded.

"When should we go?"

"How about after Bill's wedding," Ron suggested. "We could go there, make an appearance, eat some food, and be off. Nobody would be popping round to look for us. They'll all be there."

"Brilliant."

"All right. I suppose that makes sense." Hermione stood. "Let's get a few things together then. We don't know what we'll come up against, and we might have to spend the night away from here. Who knows?"

"Sounds like a plan," Ron said before crunching on a handful of crisps.

While packing for what could be an overnight excursion, Hermione found the picture that she'd nicked from Headmistress McGonagall's office. Her eyes were once again drawn to Dumbledore and Snape. They seemed so close. How could he have murdered him? As before, they seemed to sense her presence and gazed out at her. Dumbledore placed an affectionate hand on his younger friend's shoulder while Snape gazed at her intently, a small smile playing on his lips. There was something about the way he looked at her that seemed familiar. She supposed being his pupil for six years had much to do with that, but the thing that amazed her the most was that she'd never really seen him this relaxed or happy looking. He seemed to genuinely care about the headmaster.

Frowning in disappointment, she shoved the picture back to the bottom of the drawer she kept her socks in. She had more important things to think about than Severus Snape!

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**Southern's Notes:** Sorry the chapter is so short, but I'd like to think of it as a transition chapter. This was necessary for the rest of the plot to unfold, and I really couldn't add any more without cutting into the next chapter's important bits. There will be Snape and Hermione interaction in the next chapter again.

## Chapter 7

Hermione comes face to face with Severus Snape. He has a request of her, and things suddenly become clear as to what went on during his last visit there.

**Disclaimer:** I've snagged a few of JKR's characters, but I'll be returning them shortly. No money for me...bummer.

*Thanks go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay.*

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Hermione followed Harry and Ron through the old trail and realized, much to her annoyance, that they'd passed the same marked, gnarled tree three times already. There was no way that many trees were marked the same way.

"Stop," she said, easing her bag's strap from her shoulder and letting it fall to the ground with a thud.

"Want to stop for a light snack, what?" Ron asked, backtracking to stand next to her.

"No, we just ate two hours ago at Bill and Fleur's wedding party," she replied, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "Honestly, all you do is think of food."

He wagged his eyebrows and whispered, "I think about sex, too, you know."

She blushed prettily and grinned. "Don't I know it?" Realizing that Harry had come to stand next to her as well, she cleared her throat and said, "I think the place is warded so that we can't see it." Hooking a thumb behind her, she added, "We've been by here already."

Harry took out the map and looked at it again before gazing at their surroundings. "Seems like we should have been there already. The rest of the homes are to the east, and we've walked way more than the map's told us to." He frowned. "I expect we should try to feel the wards out."

"All right," Ron agreed. "Where do you want to start?"

"Hermione can have this area. I'll go ahead and try there while you go back the way we came and try. We'll meet back right here in about an hour to see what we've found...if anything."

"Right." Ron smiled and moved back down the overgrown path.

"Meet you back here soon," Harry said before walking on.

It didn't even take an hour before both boys found their way back to her, unable to detect any enchantments at all. Harry had somehow circled back without ever leaving the path that he was on. Ron claimed to have seen a wild Crup, but he couldn't be sure, as he'd sped off quickly when he'd first heard it growl.

"Why didn't I think of this before?" Hermione blurted suddenly, softly slapping her forehead. "We've got that book at home with all those wards and ward detections. I expect it has something in there that will help us."

"All right. I'll go back and get it for you," Ron offered.

She shook her head. "No, I've got it warded in the study where no others can find it when they come over."

Ron nodded. "Don't blame you there. Lupin was a bit nosy last time if you ask me."

"You two can set up camp here, and I'll be along as soon as I get it. We can stay here until we figure out how to unward the path to this place." She flashed a reassuring grin. "Shouldn't take long."

"Er... you did pack the tent, eh, Ron?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I wouldn't forget that, mate."

Harry quipped, "Or the food."

"Absolutely. Can't do hard work on an empty stomach."

Hermione shook her head and made her way back down the path to the place they'd Apparated at, which was the suggested point on the map. She did keep a close watch on the brush and trees around her in case that Crup came round, but she never heard anything suspicious and assumed it had wandered off. While she was walking, she thought about what Tonks had told her after the wedding.

*"You wouldn't believe how much things have changed for Remus and me since he finally realized that it truly didn't matter that he's older and a werewolf." She grinned broadly and took another deep sip of her wine. "I can only hope that you can be this happy one day, Hermione. I'm sure that you will get on well with Ron once he gets serious about a relationship with you."*

*"Oh, we do get along fine," Hermione said, eager to point out that Ron was serious about her already.*

*"I didn't mean to sound like I thought less of your relationship because you're so young or because it's so new. It's just that he still has that look of a boy who's not sown his wild oats yet," she wriggled her eyebrows, "if you know what I mean."*

*"Sorry?"*

*"Think of it this way. Remus is in his late thirties, and he's finally ready to settle down. It just takes longer for some men." She nodded towards Ron and Harry who were speaking animatedly with Gabrielle Delacour and a couple of her friends. "He's still trying to impress other girls." With a dismissive wave of her hand, she said, "Don't worry. He'll get over that."*

*Hermione swallowed thickly. She hadn't looked at it that way, but it did indeed seem like Ron was flirting with those girls or was trying to impress them at least. They couldn't have been older than fourteen, maybe fifteen. What man would look at someone so young? The answer came to her instantly: Viktor Krum. He'd done much the same with her, and their ages were about the same.*

*"Oh, please don't be upset," Tonks said suddenly, looking at her wineglass as if it had cast an Imperius on her and forced her to say something.*

*"No, I'm not. I just didn't think of it as flirting." She shrugged. "I won't let it bother me. I know how he feels about me, and that's good enough for me." These last few words came out sharply.*

"Great, oh, absolutely," Tonks quickly said, nodding vigorously. Her eyes took on a dreamy look as she began rambling. "I knew that I'd found the man for me when I looked at Remus, and he gave me a wide smile that simply transformed his gloomy face into something very beautiful. I realized he was so much more. My stomach tingled, my pulse rate increased, my heart pounded so much that I could practically hear the thuds in my ears, my whole body shook with nervous anticipation, and I knew that I'd finally found all that I would ever need in a companion." She sighed. "When he holds me... the feel of him against me... that intense stare as he's sliding...er... Oh, look at the time."

Obviously realizing that she was about to let slip something intimate, Tonks scurried off to talk to Remus and Kingsley. At that moment, Ron looked up and over at her, smiling broadly. It was in that moment when Hermione wondered why she didn't know without a doubt that Ron was the man for her or feel anything like Tonks had felt in that same moment? She smiled back and wondered if she ever had. Sure, she'd felt some of that, but it wasn't the way Tonks made it sound. Turning away, Hermione went off to comfort a sullen Ginny.

She hadn't had much time to truly ponder those words, but she felt a little cheated. Why couldn't she experience that? Was it because she and Ron had always been close and that something like this only happened when a person made this realization about a stranger or someone not too close? Maybe her feelings for Ron had been unrequited for so long that when he'd finally glanced her way, they'd already dulled some, rendering her unable to feel that spark that Tonks felt.

With a sigh, she Disapparated and began to retrace their steps by going back to each of the Apparition points they'd used on their way in.

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Severus congratulated himself on easily infiltrating Grimmauld Place once again. The inhabitants wouldn't be back for hours, as they were attending the Weasley nuptials. To be on the safe side, he'd placed a ward of his own to alert him of anyone entering. Currently, he was sitting comfortably on the couch in the study while sipping on a glass of whisky. Dumbledore's letter had instructed him to do that. On his last visit, he'd been too hurried and had been interrupted before he could carry out his plans.

The letter's orders were to have a glass of whisky and to recall the last conversation he'd had with Dumbledore in that very study. Something in that discussion had been a clue to what he needed in order to move his own plans along. Closing his eyes and leaning back, trying not to think of what he'd been doing on this very couch the last time he'd been there, he let the burn of the whisky ease down his throat into his chest and tried to recall the exact conversation they'd shared.

"Severus, I do wish that you would try to do things differently with Harry. It would make everything easier. Maybe if you would just tell him that you..."

"I will not, Albus. Things are what they are, and I don't care to change his perception of me. Nor do I care to change mine of him. He is what he is, and that's..."

"A pity then," Dumbledore said sadly, eyes boring into Severus' intently. Suddenly, he bounded up energetically and practically skipped over to one of the bookshelves. "Nice things, books. One can learn so much from them. Why, there is a book here that quite amazed me with the things I'd seen inside of it." He glanced back towards Severus. "Dark magic in some places to be sure, but not all of it is as bad as all that. You know, it might be quite useful in the future... should you ever need it."

Shaking his head in confusion, Severus said, "I'm sure whatever books are among these shelves can easily be found in my collection or at the library at Hogwarts, dark or no."

"Not this one. Even the title is quite interesting: The Black Way. It's a pun on words of course. The House of Black obviously bought it for its name and because it celebrated doing things their way...a dark way."

Eyes popping open, Severus sat forward, spilling some of his drink as he did so. "That's it then. His next instructions are in that very book." With a satisfied, smug smile, he rose and began looking over the titles of the tomes on the shelves, realizing it would be a tedious task, as the number of books were many. It was a pity that a simple Summoning Charm didn't work to bring it forth. After nearly two hours of looking through the titles, trying different revealing charms on some of them, and finding nothing, his ward alerted him that someone was about to enter the front door. As quickly as he could, he jumped behind the couch and crouched down to peer out.

What the fuck? They shouldn't be back just yet, he thought in annoyance as he pulled his wand, preparing to do what he must in order to save himself. To his dismay, Hermione Granger walked into the room and went straight to the bookshelf he'd just been perusing. As she'd passed the couch, the citrus scent he now associated with her wafted over to him, and he wondered, not for the first time, if she'd put oranges in her bath.

"Let's see..." she muttered to herself. "One, two, three... Here we are."

He smirked and shook his head. *Still talking and counting to herself, I see.* Another thought struck him. She might know where the book is. It was possible that they'd found it already and, with it, the documents he needed. Even as he watched, she flicked her wand a few times to change the appearance of the small book into a large, dark tome. While she opened it in search of something particular, he made a quick decision and rose from his hiding spot.

"Expelliarmus!" he hissed, disarming the unaware girl of her wand, snatching it neatly as it flew to him. Even as he looked, her tome dropped to the floor, and her expression became frantic.

"Professor Snape!" she blurted incredulously. "But we've warded the house against you!" As quickly as she could, she scrambled towards the couch, meaning to jump over it and sprint to freedom; however, her foot caught on the arm and tripped her up.

To his surprise, she didn't stop there...rolling over and jumping up again to make for the doorway, a small limp evident. He had to think quickly to command the door to close and lock before she made her way out.

"Stop, you stupid girl!" he said angrily, advancing on her slowly as she pounded on the door. "Nobody will hear you. You are at my mercy now."

"W-what do you want?"

Her breathing was heavy, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were wide with wonder and fear. He'd seen her looking much like this on their last encounter, though for different reasons. Pointing his wand at her and glaring at her menacingly, he said, "You have something that I need." When her eyes widened even more, he curled his lower lip in disgust. "Definitely not what you're thinking. Tell me. Where is the tome, *The Black Way*?"

"I don't know," she replied quickly, eyeing his wand as it inched closer to her neck.

"You're lying, Miss Granger. Tell me the truth."

"No, I'm not," she said in a voice that was nearly defiant. "Ouch," she said with a moan as she applied weight to her left ankle.

Angered, he clutched her roughly by her jumper and pulled her over to the couch, tossing her down with a loud thud. *Accio,* he said, flicking his wand towards the book she'd been holding. "What have we here?" He opened the book and noted that it was a book on wards and revealing enchanted places or items. "What need do you have of this book while you're at a wedding?"

She said nothing, only turned her head away, seemingly trying to keep herself from crying. When he slammed the book onto the hard floor, she startled and looked back at him, biting her lip.

"Speak quickly."

"We aren't at the wedding any longer. We left and went someplace else. Once there, I remembered that I'd forgotten my book. I, uh, I felt like doing some light reading while the boys played chess." She swallowed thickly. "How did you get in here?"

"I'll ask the questions if you don't mind, Miss Granger," he said through clenched teeth. "So, you came back here for a book to read...a book that just happened to be warded so that others wouldn't notice it, and if so, it would appear to be a rather ordinary text. Why, it seems like something so much more important than just a bit of light reading."

"I just didn't want anyone else to snatch it up while I was reading it and misplace it," she said, gazing at him evenly.

"Such a little liar," he said, tilting his head to the side and studying her. He could see that she was lying, but he could also tell that she wasn't keeping anything from him that would be detrimental to his plans. "Seeing as I don't care what your reading habits are, I will get to the point and ask you again: Where is the book that I am searching for? Why is it not here?" He pressed his wand against her chest. "I warn you that I shall know if you are lying."

"Harry has it."

"Does he indeed? And what would *that boy* be doing with it?"

"L-learning things," she said softly, eyes tearing up.

"And is it in his possession at this moment?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head.

He could see that she was telling the truth. "Very well, Miss Granger," he said, stepping away from her and lowering his wand. Deciding to give her a demonstration of good faith, he flicked his wand to heal her sprained ankle, satisfied when he noticed her look of surprise. As much as he hated to admit it, he needed her help. "I am willing to make a bargain with you."

Brown eyes lit up with curiosity and wariness. "What sort of bargain?"

"Get that book for me, and I'll get you something in return."

"What do you have that I could possibly want?" she asked quickly, a horrified expression upon her face.

"Information, Miss Granger," he said in a bored tone.

"Why would I help you get a book that might enable you to do something that would hurt us?" she asked, finally finding a bit of stubborn courage.

"I don't have to answer any of your questions, girl," he said brusquely. "However, I do see the need to reassure you that the finding of this book will not bring harm to you or your... pesky friends."

"How can I trust you?" Her voice had taken on a harsh tone. "We all know what you did!"

"Save your questions and indignation. You know *nothing*!"

"But I always thought... I thought you were so noble and..."

He began laughing loudly, obviously startling her to silence. "Noble? I believe I told you last time that being noble has nothing to do with it." Severus smiled smugly as her face contorted with confusion, obviously trying to remember where she'd heard those words and think of the last time they'd spoken. He wanted her to know. Wanted her to remember.

"You never said that to me that I can rightly remember," she said, brow still knitted in bewilderment.

"Why, I did indeed." He nodded to the couch she was sitting on. "We were in this very room... on that very couch..." He arched an eyebrow at her as she gazed down at the couch in horror and then brought shocked eyes up to meet his. "I see you understand then."

"Oh, my God! It was... you... The whole time that night. No wonder he...oh, God, I'm going to be sick!"

"Spare me your dramatics, girl. I tried to get you to leave off. I simply wanted the damn book! That I didn't kill you or Potter and Weasley should be testament enough that I'll not harm the three of you...even though I am a *murdering Death Eater*."

"But you...and you..." She leaned over and dry heaved twice.

"Do you want to know anything that I can tell you, Miss Granger? Would you rather that I promise to never return here again? I'd do it, you know... make that promise," he said softly and slowly, letting his words sink in.

Her eyes rose to meet his. "You would stay away from here and help us? How could I trust that after what you did... and now after you took advantage of me!"

"I had no choice," he said, suddenly angry. Couldn't she understand that? "Do you think I wanted to touch *you*? You are nothing but an insignificant, plain girl to me! I tried to deter you. It was you who wouldn't turn away. For the first time in my life, I was glad to see Potter, for it hadn't been for him..." He let his words remain unsaid.

"I need to know where Nagini is," Granger said suddenly, all traces of her tears and disgust gone. "I also need to know where Lord Voldemort is hiding."

Severus chuckled. "Not wanting much, are you?"

"You said you would tell me what I want to know in exchange for the book, and don't forget your promise to never return here."

"Agreed. When you deliver the book to me, I will tell you as much as I can, and that is a promise. If I can't give that to you, I will give you something just as valuable."

"What? When I deliver the book to you? As much as you can? That doesn't sound like part of the deal to me."

"I'll not come back here again, as per our agreement and for the fact that I don't trust you as much as you don't trust me. I won't come back and find myself trapped with Aurors or Order members waiting for me. I've important work to do, and I will see it done by any means necessary," he said, letting cold determination seep into his voice. When she shivered, he knew his desired effect had been achieved. She now feared him again.

"But why should I come to you? What if you plan on doing the same thing? Trapping me, I mean?" she asked nervously.

"If I intended that, wouldn't I spirit you away now, girl? Think. You're smarter than this." He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Suffice it to say that I will not deceive

you in this and expect the same in return. But if you cross me, Miss Granger..."

He watched as she mulled over his words and briefly took a moment to remember the way she'd felt beneath him and against him. *Ha! Girl indeed. I've been thinking of her since then... occasionally and trying not to wonder how an eighteen-year-old girl could have a body like a siren.* There was something about her that was indeed appealing to him, and he only hoped that he didn't have to force her to help him. Things would be so much easier if she'd just agree to it, and he would form his plans around that.

"All right," she said shakily, yet determinedly. "I'll meet you. Where? When?"

"How quickly can you get the book?"

"I need only to ask him for it to get it," she replied. "And you? When can you find out their locations?"

"That's hard to say," he answered honestly. "Where there is one, there is the other, and he always moves about." He looked at her thoughtfully before saying, "Now is not the time for anyone to search them out. Potter isn't ready."

"Are you... are you on our side still even after...you know...the Astronomy Tower?" she asked incredulously.

"Where my loyalties lie are not your concern at this moment. There is something else that I can give you that is just as important and something that needs to be handled before anything else can happen. Will that do?"

She bit her lip and nodded her head. "All right then."

"I will owl you when I want to meet and disclose the time and the..." His ward alerted him that two people were about to enter the house. "I must go." As fast as he could, he unwarded the door and fled up the stairs towards the attic to his escape, leaving the shaking girl in his wake.

Hermione slid from the couch in relief and allowed her hot tears to stream down her face. Snape, the Death Eater who'd murdered the headmaster, had come into their home easily, even with their wards in place. Snape, the man who had made them miserable in his classes for many years, had Polyjuiced himself as Ron and had made her feel like a woman...had given her the first intense orgasm of her life that wasn't encouraged by her own hand. Promptly, she threw up just as Ron and Harry ran into the study, wands drawn.

"Where is he?" Harry asked as Ron kneeled next to her and rubbed her back.

"All right?"

"Snape?" Harry asked again. "Where'd he go?"

"Up the stairs," she said weakly. "Gone."

"Fuck!" Harry yelled, sprinting off towards the staircase.

"I need to help him. I'll be right back, okay?"

She nodded and waved him away, trying to stop herself from vomiting again, not that she had much more that would come up. *Snape kissed and touched me. Saw me naked. Would have shagged me!* The mortification she felt was something she'd not ever experienced before. How could she not have known that it wasn't Ron? In all fairness, she'd noticed that something wasn't right the next day when they'd actually made love, but she'd thought that his boldness the night before had been because of the whisky he'd consumed. Ever since then, she'd been trying to put her finger on what was wrong and what was missing. Now that she'd figured it out, she wished she still had no clue as to what it was. *Snape!* she thought again before feeling her body heat and cool at the same time, making it unbearable to remain conscious.

"Mione?" Ron's voice. "Come on. Wake up."

She opened her eyes, horrified that she'd fainted. "I'm all right," she said shakily, bringing a hand to her puffy eyes. "I need to wash up."

"We'll be in the kitchen."

"How'd you know that he was here?" she asked.

"Harry's wards were alerted," he said, almost proudly.

"But why didn't they work last time?"

"What? Last time?" Harry asked from the doorway.

"What are you on about?"

Not wanting to tell them exactly how she knew he'd been there before, she quickly said, "He told me he's been here before... spying on us... knowing when we'd be away so he could come here while we were at the wedding to search for something."

"For what?" Harry demanded.

"How come you didn't detect him last time?" she asked accusingly, feeling it was Harry's fault that things had gone so far between her and Snape.

"I just added some new wards with something I learned. When someone uses a hex against one of us in this house, I'm alerted about it."

"The name of the person casting the hex shows up in red sparks, quite wicked that," Ron added.

Harry lowered his voice, concern showing in his eyes. "Where did he hex you? I got the alert twice."

"He disarmed me," she admitted, frowning as she looked around. "He also charmed my sprained ankle to heal." She gasped suddenly. "Oh, no! He took my wand with him!"

"What exactly went on here, Hermione?" Ron asked, squeezing her shoulder affectionately. "Did he try to hurt you?"

When she noticed that his ears had reddened, she smiled and shook her head. "No, nothing like that. *At least not this time.* Just let me go brush my teeth and change please... and wash up. I'll be back."

"Okay."

Harry nodded at her as she left, and she could tell that he was a little suspicious about things. It was at this point that she decided to tell them exactly what had happened with Snape...not the part about him Polyjuicing himself as Ron the other time, as that would be too humiliating and cause problems. They had the right to know about his request for the book, though, and to help her decide what to do. They also needed to add much more wards. It was apparent that Snape had entered and exited from one of the higher floors, else Harry's wards would have detected him entering from below. She'd make certain he didn't return either way, and if it was her fate to meet him, she'd

definitely have a backup plan, as she didn't trust him whatsoever...no matter how sincere his words had been. He hadn't hoodwinked Dumbledore all those years without learning to be convincing, had he?

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**Southern's Notes:** And so they meet again. This time, the game changes. We'll see what each has planned in the next chapter and how one gets the better of the other. Whoops! Hehehe.

## Chapter 8

*Chapter 8 of 30*

The trio attempt to corner Snape, but things don't turn out as they planned.

**Disclaimer:** I've borrowed a few of JKR's characters for a bit of fun in a twisted plot of mine. Teehee. I'll send them home soon.

*Thanks go to my lovely beta, Charmed Nay, who just celebrated her birthday! Hope it was lovely, my dear!*

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Harry frowned as he watched Hermione's pale face while she tried to explain what had gone on between her and Snape. Something wasn't adding up. Her story seemed like something was missing. She blushed uncomfortably and lost her train of thought while talking, only to try to recap what she'd just said before continuing. A thought kept coming to his mind, and he couldn't push it away, much as he'd like to. Had Snape done something to her that she wasn't telling them? Had he touched her? Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. He wouldn't put it past the murdering git.

Finally, he decided to interrupt her story. "So he wants the book I've been studying. That doesn't make sense. He's been into Dark magic since he was young to hear Sirius tell it. I'm sure anything in that book wouldn't be something new to him. And why this copy? Wouldn't there be others?"

"I don't know," Hermione said softly. "He said it's what he's been looking for, and he promises to never come back so long as he gets it."

"Yeah," Ron added, "just like he promised to be loyal to Dumbledore, eh? I don't trust the git."

"Nor I... not really, but what if he can give us a location to a Horcrux or to Voldemort himself? We have to at least try to make the trade and see what we can find out. If it looks dodgy, I'll Disapparate or use a Portkey."

"We can't just let you go off to find him alone, Hermione," Harry said with a shake of his head.

She smiled shakily. "We have no choice, Harry. It's a chance I'll take. If we can get some information, then we'll be one step closer to finding a way to end all of this."

"How about we go along with her?" Ron put in suddenly. "I don't want her going alone, but we can go and make sure he doesn't try anything."

"The Invisibility Cloak," Harry said, liking Ron's idea. "He wouldn't have to know that we're there. If he does anything during the exchange, we'll Stun him."

"No," Hermione shook her head. "He told me to go alone, and he warned me not to cross him."

"He won't know we're there," Ron said.

"And no matter what information he can give us, it's not worth risking you, Hermione," Harry added firmly. "Either we go to watch the transaction, or we don't go at all. Anything he can tell us, we'd find out eventually anyway."

"I wonder what's so important about that book," she said aloud. "You're right, Harry. It isn't likely the only one. I wouldn't think anyway."

"That's the problem, isn't it? We might just be handing the slime ball something he's going to turn round and use against us," Ron said worriedly. "Maybe we should talk to Lupin. He wouldn't steer us wrong."

"The less people who know our business, the better," Harry said adamantly.

"I agree," Hermione said. "It's what Dumbledore wanted." She looked away and added, "Dumbledore's painting believes we can still trust Snape. He could have killed us all already, and he could have taken me with him." She met Harry's eyes again, determination lacing hers. "I want to do this. Something tells me that no matter what he's done, we should do it."

"He'll get his," Harry said vehemently, "no matter what Dumbledore says."

"When he contacts me, I'll tell him that I've got the book and told you I wanted to do a bit of light reading. He'll buy that, I think. When he tells me where to meet him, we'll make plans so that you two get there a little early and hide. I'm sure he'll be there early, too, though, making certain I'm alone." She frowned. "We'll just figure it out when the time comes."

"For now, we should get back to Godric's Hollow and break down those wards," Ron said, unknowingly flexing his blackened fingers.

"Let me go get the book," Hermione said, dashing out of the kitchen.

Harry turned to Ron and whispered, "Look. She might not agree, but I say we Stun Snape anyway. We can't trust him with that book or to give us any real information."

Ron nodded, eyes glinting with determination. "You read my mind, mate."

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"Come forward, Severusss," the Dark Lord said quietly. "Tell me of things in the safe house. How is the boy now?"

"He seems to be accepting his lot better, and he seems to be following Rabastan about, eager to hear old tales." Snape smirked. "I think his dear Aunt Bellatrix is having an influence on him indeed."

"And his mother? What of her?"

"She seems to be taking things in stride." Gazing into his Master's eyes, he said, "I feel she is anxious for the return of her husband and some normalcy in her life."

"Have you been... indulging in your gift?"

Snape blinked and wondered briefly what he could say to his Lord. In the end, he decided on honesty. "I could if I chose to, but I have not indulged."

"My offer still stands, Severus. I can have Rosmerta here for you with a snap of my fingers. She may not be happy about it, but that's nothing that time won't cure...or a number of potions or hexes."

"No, sir," he said quickly. "As I've told you before, I don't want her. She's too weak."

"And just who are you wanting, Severus? I can feel that there is something you long to tell me but are afraid to do so."

"This evening while trying to spy on Potter for you, I had a run in with his friend, Hermione Granger," he said quietly, making certain to look abashed.

"Why did you not tell me of this right away?"

"You asked me other questions first, my Lord. I was merely waiting for your approval to speak at will."

"Very well. Be seated. Tell me everything."

"The boy has the place warded, and he knew I was there the instant I hexed the girl to disarm her. I hadn't much time to escape before he and Weasley returned from... the older Weasley's wedding, knowing that someone had infiltrated their home and harmed her."

"Did you find anything in the house that reflects on what they've been doing?" the Dark Lord asked.

"They've been studying a thick book on breaking wards. I think they mean to try to find you and slip by undetected to take you by surprise."

At this, his Master emitted a long, high-pitched cackle. "The fools. Now, tell me of the girl." He leaned forward and gazed into Snape's eyes intently. Before Severus could speak, the Dark Lord said, "So... you desire her."

"I saw her naked and found her alluring," he said honestly.

"Another Mudblood, Severus? Why do you choose these women?"

"Because they are inferior to me and can be easily taught to live by your rules, my Lord, given the proper amount of time." He sulked. "If I chose someone like Bellatrix, she would try to make me feel inferior because of her birth, and I will not be commanded by anyone but you, my Lord." He flashed a sly smile. "And wouldn't Potter loathe the fact that the one man he hates most lured his friend from his side? I think it would benefit us, my Lord, if I am allowed to form a small bond with her."

"You intend to slip her insignificant information to gain her trust and to woo her."

"If it pleases you, my Lord. I think it could be easily done. I healed a sprained ankle and spouted intentions of good deeds. She eagerly ate them up, trusting my every word."

"Why do you not just snatch her and take her as your own? That would affect Potter more."

"I will do what you wish, Master."

"Lord Voldemort will think on this, Severus, and I do commend you for thinking of it. Continue your spying activities on the boy and his friends. The more we know of their moves, the better. The brat is up to something. I can feel it when I try to enter his mind." He growled angrily. "I can't get in very far any longer it seems, and now, he's trying to push back to see into my mind."

"I will be waiting for your answer," Severus said with a nod.

After a long pause, the Dark Lord asked, "And if you did have this girl for your own? What are your intentions?"

"I would have her as my consort. She's gifted with intelligence, Master, and I know that given the right amount of attention and affection, she's easily swayed. She would be an asset in the long run, and it would disrupt Potter." He smirked. "And if she cannot be, I would terminate her."

"And you would finally have someone that doesn't belong to someone else...someone nobody else would want."

Severus nodded honestly. "That is the gist of it."

"Only because you have proved yourself to be my most faithful follower, Severus, will I grant this wish for you. So long ago when you told me of the Prophecy, I promised to deliver the Evans Mudblood to you once I killed her husband and the boy. Even though I had no choice but to kill her, you've not held that against me and still do my bidding." With a small nod, he added, "You will have this if it is your wish. A reward for your continued loyalty."

"Thank you, my Master."

"I will call you when I have made my decision."

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Draco listened to Rabastan's laughter as he recounted a tale from his teen years when he'd had a fight with some Muggle bloke, ending in the Muggle's demise at his hand. Bellatrix seemed to be enjoying it just as much as the man enjoyed telling it. Draco pretended to be enthralled and curious while his mother seemed pale faced.

"Did the authorities never catch you?" he asked in what he hoped seemed like awe.

"Of course not. That lot can't catch a wizard! Even our Ministry never figured out it was me who did it. Didn't use a wand, see." At this point, he slipped a long, thick-bladed knife from the sleeve of his robes. "I sliced the git up right good. No magic to trace it back to me." He grinned wickedly. "Lovely things, knives."

"I often wished that Rodolphus shared your love for them," Bellatrix said wistfully. "It will be good to see him again, won't it?"

"Aye," Rabastan agreed. "Just a few more days now."

"Sorry?" Draco asked in confusion. Did this mean there would be an Azkaban break?

"Hold your tongues," Snape hissed as he glided by.

"What, Severus? It's not like the boy can leave and tell anyone. Might as well tell him his father's going to be out soon, eh?"



"My father? Out of Azkaban?" Draco asked, eyes wide and darting to his mother, who seemed to pale even more. "Mum?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"What's so wrong with me knowing?" Draco blurted angrily in Snape's direction. "I've got the right!"

"We were told to say nothing to anyone," Snape said nonchalantly. "That includes you."

"Can I help?"

"Most certainly not."

"The lad's ready to prove himself, Severus. Maybe he should come along."

Gazing back at them, Snape nodded after a moment. "Perhaps. I shall speak to the Dark Lord. His word will be law."

"Agreed," Bellatrix said. Then eyeing her sister, she said, "Cissy, are you not happy that your husband will be about soon?" She hooked a thumb in Snape's direction and sneered, after lowering her voice, saying, "It'll get you away from this miserable blighter."

"He's been kind to me," Narcissa said firmly. "Things could have been much worse."

Rabastan snickered. "Sounds like you two have been getting on just fine to me."

"Oi!" Draco said, wishing he had his wand to hex the man. How dare he speak to his mother that way!

"Ah, just funning, boy. Don't take it so personal like."

Draco shrugged and moved away from the group to gaze out of a window. *So, my father will be breaking out soon. What does that mean for us? Will he be punished? Will my whole family be killed?* He'd noticed that his mother had been looking a bit ill lately and wondered exactly what was wrong. He supposed he now knew. She was worried what his father would do to her when he got out... as she had been sharing Snape's bed, though she claimed he hadn't made any advances on her. It would be hard for her to prove, especially with Rabastan's filthy comments.

Often, Draco thought over the words Dumbledore had told him. If one's enemies believed a person to be dead, they wouldn't hunt him any longer. He'd planned on faking his death somehow the first time he'd been given permission to leave the place, but now, he feared even more for his mother's life. He needed to find a way to take her with him. They could hide someplace...even seek out Potter for help if he had to. Pride could and would be pushed aside. Life was more important.

Lately, he'd taken to pretending to want to follow in his aunt's footsteps, eagerly asking as many questions as he could and saying things he truly didn't mean. It seemed to be working. Even Snape's suspicious eyes looked on him with thoughtful wonder. If Snape had noticed the change and the attempts to redeem himself as a Death Eater, then the Dark Lord must have been told. Nothing Snape knew or did was unknown to their Master. Perhaps it was why Snape hadn't further scolded Rabastan and Bellatrix for letting slip the plans to release their mates from Azkaban. He'd even relented and said he'd ask the Dark Lord.

Things were falling into place. He needed only to plan it out just right so that he could slip away without them hounding him. Faking his own death would be easy, but how could he fake his mother's as well. Death Eaters wouldn't stop hunting them if they knew they'd fled. He couldn't leave her behind. Not now. Could he?

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Hermione paced in her room, thinking about the state of things. After many attempts, they'd finally unwarded and revealed the old Gryffindor home, which was quite lovely...even after many years of desertion. Made mostly of stone and nearly completely overrun by thick vines, it could easily be mistaken as nothing more than an old ruin from days past. There were many rooms inside that they'd perused, but their patience finally paid off. In one of the upstairs bedrooms, they found an old painting of Godric Gryffindor.

The pleasant man immediately told them the tale of some arrogant, young man who'd paid him a visit years earlier, enquiring all sorts of things. He promptly directed the three friends to a secret safe warded from view across the room. Inside, they found an old dagger and, after testing it, knew it to be a Horcrux. Gryffindor's painting told him that the man had hexed him, thinking he'd silenced him forever, but he'd only pretended that the curse had worked, less the sod try to destroy the painting completely.

Harry had taken the painting down and had brought it back with them to Grimmauld Place. And so, another Horcrux had been done away with, and they were on the verge of finding Slytherin's locket, which had been under their noses all along. Harry and Ron had threatened Mundungus, knowing he'd been the one to snatch it and sell it to someone else, and the man had promised that he'd get it back in a trice.

"It's been nearly two weeks, Snape," Hermione said to herself. "Where are you?" She'd truly expected him to owl her right away with a place to meet him for the exchange, but she'd not heard a word from him. That made her a little suspicious. If finding the book had been so urgent, what was the hold up? Could he not get away from his Death Eater mates? Voldemort? She pulled the picture of him from her sock drawer and gazed at him intently, watching his carefree talk with Headmaster Dumbledore, the way his eyes crinkled slightly when he laughed heartily at something his friend said, and the way his thin lips curved upwards in a small smile.

Since she'd found out what he'd done to her, she couldn't put it from her mind. She wanted badly to slap the memory from him, not wanting him to know her so intimately, but part of her wondered if he truly thought her to be nothing but an immature, plain girl...as he'd said. He'd been utterly aroused that night when he'd been Polyjuiced as Ron. It had to be a lie, him not finding her attractive. He'd wanted her on some level. That thought made her shiver. Was this some sort of plan to trick her? What exactly was he up to?

Her relationship with Ron was suffering a little. Each time he'd tried to touch her since then, she'd shied away, not really wanting his touch. It wasn't anything against him, and she wasn't so stupid as to think it was Snape again, she just felt odd about it. Oh, she'd relented and allowed him to have his way with her lately, but her mind and heart weren't into it. She couldn't help but to think of Snape when Ron touched her. Furious, she tossed the picture across the room.

"I won't let what you did ruin things for Ron and me!" she said heatedly.

At that moment, there was a light tapping at her window. She immediately went to it, threw back the curtain, and saw a small, tawny owl fluttering about, a parchment attached to its leg. She quickly opened the window and took the parchment from it and watched as it flew off without begging for food. No one other than Snape could have written the spiky scrawl that spelled out her name on the front.

Swallowing nervously, she opened the parchment and read his note.

*Miss Granger,*

*I apologize for not contacting you sooner, but you can understand that I am a busy man, I'm sure. I've finally found a moment where I can slip away unnoticed and make the exchange with you. I have something that you will find quite useful.*

*Meet me in ten minutes at the very end of Knockturn Alley in the small passageway between Bentley's Books and the brick wall. I warn you to come alone.*

*Your Collaborator*

"Ten minutes!" she said incredulously. "Harry! Ron!" she yelled, running towards the doorway, clutching the note. If they were going to be there to keep a watch out on her, they would have to go immediately, leaving her to venture there alone with the book to make it look as though she'd not told anyone.

"What is it?" Ron asked, running up the stairs to meet her halfway.

"It's him! He's sent a letter and wants to meet in ten minutes." She looked past him to Harry, who stood at the bottom of the staircase. "Can you two be ready to go now? He's likely there waiting as we speak!"

Harry nodded. "Come on, Ron. I'll just grab the cloak. Find out where he wants to meet her."

Ron said, "All right." He turned to Hermione, taking the note from her. "Don't worry, love. We'll be there to make sure the git doesn't try anything, okay?"

"Right," she said nervously. "I'll fetch my cloak and the book. S-see you there. And... Ron?"

"Yes?"

"Please be careful. Don't try to be clever or anything."

"Clever? Me?" He chuckled. "Just don't worry. We'll take the cloak and go to this alley before you get there. We'll see if he's planning anything."

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Severus waited in the darkened alleyway for the girl to show. Only a few minutes had passed since he'd sent the owl off to her, but he knew she'd come as soon as she could, likely not waiting the full ten minutes. He leaned casually against the brick wall, arms crossed over his chest while he gazed out to the entrance to the small alley. There was a small shift to his left, and he glanced just behind him with narrowed eyes. Nothing was visible to the naked eye however.

The sound of nearing footsteps had him glancing back at the entryway in anticipation, wand at the ready in his right hand...just in case she tried something shifty. When she didn't come into view, he became suspicious and mumbled quietly, "Sounded like footsteps." He strained into the silence that followed to listen for any breathing or shuffling, but he heard nothing. Unfortunately, the sounds from the nearby store muffled out any other sounds he might have detected. Something didn't feel right about this, and his instinct was usually not to be ignored.

Only another minute passed before more footsteps could be heard...these cautious but not softened in an attempt to be stealthy. Sure enough, she rounded the corner, book in her arms, gazing into the darkness with squinted eyes.

"Professor?" she asked, voice cracking with her nervousness.

"I'm here," he said, walking forward slightly, pointing his wand at her. "Are you alone?"

"Yes." She stepped back. "Please don't come any closer. I have the book. What do you have for me?"

He took a small parchment from his pocket. "I've something you'd very much like to know on this. Now, come here, girl. You have no reason to fear me."

With amusement, he watched as she inched forward and stopped nearly two feet away from him, stretching out an arm to offer him the book.

"Why so tense?" he asked.

"You still have my wand, sir. I've nothing to protect myself with," she said, voice surprisingly firm suddenly.

It was easy to see that it angered her to be wandless. "I was certain you would have acquired another by now."

"That would be easily done, but the local wandmaker isn't about any longer. I suppose your lot had something to do with that."

And then he heard it...a slight snort. She was not alone. He promptly understood what was going on, and he felt the anger surge within him. She thought to double cross him, even after he'd warned her. Her two berk friends were here under Potter's Invisibility Cloak. He should have known.

In a move as smooth as silk, he swiftly reached out, turned her around, and pulled her back against him, wand at her throat. "Show yourselves, Potter, Weasley!" he called out.

"Fucking hell, he knows!" Weasley said, pulling the cloak away from him. Potter stayed hidden. "It's only me, Snape. Couldn't let her come alone, you know."

"Do you take me for a fool, Weasley?" he asked, slight hiss to his voice. Granger struggled in his arms, and he tightened his hold on her what he hoped was painfully. "You will pay for this treachery. I warned you," he said softly into her ear.

"N-no! It's not like that," she said, but spoke no more when his arm tightened around her throat.

A red jet of light shot out at him from Weasley's far right. He moved just in time so that it missed him and hit Granger instead. Stunned, she slumped against him and didn't move at all. From his own left, Rabastan made himself visible, losing the Disillusionment Charm, and fired a multitude of hexes towards the invisible Potter and Weasley while Severus shot some off as well.

"*Crucio!*" Rabastan said, hitting Weasley squarely in the chest. The boy fell to the dirty ground, writhing and screaming in pain.

Potter shot a few return curses back at them, one Slicing Hex hitting Rabastan in the arm, which only enraged the man even more, sending him to bodily try to find the boy. A Binding Hex just missed Severus as he finally took good aim and Stunned Potter. He could only see the tip of the boy's trainer sticking out from beneath the Invisibility Cloak.

"Rabastan! Come!" he called when he saw that his friend had pulled his knife out and intended to do damage on Potter.

"The little prat cut me. An eye for an eye, Severus!"

"No, he's for the Dark Lord. We aren't to touch Potter!"

Reluctantly, Rabastan Disapparated away, leaving Severus alone in the alley with the two boys and an unconscious Hermione. He softly said, *Finite Incantatem!* to release Weasley from the Cruciatus Curse. The boy continued to shake but looked up to him defiantly. He tossed down the parchment he'd intended to give Granger. A deal was a deal after all. He had the book, didn't he? "Wake Potter and get out of here, boy!" Severus urged before Disapparating away with Granger in his arms.

He appeared a little ways away from the old infirmary he shared with the others, dropping her to the grassy ground. He hadn't meant to take her so soon and had brought Rabastan as a precaution. The Dark Lord had decided to let her remain with Potter a while longer to build the bond between them before he coaxed her away. However, their plans were merely changed sooner rather than later. He'd been right not to trust her not to tell the others. He sneered hatefully as he stared down in her relaxed face. How dare they think to take him on and win! Hadn't they learned that they'd never win against him?

Pointing his wand at Granger, he said, *'Rennervate!*

Her dazed eyes opened immediately, and she sat up, rubbing her head. "What? Where is this place?"

"You are now my prisoner, Miss Granger. I warned you that you shouldn't double cross me." He reached down to roughly pull her up. "Come. It's time to meet the rest of the lot who stay here."

"But I didn't!"

"Really? And what were those two idiots doing there then?"

"They were just going to make sure you didn't try to hurt me. Nothing more!"

"Stop your lying, you stupid girl. They were trying to cast hexes to bind me. Wanted to turn me over to the Aurors, I expect."

"No, really..."

"Silence!" he hissed, dragging her towards the old building.

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**Southern's Notes:** And now the fun begins.

## Chapter 9

*Chapter 9 of 30*

Hermione meets the Death Eaters staying with Snape and quickly learns what her fate will be while Harry and the others try to determine what to do to get her back and what to think of Snape.

**Disclaimer:** I've snatched some of JKR's characters and am using them for a spot of entertainment. I hope you like it.

*Thanks go to my dear beta, Charmed\_Nay, who's taken the time to read through this for me.*

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Ron knew he needed to speak up about what truly happened in the alley. Not wanting to linger in the alleyway, he did the first thing that came to mind. He Side-Along Apparated with Harry to Hogwarts before releasing the Stunner's hold on him. The Headmistress met them at the doorway and hurried them up to her office before Flooding Lupin and Tonks and summoning the school nurse.

"How could you have not come to me before now? I could have helped you!" Lupin said heatedly, face twisted in anger and disappointment.

"Calm down, Remus. They look as though they feel bad enough as it is," Tonks said, putting a hand on his arm.

"Yeah, we're not exactly happy that we made a mess of things," Harry sniped back, continuing to hold the cold flannel against the knot on the back of his head.

"Here you are, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said, extending a vial to him as she entered the room. "This should stop the pain straightaway."

"Thanks."

While Harry downed the nasty potion, Ron looked towards McGonagall and said, "That's not all that happened. I think you all ought to know the whole thing."

"What are you talking about, Mr. Weasley?"

"Sorry? What more is there, Ron?"

Ron gazed at Harry and shrugged. "I was a bit surprised and hurting at the time, and I wasn't sure what to say exactly."

"Go on then," Remus said, sitting down across from them, pulling Tonks down next to him.

Leaning forward in her chair and placing her elbows on her desk, McGonagall said, "Please don't leave anything out, Mr. Weasley."

"Well, Rabastan Lestrangle put me under the Cruciatus, and it bloody well hurt, but I was still aware of what was going on." He nodded towards Harry. "The bloke pulled a knife and was walking to where Harry had fell. And Snape... he said something to make him stop. I'm not sure what exactly, as I was a bit preoccupied and doing a bit of screaming at the time."

Remus shook his head. "It's likely the same as before: saving Harry for the Dark Lord. Remember what he said that night, Harry?"

"Yeah. I'd wager it is."

"But why didn't they take Harry with them?" Tonks asked aloud. "I mean, it would have ended things, wouldn't it?"

"He's a damn coward," Harry spat.

"I think there's more," McGonagall said.

"Yeah," Ron said softly. "Lestrangle Disapparated, leaving me as I was, but Snape took the curse off of me. Then he tossed down a parchment to me and told me to get Harry out of there."

All of the adults exchanged looks of wonder while Harry sneered. "That doesn't change anything. He's got Hermione! He took her!"

Digging into his pocket, Ron took out the parchment. "He didn't intend to though. I think... I think we forced his hand. How would he explain to Lestrangle when he went back to wherever if he didn't have her? She was Stunned and at his mercy so to speak."

"I could agree with that," Remus said, brow furrowed in thought. "What's on the parchment then?"

"Right." Ron opened it and said, "He's written this to Hermione. It's like he thought that their agreement would go off without a hitch. Says, 'Miss Granger, as per our agreement, I do have some information that you might find interesting. I cannot give you the location of the Dark Lord or Nagini as of yet, but you might be interested in knowing that Borgin and Burkes has a secret back room behind their public back room. Inside, Borgin is holding a cup for the Dark Lord and often brags that we can't do anything to him, else there'd be no way to retrieve it. I thank you for the book, as I truly needed it. Perhaps one day you will understand. And, as to my promise to never again darken Grimmauld Place, I shall endeavor to do so.' That's all it says."

"It's... It's a trick!" Harry blurted with a nod. "That's right. He might have planned that in the event that something went wrong so that he'd look like he meant well."

"Or he truly had honorable intentions," McGonagall added.

Everyone began speaking at once, shouting out his or her opinion on the matter. It wasn't until a soft voice from above spoke that the room quieted.

"I've been saying all along that Severus can still be trusted," Dumbledore said from his portrait on the wall. "You see, I left instructions for him to find that very book at Grimmauld Place. So, he is indeed continuing a mission that I placed him on." He smiled kindly. "It wouldn't do to interfere."

Though the headmaster was giving Harry a stern gaze, the boy spoke. "I can't believe you're still defending him! We've had this conversation before. And this time, you can't make excuses for him! He took Hermione as his prisoner. She might turn up d-dead."

"Harry, come on, mate. Don't say that," Ron said, eyes wide with worry.

"Severus will protect her in any way that he can, Harry," Dumbledore said. He then looked to the headmistress. "I think it's time that you showed them what I asked, Minerva."

She nodded and stood, making her way to the locked cabinet behind her desk. Once she unwarded it, she pulled out a small phial that held a silvery mass inside...obviously a memory.

"Albus directed me to view this before you borrowed his Pensieve, Potter," she began, walking back towards her desk. Once she was seated, she continued, "And in here, there are two memories. One is Severus agreeing to a request Albus asked of him, albeit reluctantly, and the next is Severus trying to renege on that agreement."

"Figures," Potter muttered.

"You'll not feel that way once you've heard this. I should have showed you sooner," she said, directing an admonishing glance at Dumbledore, who didn't seem to notice. "But I was forced to wait until an opportune moment. I fear that time has passed, and you must be in the know now."

"So, you mean to say," Ron began, "that's Snape's doing all this for us still? That he's still on our side even though he... ~~did~~ha?"

She nodded and was about to speak when Lupin interrupted. "I don't know what to think about this!" He ran his fingers through his scruffy hair and looked down, sighing. "I always trusted him, and when he... I just don't know what to think right now."

Tonks put an arm around him supportively. "I think maybe we should share this with the rest of the Order. First... may we all witness it?"

"I think we should call a meeting at Grimmauld Place this evening. Everyone will be brought up to date on everything." She met Harry's stare. "Ommost things, that is. Some things still can't be discussed, but everyone should know of Miss Granger's current position and learn what I know about Severus."

"What was in that book?" Harry asked, still clearly suspicious of everything and sounding bitter.

"A way to make things right again," Dumbledore replied, adding, "and that is all I shall say at this moment. To say any more might jeopardize our plans."

"All right," Lupin said, standing. "A meeting tonight it is. We'll take care of notifying everyone. What time?"

"After eight, I should think," McGonagall said. "I should be able to slip away by then."

"Right then."

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"Sir, please stop. I swear I didn't know they were going to try anything. Maybe... maybe you provoked them when you grabbed me."

"Hold your tongue, girl," he said, tightening his grip on her arm and pushing the door open forcefully, slamming it against the wall with a bang. Four faces turned in unison and looked at the new arrivals. Three were shocked while one...Lestranger's...sneered hatefully.

"Thought you might stop off and have a bit of fun with the bint before bringing her here," he said, stepping forward. "If you don't want to have a go," he looked Hermione up and down, "I'll make use of her this night."

"I think not, and shouldn't you be seeing to the wound Potter gave you? I see some blood just there," Severus said, barely missing a step as he pulled her in his wake. "Narcissa, you will remove your things from my room." He stopped and glared down at Hermione scornfully. "It appears I will have a new guest."

"But... what?" the woman asked incredulously. "You don't mean to turn me out."

"That's exactly what I mean. I'm certain your sister wouldn't mind the company." He glanced at the dark-haired woman and added, "Unless she's busy entertaining her brother-in-law."

Rabastan snickered. "Only with tales, mate. Nothing too entertaining, mind. Me brother would cut me sac."

"How dare you say that about me!" Bellatrix said, stepping forward only to stop again.

"Spare me your dramatics," he said in a bored tone. "As you likely all know, this is Hermione Granger, and she is now my prisoner. She will not be harmed in any way... unless I choose to do so. Is that clear?"

"Denying us our right to interrogate your prisoner? She might know something important!" Bellatrix said firmly. "Our Master shall hear of this! Do you think with nothing but the dick in your pants, man?"

Snape smirked at her and calmly said, "As I told you long ago, Bella, nothing in my trousers is of any business of yours." Noticing that Narcissa hadn't moved, Snape said, "I believe I told you to move your things so that I can retire with my hostage."

"What are you going to do?" Draco asked suddenly, eyeing Hermione oddly. "You aren't actually going to..do anything, are you?"

"Why, Draco, has your aunt not taught you anything valuable? You should know better than to question your superiors." Without waiting for a reply, he led Hermione towards the corner of the large, open room.

There wasn't a real room there, but a section that was only separated from the rest of the room by a sheer, dingy curtain. She noticed a makeshift laboratory next to it and some bookshelves. She knew instantly that these were Snape's possessions, too. Why had he been sharing a room with Narcissa Malfoy? Were they having an affair? Worse. What did he intend to do with *her*?

Regally, the blonde woman made her way into the small room and used her wand to pack a trunk with clothes and personal items. Every now and then she'd glance over at Hermione, eyes narrowing slightly. When she finally had her things packed away, she faced Snape and, in a soft voice, asked, "Why are you keeping her here? What of our arrangement?"

"You'll soon have your husband to keep company with," he said decisively. "Our arrangement is done. We no longer have to keep up any pretenses." He shoved Hermione onto the bed. "And I would appreciate it if you'd not question me about my intentions with dear Miss Granger." He ran one long, pale finger down the side of her face as he stared at her possessively.

Hermione shivered at the way he said her name, the way he touched her, and the way his eyes penetrated hers. Surely he didn't intend to... do anything else. *He's already nearly had you. He wants more, a voice whispered, causing tears of shame and fear to come into her eyes. A more hopeful voice replied* *He said that I am plain, that he isn't interested in me, and they just said something about pretenses. Have they only been pretending to share a bed?*

"Sir," she began.

"You will not speak unless you are spoken to. Is that clear?" he said, bending over her. When she nodded, he lowered his face near her ear and whispered, "We shall talk shortly." At that, he pushed her back onto the bed, causing her to lie across it.

"Severus, what..." Narcissa began, but her voice trailed away when he spun around to face her. "She can't just wear that while she stays here."

Hermione was certain that wasn't what the woman had intended on saying. It seemed that she'd been about to take Snape to task for the way he'd roughly handled her, but Hermione wasn't exactly sure about that. This was the same woman that had called her scum when she'd seen her at Madam Malkin's. Perhaps she was simply angry about being replaced.

"Good point," Snape said. "Have Bellatrix help you in Transfiguring some of those old linens into something she can wear. He looked back and leered at her for good measure. "She'll not need any knickers or underthings. Just something for daily wear will suffice. Maybe a nightgown as well." After a slight pause, he added, "Something short of course."

"Really! She'll need underthings and feminine items. You can't expect her to always..."

"Very well. You may leave now," he said curtly.

"I'll see what we can come up with," the woman said and left without another glance at Hermione.

Once they were alone, Snape frowned at her and flicked his wand towards the curtain. *'Muffliato.'*

Two tears escaped Hermione's eyes at the same time, but the rest stopped as she gazed at him warily. She wanted desperately to speak to him and ask him questions, but he'd made it clear that she'd suffer if she did, so she chose to wait until he spoke, which he seemed ready to do.

He brought a hand up to cover his mouth for a moment as he stared at her. Finally, he moved it and said, "I told you not to cross me. Do you see what your actions of betrayal have caused?"

"May I speak?" she asked uncertainly, scooting closer towards the headboard, glancing from him to the curtain where she could fuzzily make out the far off area where the others were.

"Yes. Answer me."

"Professor, I swear that they were only going to make certain you didn't harm me. I didn't even know that you knew they were there until you grabbed me, and then everything happened so fast. I only meant to exchange information." She bit her lip as she waited for his reply.

"Be that as it may, you should never have told them. Why did you?"

"I...I didn't fully trust you."

Incredulously, he scoffed and stepped closer, looked towards the curtain, and then sat next to her on the bed. "I thought you might betray me, though I'd hoped you had the sense not to."

She lifted her chin and defiantly said, "You brought someone as well! I'd say that should make us even in the betrayal department."

The corner of his lips curved up slightly as he nodded his head once. "Do you want to live, Miss Granger?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she answered breathlessly and without hesitation, afraid of where this was going.

"Will you do as I say? Never question my judgment? Do as you must to ensure your survival?"

"I... What do I have to do?"

"Questioning me already then?" He arched an eyebrow at her and leaned closer so that his face was only inches from hers. "The Dark Lord believes that I fancy you and intended to eventually take you as my own."

"But why?"

"Because I told him that I did." He smiled at her nastily, pointedly looking down at her chest and then legs. "Don't worry. The last thing I want to do is bed you." He nodded towards the curtain. "You've just seen what was sharing my bed before you got here, didn't you? That's what attracts me, which, sadly, is something you'll never be."

"You're not someone who'd attract me either!" she blurted angrily, stung by his hateful words, though feeling relieved. "Do you think that it was you who had me... er... That is to say..."

"I don't care one way or the other," he interrupted. "The point is that you will have to do what I say, and yes, that includes sleeping with me each night. They will certainly think that something else besides 'sleeping' is going on, and I will make comments to lead them to believe that you are indeed my lover. You will NOT say otherwise. Do you understand?"

*So he's not actually going to force me into anything. Good.* "Agreed." She paused and then asked, "What can I expect here? What's going to happen? Why are you being," she searched for the right word and could think of none, "so nice to me?"

He thought for a moment before answering. "There are other things going on here that you can't yet understand, and just so you know, I made good on my promise. I gave Weasley the information that I'd intended to give to you." He glanced over towards the curtain and noted, as she did, that the tall form of Rabastan Lestranger was nearing.

"Come here. Now." Pulling her from her position on the bed, he forced her onto her knees between his spread legs and tossed his robe over her head. Shocked, she felt a hand on her head, and it pushed at her head, grinding her face against his thigh just near his underpants and his crotch. Instinctively, she knew not to say anything and to play along, moving her head slightly every few seconds.

"Come on, girl. You can do better than that!" he said loudly, obviously making a show for their eavesdropper who had to have entered the room to truly hear anything after the spell he'd cast.

"Already getting her to do your bidding, eh?" Lestrangle asked. "Lucky bastard."

"If you don't mind..."

"I was just wondering how she's settling in and if you needed any... assistance with anything."

Roughly, her head was moved and ground against his crotch again. To her horror, she could actually feel his semi-erect penis pressing against her scalp, could actually smell a musky scent she could describe only as being male.

"Watch those teeth," he hissed angrily. "Lestrangle, I don't like audiences. Get out. I shall be done shortly, and we'll go to make our report to the Dark Lord."

"All right. And if you reconsider, let me know." The man left with a few loud stomps, and Snape immediately released her head.

"Just stay there for a moment."

"Yes, sir," she said softly. She didn't want to move her head, lest she'd offend him, but she didn't feel right in the position she was in. He must have realized her dilemma and noticed his own, for he pulled his robes up and motioned for her to get back on the bed. He stood and made a show of fixing his underpants. If anyone could make out their shapes through the curtain, they'd think she'd just given him fellatio and that he was cleaning himself off. Noting the growing bulge at the front of the gray underpants, she pointedly looked up at his face, hoping her burning cheeks weren't red.

He turned towards her and flicked his wand. She was suddenly bound to his bedpost by one wrist. Tugging on the tight, yet soft, rope, Hermione asked, "What is this for?"

"This is for looks... I'm certain once I leave, someone might come in. It would be odd for me to not leave you bound...for now at least." He adjusted his robes. "I must see the Dark Lord and inform him of what's happened. I will return when I can." He released the spell on the curtains, but his voice remained low enough that the others wouldn't be able to hear. "You can reach any part of this room, even though you're bound to the bed. Read if you'd like." He pointed to a small stack of books lying on top of a beat-up, wooden desk. He pulled the shrunken tome that she'd given him from one of his robe pockets and placed it inside a drawer, warding it immediately after.

"Thank you."

The instant he was gone, she gave in to the horror she felt over what had just happened and willed her roiling stomach to remain calm and not spill the contents of her last meal. If anyone other than Snape had snatched her, she was certain she wouldn't be treated the same way. So much was happening.... She couldn't think straight. Wishing she'd listened to Harry and hadn't insisted on meeting Snape, she curled up and tried to fall asleep, which would be the only way she'd find any peace at the moment...and that was only if she didn't have nightmares.

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"Can you believe that they all seem to think that there might be more to Snape than meets the eye?" Harry asked Ron incredulously after the Order members left.

Ron nodded. "Seems odd to be thinking about it, especially after he took off with Hermione like that, but after seeing those two memories, I have to admit that I'm also thinking that he's still on our side."

"She's your girlfriend, Ron, and she's now with a bloke who isn't above taking advantage of that. You heard him. He'll do what he must for the cause!" Harry said in disgust. "What we saw might very well be how it went down, but it could be that it was all an act. He's hoodwinked people all his life, Ron, and I've long thought that the headmaster was wrong in trusting him."

Ron was silent for a long moment before he looked at Harry, eyes filled with worry. "Don't you think that I'm not anxious about where Hermione is? I know what you're saying is true, but today, it just seemed like he wanted to help. It wasn't what he gave me or what he said. Not really. It was how he said it. I can't explain it to you, but I... I do think the bloke's on our side."

"So, he's got you fooled, too, then, eh?" Harry said, not really waiting for an answer. "I'm not going to be swayed. Not in this. I saw his face when he cast that spell on the headmaster. It was like he loathed him! I just can't let go of everything that's happened."

The memories had showed two different conversations between Dumbledore and Snape. In the first one, Snape had told Dumbledore about a visit he'd received from Narcissa and Bellatrix and a Vow he'd taken, not truly knowing the full meaning of it, but he'd found out afterwards what Draco's orders were through talking with Rabastan Lestrangle. Dumbledore had forced him to do whatever he had to do, even casting a curse to end his life if he had to, so long as he didn't expose his position in the Dark Lord's camp. Snape had agreed after much talking from Dumbledore, but even Harry could see that the man didn't like what he was agreeing to...or at least he was pretending to not like it.

In the second memory, Snape was nearly frantic and was speaking nastily to the headmaster, saying he didn't want to do what he'd promised any longer, and that Dumbledore couldn't force him, as he'd rather lose his own life than truly follow through with the Vow he'd taken with Narcissa. Dumbledore was adamant that he'd do what he must to make certain everything went on according to plan and that he was looking into an alternative to things that would still be a winning situation. After they'd stopped talking, Snape departing dejectedly towards the castle, Hagrid engaged the headmaster in a conversation. Harry knew this to be the conversation he'd let slip to them, saying he'd overheard Snape and Dumbledore. Unfortunately, Hagrid hadn't heard everything or had left some things out.

The whole mess was confusing for Harry, but his hatred for Snape and his memories kept him biased and not wanting to trust the man. All he knew was that they'd meet again, and Snape had better be prepared for the match up, as he'd taught himself some things that he hadn't seen in the curriculum at Hogwarts. He would be a rival indeed. And if Snape harmed a hair on Hermione's head or allowed Voldemort to do anything to her, there would be hell to pay, regardless where his loyalties truly were.

"We need to just stop talking about this for right now, and we need to figure out a way to get to the cup at Borgin and Burkes."

Harry knew that his friend was right, but he couldn't understand why the boy was so calm when his lover...their best friend...had been taken by a Death Eater... a Death Eater who spouted lies easily and smooth talked his way through most anything, even Azkaban.

"I talked to Tonks before she left, and we've come up with a plan."

"That's a start. Come on then. Tell me, mate."

Harry quickly filled Ron in on the inspection she and Kingsley would claim to have to do to the place, saying that someone had tipped them off to stolen goods. While the man was tied up with them and up in the store's upper levels, Harry, Ron, and Lupin could slip in and try to unward the private room. Harry felt they could do it with some of the wards they'd found in Hermione's book. If they could unward something that Voldemort put on Godric's Hollow, they could unward this room.

Before they went up to bed, Ron quietly said, "I love her, Harry, and I am worried about what's become of her, but if I don't stay positive about this and do my part in what we have to do, I'll go mad. And besides, she'd want us to keep up with things."

"I know, mate. I know. I just... I hate this shite."

"Me too."

"Come on. Up we go. Maybe the blighter will send us something new soon," Harry said more optimistically than he felt.

"Yeah," Ron said with a nod. "He might do that. I hope."

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**Southern's Notes:** Moving right along then. We'll soon see if captivity is all it's cracked up to be.

## Chapter 10

*Chapter 10 of 30*

Living with Snape and his friends proves to be harder than Hermione had imagined.

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters. Just borrowing for a bit.

*Thanks go to Charmed\_Nay for the beta (has been my main beta for three years now)! You're so good to me.*

---

"My Lord, if I might speak..."

"You may not, Rabastan," came the soft reply. His slitty eyes met Snape's. "Severusss?"

With a nod, Severus said, "Potter and Weasley showed up, my Lord. She'd informed them of the meeting."

"I thought she might," he said thoughtfully, bringing a bony finger up to rest on his chin for a moment. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed and his gaze swung back to Rabastan. "What is it?"

"My Lord, Snape, he wouldn't let me handle Potter." He looked over at Snape apologetically before turning back to his Lord. "It would have saved you the trouble and the time."

"And you are upset about this because..."

Blinking, Rabastan repeated, "Well, it would have made things easier."

"I will be the last face that boy sees before he dies," the Dark Lord said forcefully, rising from his chair, wand raised. "You wanted recognition. You wanted glory."

"N-no, my Lord," Rabastan said, shuffling side to side nervously, not daring a glance at Severus.

"You wish to have the girl as well."

"I... Well, I wouldn't mind, Master." Chancing a glance at Severus, he quickly added, "I believe I could intimidate her more... make her talk. She doesn't seem too leery of Severus, my Lord."

"Liar!" said his Master. A jet of purple light hit Rabastan in the arm he'd received his hex on, causing him to scream and fall to his knees clutching it. "You want her for your own pleasure more than what you could do for the cause." Releasing the spell on his follower, he turned to Severus. "What shall you do now that our initial plan has been thwarted?"

"Master, I intend to gain her trust by playing honorable, letting her think that I am helping her friends.... I feel the task will be quite easy." He arched an eyebrow and looked towards his kneeling friend. "However, outside interference would set things back. She must feel safe with me right now if nothing else."

"Agreed. See that it's done and keep me apprised of any progress." Voice softening to a mocking sweet tone, he said, "Dear Rabastan, where are my manners? You may rise now, my friend."

"Thank you, Master."

"Remember always the kindness Lord Voldemort has shown you. Mistakes disappoint me so very much. Before you go..." He paused and called out, "Wormtail, come here."

"Yes, my Lord?"

"You will go with Severusss and Rabastan. I've things to do and do not need you underfoot."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Severusss, have Rabastan redeem himself by sending him on that last assignment we talked about in your stead."

"I will see it done."

"Off, the lot of you."

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"Awww, is the ickle wittle Mudblood sweeping already?" Bellatrix taunted.

Hermione nervously opened her eyes and scooted up to a sitting position. "I wasn't sleeping."

Curling her lips in disgust, the dark-haired woman looked Hermione up and down. "Whatever does Severus want with you?" she asked finally. "Plain brown hair...unruly at that. Plain brown eyes. Not even beautiful." When there was no reply, she grinned slyly. "Now that Narcissa is out of here, she won't have to put up with his filthy hands on her." She reached out and placed a hand on Hermione's bound wrist and slid it slowly down her forearm, smirking as her prey flinched and tried to move away. "Looks like you're a little tied up." Lowering her voice to a whisper, she confided, "Snape likes it rough. I'll bet he'll keep you bound and beat you until you're nearly unconscious before he finally fucks you. Why, I remember..."

"What are you doing?"

Bellatrix straightened up, momentarily startled, and then flashed her sister an affectionate smile. "Playing with my new toy."

"Severus doesn't want us to bother her."

"Come now, Cissy. Not up for a spot of fun then? Snape and Rab's going to be gone for a while yet."

Ignoring her sister, Narcissa walked into the room and tossed what looked to be old sheets onto the bed. "Here. You'll be wearing these until Severus gives you something else."

"Would you let me go?" Hermione asked suddenly, trying to make a plea to what appeared to be Narcissa's sympathetic side.

Unfortunately, both women started laughing. "Come, Bella. Let's leave before Severus returns."

With a resigned sigh, Bellatrix said, "You're just no fun these days, Cissy." She watched as her sister left and then faced Hermione again. "You won't get out of here alive, little Mudblood."

The glint in her eye left no doubt for Hermione that the woman would personally enjoy ending her stay with them *What have I got myself into? Why did I trust Snape? Why did I tell Harry and Ron?*

A shuffling sound brought her attention to the curtain's entrance once again, and she was surprised to see Draco standing there, peeking in at her, eyes filled with something akin to horror.

"Malfoy?" she said uncertainly. "C-can you help me?"

He shook his head and quickly glanced back over his shoulder before stepping in. "You've gone and done it now, Granger!" he whispered.

Losing a little of the hope that had flared within, she turned her face away from him and said, "You think I don't know that?"

"There're wards. You can't leave. No Apparition. No Floo."

"Yes, I tried already," she said dryly, then realized he was still talking, seemingly not noticing she'd commented. Her gaze went back to his emotional face.

"Everyone expecting things of you that you don't want to do. Never getting a chance to be alone to think!"

"Ar-are you a prisoner here, Draco?"

His eyes met hers, but he said nothing.

"Can you help me?"

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, he was pushed aside by Rabastan Lestrangle. "Ah, there's a good lad. Keeping her company, eh?"

"Where's Snape?" Draco asked, nervously gazing between Hermione and his aunt's brother-in-law.

"Oh, he's taking care of a little rat problem." He leered at Hermione and moved towards her.

"What do you want?" she asked defiantly, readying her leg to kick him if he got too close.

"Just making sure Snape's little treasure is comfortable. Wouldn't want you to be lonely... or cold." He smirked and motioned for Draco to enter. "Come see this, boy. I'm going to keep the lass warm, I am."

"But Snape said..."

"Bugger Snape and his orders. He's not my da, you know."

Hermione was horrified, but then she saw Draco straighten up and puff out his chest, fists clenching at his side. He was going to take up for her...she could sense it. Lestrangle gave him a sideways glance, expression asking if there was a problem.

Then Hermione's hope shattered once again.

"How dare you think that I would want to watch you do anything with that Mudblood scum?" He looked at her coldly. "I've always hated her...bloody swot, always trying to impress everyone with things she'd read, lucking out and besting me on tests." He sneered. "Likely sucking up to the professors." Stepping closer, he asked, "Never thought I'd see the day when Snape'd pick someone like you. Bet he's had you propped under his desk a few times doing your dirty deed down low while he graded papers. You seemed to get right to it earlier!"

Rabastan snickered. "Be a good lad and stand just round there then. If you see Snape coming, let me know."

"No way," he said flatly. "I'm not going to let Snape see me around here."

"Oi, come on! It won't take long. 'S been a while for me."

"You're not going to touch me!" Hermione bit out, readying herself for a fight.

Ignoring her outburst, Rabastan said, "You should take orders from your elders, boy."

"I am," Draco replied arrogantly. "Snape runs this place and told us to leave off." He nodded towards Hermione. "I won't jeopardize my new standing for the likes of that. You're on your own, mate."

"Then bugger off, you ingrate. You're wasting my time. Won't be long before the bloke's done now and on his way back," he replied testily.

Giving her one last glance, Draco left. Hermione swallowed some of her fear and told the man, "If you come near me, I promise you'll regret it." She balled her fists up and drew herself up to a crouching position, ready to pounce, heart hammering in her chest.

The man simply grinned in amusement and lifted his wand. Instantly, three other ropes appeared, all rough and scratchy...nothing like the soft one Snape had conjured.



Before she realized what was happening, the magical bindings had her sprawled on the bed, legs spread widely. She realized then that he was serious and that, being bound, there was little she could do to stop him.

"Stay back!" she loudly yelled, hoping someone would come and put an end to it. However, she doubted if anyone else would dare approach them, especially not after what Draco...her last hope...had said.

Another flick of his wand saw a jet of light connecting with her chest, and no matter how much she screamed or swore at the bastard, no sound came out. Writhing desperately against her binds, she tried to free herself, all the while watching him lift his robes and toss down his trousers to reveal a thick, already hardened member.

"Ah, see that? 'E likes a good struggle." He made a humming noise of appreciation. "Yeah, keep bucking like that, lass. It's what I want, you see."

Suddenly going still, eyes wide with horror, she watched as he approached the bed after kicking his trousers away. One hand gripped and slid over his erection while the other held his robes out of the way and gripped his wand. The bed sagged and shook as he climbed in and moved between her legs.

"Looks like you'll need to be rid of these clothes, eh?"

At that, her mouth opened and would have screamed the word 'no' had she not been silenced as she tried to scoot away from his advance.

"I believe I told you to stay away from what's *mine*," said a silky, dangerously quiet voice.

Hermione had never been so happy to see Snape in all her life. And to think, he'd showed up before the arsehole could remove her clothes, but the humiliation and total feeling of helplessness had already left its mark. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she watched Snape flick his wand a few times.

Rabastan jumped away from her and off the bed as if he'd been burned, and his trousers lifted from the floor, hovered in place for a moment, and then lurched towards the half naked man, who still had a grip on his robes.

"Bloody fuck, Snape!" he yelled. "Call it off, you wanker!"

The trousers had shrunk and wrapped tightly around his erection, obviously squeezing it from the frantic way he was hopping about.

"If I ever find you in these rooms again, I'll make certain there's nothing down there needing tending to. Do I make myself clear?" Snape stepped closer, wand leveled at the man's chest.

"Yes! *Finite!* What the fuck? Call it off!"

With a vicious smirk, Snape flicked his wrist, calling the attacking trousers off. "Get out."

Rabastan fled without donning his trousers or saying another word. It was only then that Hermione realized she was completely unbound and could speak again. Wiping at her wet cheeks, she noticed that the wrist that had been bound by Rabastan's rough rope was bloodied and burning. A glance down at her ankles showed the same results.

"Are you all right?" Snape asked, coming closer.

"Stay back," she said, throat tight, chest heavy.

"I need to heal you," he said, disregarding her plea and sitting next to her. When he reached out to take her hand, she snatched it back. "Miss Granger, I've just rid you of your aggressor. Surely you can trust me."

"I wish you hadn't brought me here. You could have left me there."

"*You* left me no choice," he said accusingly as he spelled away the abrasions on her flesh.

She wanted to cry, but she knew that by doing so, she was showing him weakness. Before he'd gone off to see Voldemort, he'd made her feel at ease. However, she'd been harassed by the others, let down by Malfoy...though why she'd hoped he'd help her was beyond her...and nearly raped. She supposed she should be grateful that he'd helped her, but at the moment, she blamed him for everything she felt and would have liked nothing more than to slap the nonchalant expression from his face.

"I'll bet you'd like to hit me," he said suddenly.

Hermione looked up to see that he was staring at her thoughtfully. "Yes."

"And rage at me?"

"Yes."

"You're putting all of the blame on me and none on yourself."

"It's *your* doing that has me here! You know you could have left me there and made some excuse about someone else showing up," she said with an angry hiss.

He rose and ignored her statements...instead moving towards his wardrobe where he took off his cloak and hung it. Next, he worked on the fastenings of his robes and hung them up as well.

"What are you doing?" she asked nervously.

He turned, made his way back to her, and roughly pulled her up from the bed, keeping his grip on her arms tight.

"Snape! Stop!"

When he began lowering his head, she began to frantically struggle to free herself from him, kicking and scratching and pushing...anything.

"No!"

Shaking her slightly, he flashed a sinister smile. "Do you think your feeble attempts to dislodge me could truly work if I seriously wanted to harm you?"

"Get your hands off of me."

"Scream at me. Rage all you want. Tell me how you really feel." His lips were curled in disgust as he gazed at her with disdain...much like the Snape she was used to at Hogwarts.

"I hate you! I wish you'd never brought me here! I thought we could trust you...you betrayed us. Harry was right!" she yelled as loudly as she could. Hermione began pummeling his chest with her fists, trying to hurt him as much as she was hurting. "Why didn't you just leave me alone? Wh-why couldn't it ha-have been som-someone else?" All of her emotions were peaking, and her words were littered with sobs. Spent, she finally collapsed against him, taking comfort in the strong embrace he offered her.

Continuing to cry softly, she listened to the words he whispered in her ear. "I did not wish for this. I hope you believe that, but if you are to survive, you must play the part. Same for me."

"I... I can't do this. I thought I could, but they..." Her words trailed away, unable to voice the fear and vulnerability she'd felt at the hands of his friends.

"You *will* be able to do this," he murmured, moving them towards the bed. If she'd had the energy, she would have fought him again, but she couldn't muster even an ounce and simply allowed him to lower her to the soft mattress and climb in beside her. "Nox."

"What are you doing?" she asked softly once the lamps were extinguished.

"We need the privacy," he replied in a whisper. "They are likely watching us."

"Is that why you taunted me? You wanted me to make a scene for them?"

"You're a very bright girl. I am glad that you're catching on. They will think you've rebelled against me after what he did to you, and now that things are quiet, they'll think that you are submitting to my will."

"Lestranger... he was going to..."

"I won't let him touch you," he vowed firmly.

"But how can you stop it if you aren't here?"

"I'll not leave you unprotected again. If I must go, you will be safely warded within."

This made Hermione feel better immediately. At least she wouldn't have to put up with their snide comments or anything worse. "So, I can just stay in here then and not bother with them?"

"I'm afraid that I will ask you to venture out with me at times. You'll find that their company can be quite pleasant upon occasion," he said, reaching down to pull the kicked away duvet over them.

Hermione realized that he was still holding her and that her back was pressed against his front firmly. Yes, she knew that she should be horrified, but for some odd reason, it felt comforting to know that at least Snape wouldn't try to harm her.

*Not try to harm you? He's already Polyjuiced himself as your lover and tried to have a go at you! Don't trust him!* a voice screamed.

Another countered, saying, *Just go along with things for now. If he thinks you're playing along with his scheme, he'll start trusting you and slip up. You'll find a way out of here.*

*But Malfoy said he's tried and can't!*

*You're much smarter than that blighter.*

"When do I start to act as if I'm in love with you?" she asked bluntly.

His deep chuckle startled her. "I think that will come in time, don't you?"

She didn't reply and wondered if he realized that he sounded serious. Was he playing her? Was this truly a game to win her over? Hermione vowed to not fall into his trap, whatever it might truly be. She'd find her own way out of this...without him if need be.

"The Dark Lord... what did he say about me?"

"Why don't you just rest now? We've all the time we need to talk later. Once you awake, I'll get something for you to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Hermione," he began slowly, "you won't do yourself any favors by being defiant or by starving yourself. Trust me. The only way to get out of this alive and mostly unscathed is to follow through with this ruse."

"And do you still promise not to overstep the line again, *Professor?*"

"I've already said that I wouldn't," he said, clearly irritated. "And you might as well stop calling me that."

"All right, Snape."

"Or Severus."

"Snape it is."

"Whatever you like, *Hermione.*"

She remained silent and rejoiced inwardly as he moved away from her, releasing his hold on her. So long as he was nearby, it was enough to make her feel safe...mostly. For now, she wished Ron would be there to hold her and kiss away her worries. Biting her lip, she thought of her friends and the worry this was likely causing them. She hoped that they had faith enough in her to know that she would survive... hoped they would use Snape's message to their advantage... hoped this would be over soon. She'd never missed Grimmauld Place or her two friends as much as she did in that moment.

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Severus slipped from the bed, toed on his discarded boots, and left in search of Rabastan. He didn't have to go very far, as he was sitting near the fire smoking a pipe. Gesturing for him to follow him, he led the way outside and to a spot far away from the building.

"Well?" Rabastan asked once a spell was cast to keep their conversation from being overheard.

"It worked. She feels she can only trust me," Severus replied, crossing his arms. "However, I believe you were suppose to go in and give her a scare...verbally, not physically."

"You were taking too long! Didn't want her to think I was all talk," he replied, adding, "and I sure as hell don't appreciate that bloody hex you put on my trousers. Bout tore my dick off, that!"

"Serves you right," he replied evenly. "Did you think I was jesting when I said to stay away from what's mine?"

After a small silence, Rabastan said, "I'll not touch her again...without permission."

"Agreed."

"Now, what is it that our Lord wants me to do? And why'd he send the pesky rat here with us? Just what we need! Nosy little tosser snooping about, spying on us!"

"There is an item of great importance that the Master wants retrieved. Fetching it, however, will be risky. Wormtail will be used for this, and if something happens to him, then it's no big loss to us. He planned to send me to oversee it, but I will be sending you in my stead. Do this successfully, and you will have gained favor."

"Yeah, that'll do. Seems like no matter what lately, he casts that damn Cruciatus at me. Getting right tired of it, I am."

"Don't say that too loudly around the others, my friend, else you'll have him finding out you're feelings."

Nodding, Rabastan said, "When and where?"

"I'll disclose that information to you in the morning. There's a potion that will be completed shortly. You'll both have to take a vial of it with you... just in case something goes awry."

"Sounds dodgy, this plan."

"It is, but it's our Lord's bidding."

"Then it shall be done. Come. Let's have a game of chess and a whisky."

"Fair enough."

~~~~~

Narcissa had heard the girl's crying and rants at Severus and cringed inwardly. She didn't like the girl, of course, but one could feel sympathy to those in unfortunate situations. She never did like violence and would rather not have a part in it. She could tell that her son disagreed with whatever Rabastan had done and then whatever Severus had done to her after. However, it hadn't taken long for the girl's cries to quiet and for the lights to turn off completely. She couldn't see anything through the filmy curtain since it was darker within, but she imagined Severus was all over the girl...if the way he'd been looking at her earlier was anything to go by.

She felt a small pang of jealousy. All this time, she'd needed someone to comfort her, and it had been hard enough to get him to hold her now and then while she slept...and that was after he'd taken her so roughly the night he and Draco had fled Hogwarts.

Soon enough, Lucius would be free from Azkaban. She was uncertain what he'd say about how things had gone down, but hopefully, he would understand that she was simply trying to preserve their family and that Severus was just a means to an end... and her body a small price to pay to keep Draco safe.

Her gaze landed on Draco again, and she saw that he also darted glances towards Snape's room, obviously wondering about the girl's state. When he noticed his mother watching him, he flushed guiltily and started reading the book in his hands...or pretending to read it anyway. She hoped he wasn't lusting after her and planning to try to sneak in to see her for his own pleasure. Narcissa's eyes narrowed. She'd have no rapist for a son. There were too many of those about as it stood already. Yes, it would do him well to have Lucius back in the fold. Only his father could truly guide him appropriately. With a sigh, she thought, *At least he has Severus' protection until then. Hopefully.*

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**Southern's Excuses:** I'm so sorry that this took so long in coming. There's been a great deal of things going on for me lately. Finally, everything's coming together again. LOL I just wasn't very inspired to write this story, as this transition chapter was hard to shape up. I have most of the next three chapters written out already, as I'd planned them ages ago, so the wait will certainly not be as long. Thanks for those who are reading and also to those reviewing. I truly appreciate it and the encouragement.

## Chapter 11

*Chapter 11 of 30*

Hermione's first day in "captivity" goes well and sets the stage for her duration there.

**Disclaimer:** Borrowing some of JKR's characters for a bit of fun. No money is coming to me though.

*Thanks go to my love beta, Charmed\_Nay, who has taken to harassing me to get my arse in gear and to get this out.*

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"Snape?"

Hermione's voice was quiet, not wanting anyone else to hear her, but she hoped it was loud enough to rouse the snoring man. Leaning closer to peer at his face in the darkness, she opened her mouth to speak again.

"What is it?" he asked quietly, voice laced with sleep.

"I need to use the loo."

"Now?"

"For a long while now, but I just can't hold it any longer."

She'd been awake for at least an hour she was certain and had been debating on waking him up for the last thirty minutes. However, she worried that he would insist on being in the room with her while she relieved herself. It was a moot point, as there was no way she'd go to search it out herself in the dark. Not with the others out there.

After a sigh, he said, "Very well." The bed shook and sprang up once he got up. There was a slight rustling of clothes before a candle lit, showering their room with a light glow.

Her eyes widened as she took in his appearance. His normally sleek hair was disheveled, one side of his face had creases where the pillow had been pressed against it, and a grey nightshirt replaced his usual black clothing, leaving his calves and feet bare. Keeping her eyes towards the floor, she whispered a quick thanks and tried not to think about how he looked. It wasn't appealing. No, it was just that she'd never seen Snape look so normal...like an ordinary man... less severe.

"Come on," he snapped.

When she saw his feet turn and move away from the light and into the dark outer room, she looked up and followed him, getting as close as possible, not wanting to make any noise or lose her way. The only noises in the room were light snoring from a distant corner and the light patter of their feet on the cold floor.

Snape stopped to open a door, and Hermione bumped into him. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Never mind that. In here," he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her into the room. He used his wand to light the sconce and closed the door behind them. When she simply stared at him in horror, he asked, "What?"

"I'd like to do this without an audience."

He made a face and stalked out. Once the door clicked closed, she quickly went about her business, glad he'd retreated and left her in peace.

*This won't be so bad if he keeps his word. So far, all's well. I can stand to hold on a bit longer. I'm strong. I'm clever. I'll get out of this.*

A tap on the door stopped her thought flow. "Almost done," she said quickly, darting over to splash water on her face and to rinse her mouth out. Her reflection startled her as she took in her appearance: eyes bloodshot and puffy, cheeks swollen and pale. What had Snape thought when he'd looked at her?

"Not that I care," she muttered. And she didn't. She simply hated looking so frightful. She supposed, though, that fair was fair. She'd seen him looking unkempt, and she was certain she'd see much worse. "Well, I hope I don't see much worse anyway."

"Talking to yourself again?"

"Oh!" Turning around, she saw him standing in the doorway, hair tidied somewhat. "What time is it?" she asked, hoping she sounded calm.

"Just past four."

With that, he beckoned for her to go to him and flicked his wand to rid them of light. Hands stretched out before her, she moved in his direction and found him when her hands touched his nightshirt. Silently, she followed him back to their bed. She said nothing as she hurried beneath the duvet, slid as far away from his side of the bed as possible, and turned her back to him. He blew out the candle and made himself comfortable.

For a few moments, she feared he might make a move to touch her, but nothing happened, and she soon sensed he was falling asleep, as his breathing had begun to even out. They were so far apart that she couldn't even feel the heat of his body. Relief flowed through her. So far, he'd kept his word.

Sleep wouldn't come to her no matter how hard she tried. Thoughts of Ron and Harry, completed with worried expressions on their faces, kept surfacing in her mind. What were they doing to find her? Would they trust the information Snape had given them? Would Snape truly keep his word?

*Snape*, she thought bitterly. *This is his fault.* A shiver passed through her as she thought of the night he'd been Polyjuiced as Ron. What if they hadn't been interrupted? Would he have truly gone through with it? Hermione realized that he preferred a woman such as Narcissa, but he had seemed interested that night. Had it been an act?

"I hope so," she whispered. If Snape went back on his word and tried to use her...or if Rabastan ever followed through with his initial plans...she was uncertain if she could truly handle it. No. There had to be a way to get out. Her mind then pictured Draco's face. She'd been so certain that he'd sympathized with her... until Rabastan had joined them. Then he became the petty Malfoy she'd always known from Hogwarts. *Still though. Maybe I can convince him to help. Maybe his mother can be reasoned with. She didn't seem so hostile to me. Only Bellatrix had intended her harm.* Another shiver flowed through her body. She'd have to keep an eye on that woman as well as on Rabastan. A great pair they made. She only hoped that Rodolphus Lestrangle wouldn't be joining them anytime soon. If he were anything like them, there was no telling what might transpire...whether she had Snape's protection or not!

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"Get up, girl," Snape said gruffly, shaking the bed with his booted foot.

"Whazzat?"

"I've told you twice to get up. I've things to do, and I won't have you lazing about in bed all day. You are to assist me."

When she sat up, she saw that he was holding out a dingy white, sheet-like dress for her to slip on. Gazing at it in horror, she realized that she'd have to go about dressed in something fit for house-elves. She snatched the dress from his grasp with burning cheeks, realizing that Narcissa and Bellatrix had probably thought it fitting for her.

Snape cleared his throat, causing her to look up. Dangling from the tip of his index finger was a pair of large, crudely made knickers.

"I believe you are forgetting these," he said, one eyebrow arched in amusement.

Hermione took the offensive garment from him without meeting his eyes again and opened them up completely in front of her. "I could fit someone else in these with me!" she said indignantly.

"Allow me," he said, flicking his wand.

Instantly, the material began to shrink to a size she was certain she could fit. "Er... thanks," she mumbled.

"You saw my workspace last night on our way in here?"

She nodded.

"You will reply to me with words."

"Yes," she said bitterly.

"And you will also look at me, Hermione."

At that, she looked up, defiance in her gaze. "I don't see why I have to go in there." Though her voice was no louder than a whisper, it carried her frustration and fear well.

With his arms crossed in front of him, he gazed at her a long time before speaking. "I thought we cleared this up last evening. You agreed to do as I say without question. We have a plan...if you'll remember." Raising his voice, he added, "This is not a vacation. You are my prisoner here, and as such, you will do as I say. Now, get your little arse up, get dressed, and meet me outside."

He strode off, leaving her to hurry to do his bidding. She was certain he'd said the last so that the others could hear them. He was right. If they thought he was coddling her

too soon, maybe they would realize that it was all a rouse.

The instant she walked out from behind their curtains, she was accosted by Bellatrix. "Bout time you get your lazy lump up. How about a spot of breakfast?"

"The stove's just there," Narcissa added, pointing across the room. "All that you need as well."

"She is not a house-elf... regardless of how she might be dressed," Snape said, coming into her line of sight. "She'll cook if I say she does," he added, crooking a finger at her. "For now, I have something more important I need her for."

Wanting to put space between herself and the two women, she immediately followed him. She could hear them muttering from behind, but she didn't spare them another glance. Instead, her gaze was drawn over towards the fire where Draco sat with Rabastan and... Pettigrew. Hermione stopped and glared at the man who'd betrayed Harry's parents. If he'd never got away that night at Hogwarts, none of this would be happening.

"Come along, Hermione. Don't make me repeat myself."

"I *hate* him," she said when she was again at Snape's side.

"As does everyone here," he replied snidely, pulling out a small silver cauldron. "The instructions are just there on that parchment, but I must warn you, any mistakes may cost you a limb. Be very careful." He arched an eyebrow. "I trust you won't try anything foolish."

"Of course not," she said with a slight frown as she glanced at the parchment. "I've never seen this before. What is it for?"

"I am not at liberty to say at this moment. I'm sure you can understand that."

She set out to work and became engrossed in what she was doing, paying no attention to anyone else in the room...not even Snape. By the time a purple vapor was rising from the bubbling potion, two hours had passed. Having a few minutes to spare before she had to remove it from the fire, she glanced over to where Snape had been working only to find that he was no longer there.

Quickly, she looked about the room and found him near the fire with the others. He must have cast something to keep her from hearing what they were saying, and she desperately wanted to know. From the way Bellatrix was pacing excitedly to the way Rabastan smiled manically as he sharpened his knife, she could tell that something was about to happen. What? She tried to think back to all that she'd heard.

It was then that Draco's pale, pointed face shifted to gaze at her. She could see the fear and horror in his expression. Swallowing hard, she looked away, not wanting anyone to see her interest. There had to be a way to talk to him. From the look of it, he seemed to need someone to talk to. Had she misread what he'd done and said the previous day? Were his insults veiling something else?

She had only a few minutes to ponder on it and to remove the potion from the flame when Snape appeared at her side again.

"It's done then?" he asked softly.

"Yes." She leaned closer to the cauldron. "Smells just as it says and the color is right."

Snape nodded. "Very well. Leave it there to cool. I shall bottle it myself."

"I'd like a bath," she blurted suddenly. "The potion, the vapors feel as though they're clinging to me."

"Are you not hungry?"

"Well, I'd prefer to be clean when I eat, thanks," she retorted testily. When he arched an eyebrow, she added, "Sorry, it's just that I ache, and a hot bath would help."

"Come along," he said and led her to the room they'd gone to during the night. A flick of his wand had the bath filling, and another one conjured a fresh set of clothes.

Her mouth gaped open as he walked over to the counter and hoisted himself up on it, nonchalantly pulling an old ~~Prophet~~ *Prophet* up in front of his face.

"I'd like some privacy."

"I'll not leave you alone in here," he said without even looking at her.

"Well, you can certainly sit outside the door if you intend to guard me, but there is no way I'm going to undress and ..." Her voice trailed away as one corner of the newspaper folded down.

"I am reading this from front to back. Be done before I am, and I'll not see anything you don't want me to see," he said with a stern glare. When she didn't move, he said, "Though I have seen some of you before, haven't I? Maybe you want me to watch you."

"What? No! Just... just read!"

As quickly as she could, she disrobed and slipped into the bath while keeping an eye on him. Keeping his word, he didn't try to glance her way. She lathered the fresh flannel and began scrubbing away, fuming that he'd brought up that humiliating night. As she thought of what they'd done... what he'd made her feel... her stomach tingled and the feeling spread through her body, leaving goosebumps on her exposed flesh.

In hopes of changing her train of thoughts, she softly said, "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't bring up that night again."

"Does it make you feel uncomfortable?"

She could hear the amusement in his voice. "It does indeed." When he said nothing, she went on. "I guess I can understand why you want to be in here. First, you don't want anyone to bother me...I thank you for that. Second, you want it to look as though you and I are... well, you know, make it look as if..."

"As if' what?"

"You're being difficult on purpose!" she snapped. Deciding against washing her hair, she began to rinse the soap from her body. "You know very well what I mean. I am trying to work through this situation with you, so I would appreciate it if you did your part. It's the only way this will work for us."

He flipped a page in the paper and didn't reply. Although she was annoyed with his silence, she didn't speak again until she was about to get out to dry off.

"I'm... don't look."

"Not even tempted," he replied dryly.

Once she was finished, they ventured out into the common room to find the others glancing knowingly at them. Rabastan appraised her with a smirk and lewd stare until he saw that Snape had noticed. Draco seemed shocked and turned away.

Together, they ate lunch in silence. Her stomach growled appreciatively as she hungrily devoured the sandwiches and crisps. Covertly, she watched the others while she

chewed. Bellatrix and Rabastan were playing a game of chess while Narcissa and Draco were sitting quietly together, both reading, and Wormtail was off to the side alone and obviously displeased about it. His beady eyes met hers, and a small smirk curved his lips.

"Been a long time, girl," he said, breaking the comfortable silence.

"Not long enough," she quipped, glaring at him hostilely. She loathed him more than she'd loathed anyone before. ~~He~~ He had betrayed Harry's parents to Voldemort. ~~He~~ He alone enabled Voldemort's return by helping to complete the potion. She wished that she'd allowed Harry to use the Time-Turner to capture him after all. Perhaps things would have been different for them all.

Bellatrix's loud laughter erupted, shocking Hermione.

"Even the Mudblood knows you're a worthless lump, Wormtail," she commented, drawing Rabastan's laughter.

"Bella, you will show respect to my...*friend*," Snape said coldly.

In return the dark woman snickered. "Friend indeed, Severus. Why you always choose these worthless types is beyond me."

"Bella," Narcissa chided.

"What? Why should I not say how I feel? The Dark Lord agrees with me, you know. Mudbloods... all the same, coming into our world accidentally and thinking they deserve the same treatment."

BANG!

A jet of light zapped Bellatrix and knocked her out of her chair, leaving her prone form motionless.

"Now then," Snape said as if nothing had occurred, "shall we retire to our room, Hermione? I happen to have a book that I think might interest you."

"All right," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice even. She wanted nothing more than to comment snidely to the others, but she knew she had to play her part. Without looking at anyone, she began to move towards the curtain that separated them from the others.

"Oi, Severus," Rabastan called. "How long do you want to leave her like this? We've a game going, see. Bout have her arse beat."

Snape flicked his wand and released his spell on the woman, and she angrily bounded up and pulled out her wand, muttering foul words at the lot.

Hermione ducked behind the curtain, not wanting to be involved or to have a stray hex hit her. Before long, and after much yelling, Snape joined her.

"The brown book on the third shelf."

"What are you going to be doing?" she asked when she saw him sit at his makeshift desk and pull out a quill and inkwell.

"I've some things to record," he said. "No more questions."

The afternoon stretched into the evening time before they ventured out, and Narcissa approached Hermione as she waited for Snape to come out of the loo.

"We're having guests tonight," she said. "You and Draco will be in charge of tidying up while I get the meal ready." She nodded towards Bellatrix. "She'll not bother you."

Hermione was certain she heard the woman add the word "much" as she walked away, but she couldn't be sure. So she was to be paired off with Malfoy and forced to clean up after them all? Things didn't look too bad, but she knew instinctively that she'd have to do the dirty, manual work.

"Go on then," Snape said from behind her, obviously having overheard the conversation.

She made her way to Draco, who was frowning in distaste. "Well? Where do we start?" she asked.

"You can start by sweeping," he said, nodding to the broom propped against the wall.

"And what will you be doing?"

"Making sure you don't miss a spot," he said snidely.

She narrowed her eyes and grabbed the broom, sweeping crossly. Why did she have to do it manually when they all had wands and could easily have the broom sweeping the floor on its own with a flick of a wand? She resented the fact that they were simply making her do the work because they thought she was less worthy. Each time she looked towards Snape, he was conveniently in conversation with Rabastan and Bellatrix and not paying any attention to her or the fact that Draco wasn't doing his share as indicated by his mother.

Wanting to strike out, she nastily asked, voice low, "So... is being a Death Eater all you thought it'd be?"

"Keep your mouth shut, Granger."

"No, I don't think I will. You see, I may have been told to help out in tidying up, but I've not been restricted to silence, have I?"

"If you know what's good for you..."

"What? What will you do?"

"Just do your work."

Stopping, she asked the question that had been burning in her mind for a long time. "If the others hadn't shown up, would you have went through with it?"

The look he gave her was unmasked and raw. Without his uttering of a word, she knew that his truthful answer would be a definite "no." However, she was certain that he thought himself a failure for not doing it.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, you know," she went on. "Harry saw it all. Told everyone that you'd lowered your wand, wanting to listen to Dum..."

"Shut your filthy mouth," he roared suddenly, interrupting her.

"What? Truth hurts, does it?" she returned, continuing to sweep as if he'd not just yelled at her.

"Is the M... er... girl giving your problems?" Rabastan asked as he strode towards them.

"Nothing I can't handle," Draco retorted, puffing out his chest and squaring his shoulders.

"Aye, looks like it at that." Giving her a small smile that made her nervous, he flicked his wand and charmed the broom to sweep for her. "There you are. Will give you time to help the lad polish things up right nicely. The Carrows are coming for the night."

"*Them?*" Draco commented in distaste. "Thought they weren't coming till tomorrow?"

"Plans change."

"Why wasn't I told?" Draco's tone was indignant, expression tight.

"You don't need to know everything."

"Rab, leave the children to play," Bellatrix said, drawing Hermione's attention to her.

Her dark hair seemed wildly disheveled, and there was an excitement about her that wasn't there before. Hermione wondered what plans had changed? Why did Draco seem to dislike the Carrows? It was then that Hermione noticed that Snape was no longer in the room. Suddenly feeling unsafe, she swallowed thickly and lowered her eyes, hoping nobody had noticed her discomfort. He'd said he wouldn't leave her unprotected.

*Where is he?*

She hated depending on him for safety. When she finally found a way to escape, she'd make certain to never leave herself in such a vulnerable position again. And she would escape. Yes. She and Ron would work past this, and she'd have to reassure him that nothing had happened at all.

*Will you lie to him?* The nagging voice within her mind whispered words that conjured the memory of Snape touching her intimately. She'd chosen to not let anyone know about that, wanting to deal with it on her own. She'd hated him for doing that to her, but now, it seemed to have happened in a far off time. More pressing things mattered now... like surviving while living with the enemy.

"You wipe down everything, and I'll get rid of the rubbish," Malfoy said, breaking into her thoughts. They were once again alone, and Snape had returned to his seat next to the others.

"All right," Hermione said, agreeing to the unspoken truce Malfoy had offered. "Shouldn't take long."

An hour later, they were done and parted company without a word. When the Carrows appeared, Hermione understood why Draco had seemed to abhor the thought of their company. Brother and sister, the horrid pair was alike in every way. They openly taunted her at first (the sister with nasty words, the brother with disgusting leers) until Snape forced them to keep quiet. After the meal was gone, she was excused, as they had something important to discuss. She could see that Draco was allowed to remain with them and burned to know what was being said.

It was late into the night before everyone retired and Hermione felt the bed move with Snape's weight as he joined her. She stiffened immediately, half expecting his touch.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well' what?"

"How was your first day in captivity?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"I? Indeed not."

After a long silence, she finally replied. "It wasn't as bad as it could have been, I suppose."

"Relax."

"What do you mean?"

"You're tense."

"Well, that's because..."

"You are quite safe, Hermione. What happened between us..."

"Just don't," she said. "I just wish that I wouldn't be here. My place is with Harry... and Ron."

"Curious."

"What's curious?" she asked, turning towards him in the darkness slightly, though she couldn't truly make out his outline, as someone had doused the fire in the other room and her eyes had yet to adjust.

"Do you always think of your young lover as an afterthought?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Answer the question."

"I do not!"

"Good night."

"You can't just go to sleep after saying something like that!"

"I can and I will. I trust you can make your own way to the loo if you've need of it?"

"With them out there? I don't think so."

"You are safe with me here. I've warned them all to stay away from what's m... from you."

"Where did you disappear to today? I didn't feel very safe when I noticed you'd gone," she grudgingly admitted.

Silence.

"Snape?"

"Within the next few days, when the time is just right, we will set a plan into action that will bring our friends out of Azkaban," he said quietly.

"Will you warn the Ministry or the Order?"

"No," he said flatly.

"But..."

"Enough."

"Do you think of me as a Mudblood?" she blurted, uncertain where the words came from.

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I just want to know." And she did. Had to know what he thought when he looked at her, but she couldn't fathom why it was important to her.

"No," he said softly. "Now, let me get some sleep. I've an early morning."

"Good night," she whispered, smiling into the darkness.

## Chapter 12

*Chapter 12 of 30*

Hermione and Draco overcome differences briefly to work together, but will their plans be thwarted?

**Disclaimer:** I'm borrowing some of JKR's characters and using them for my own twisty plots in an AU Potterverse! Weehee! Too bad no money's to be made.

*Thanks go to my brilliant beta, Charmed\_Nay, who's been with me since I began writing here in Potterland.*

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The next few days passed much as the others had before. She helped Snape with potions while he and the others planned the escape of their comrades. She wished there would be a way to tell the Order... or anyone for that matter, but she knew deep down that he was right. Too many coincidences of thwarted plans and Voldemort would be aware that someone was indeed betraying him.

But what if Snape was betraying her? What if he'd not truly given the information he'd promised her to Ron? Was this really a ploy to gain her affection after all? *It couldn't be*, her mind justified. *All that he's said has seemed truthful.*

If she dwelled on those thoughts for too long, doubt crept in and drove her temporarily mad. She wanted to trust Snape. Trusting him meant safety and gaining freedom eventually.

"Hermione?"

"Sorry? What was that?"

"Where were you just now?" he asked.

She looked down, realizing her book was in her lap and that she'd been staring off into space. "I was just thinking," she said quickly. "Nothing special."

"I was saying that you should come to bed, as we'll have a busy day tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

He nodded and went to the wardrobe where he began taking off his robes. Hermione did not look away, having become accustomed to seeing him get comfortable...meaning she saw him in a vest and underpants only each evening before he slipped on a nightshirt.

"Lucius and the others will be freed."

Tossing her book aside, she rose and made her way over to the bed, having already changed into her crudely made nightgown before she'd began her book. "And they all have to stay here? *With us?*"

"It shouldn't be for very long. Lucius will likely take his family and go."

"Bellatrix included?"

Snape nodded. "Yes, she is his family...her and Rodolphus both."

"What of Rabastan?" she asked sharply, eliciting a deep chuckle from him. "What's funny about that?"

"You dislike him, don't you?"

"Of course," she said, gazing at him in disbelief. "You saw what he tried to do to me!"

"He..." Snape shut his mouth and turned his back to her as he slipped off his vest and replaced it with his grey nightshirt.

"He what?"

"He's not as bad as all that most of the time. Plays a good game of chess when he's sober enough."

"Hmph!" She turned away from him and snuggled down into the duvet. The man had bound her and tried to rape her. "Not as BAD as all THAT?" she suddenly yelled, sitting up again.



"Keep your voice down, girl!" he retorted coldly, moving forward as if he were about to throttle her. "You will respect me and learn your place."

She was about to ask what he meant by that when she heard a snide bout of laughter from somewhere beyond their curtain. Hermione had momentarily forgot that they were not alone. "Yes, sir," she said sarcastically instead, hoping he'd infer the meaning behind her words.

The candlelight went out, and a moment later, the bed dipped with Snape's weight, causing her body to roll towards him slightly before she caught herself and scooted back to the edge of the bed.

"Hermione."

His voice was soft and seemed laced with pleading. What was it like to be in his position? How could he have done this all those years ago and survived? How could he do this now and not betray his true loyalties?

*He's a murderer!*

A hand on her shoulder pulled her onto her back and rested there, holding her down. However, she was not alarmed and waited to hear what he wanted to say.

"Things will be different soon enough. Once we have more privacy, I will tell you more, but do not ask too much of me."

"All right," she agreed honestly. He was right. She shouldn't add more weight to the burden he carried; however, there was something she had to know. "Harry and Ron, have you given them any more information?"

"I've sent them something, yes, but whether they are bright enough to figure it out without you, I am uncertain."

"You might be surprised," she said, a small grin spreading on her face. He'd contacted them again! She knew in her heart that she could believe him.

"Mm," he murmured noncommittally, releasing his hold on her shoulder and turning to lie flat on his back.

"Good night... Severus," she said, calling him by his given name for the first time since he'd forced her to join him in hiding.

"And you, Hermione."

She turned back over unable to quell the feeling of hope and happiness blooming within her chest. Things would be all right. She could feel it.

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"Snape says I'm in charge while they've gone to bring home my father and the others," Draco said importantly with a smug look on his face.

Hermione gazed from him to Wormtail and shuddered. She disliked both of them, the rodent even more so than Malfoy. "In charge *of that* maybe," she said, pointing to Pettigrew, "but not of me."

Draco's pale face reddened, and he stepped closer, snarling out, "No one's here to save you if you don't keep that mouth of yours shut now, Granger!"

"Severus would be upset indeed," Wormtail added. "Leave the girl be."

Hermione's eyebrows rose just as much as Draco's. "I don't need *your* help, you bloody traitor!"

Draco snickered at Wormtail's indignant look and outright roared with laughter when he responded with something that sounded like the angry squeak of a rat.

When Pettigrew stood, he stepped closer menacingly, hands clenched at his side. "You should talk of betrayal, girl. That Weasley boy fancies you, I know, and look where you sleep at night!"

She felt her cheeks heat. "Only because I have to!"

"You want to, I know it!" he said quickly. "I can sense it, you see. *You like* being here. You *want* it to be known that someone as powerful as Severus and as high ranking in the service of our Lord is *your* lover. You..."

The slap that stung his cheek resounded loudly, but it didn't turn his head nearly as much as the second one, which stung his other cheek.

"How dare you!"

"Granger, calm down," Malfoy said, pulling her back and away from Wormtail, who had staggered back.

"That's it!" the man yelled, grabbing for his wand.

"Oi!" Draco warned, raising his. "Mind yourself, Wormtail."

Grateful for his protection, though uncertain why he gave it, Hermione let Draco lead her over to the fire and said nothing as he cast a Muffliato to keep Wormtail from overhearing them.

"You can say thanks now," he said.

"I could have handled myself!"

"With no wand?"

"Thank you, Malfoy," she bit out slowly.

"Look, Granger, I need to ask you something." He looked towards the fuming man across the room and cast a dark look at him.

"What is it?" She could sense that he'd grown serious and felt that something had changed. "Draco?"

His gaze met hers again. "How do you make a Portkey?"

"Sorry?"

"You heard me."

"What for?"

Excitement welled in the pit of her stomach. He wanted a Portkey! That meant that he wanted to escape just as much as she did. An uneasy feeling settled over her as she remembered Pettigrew's words. Did the others truly believe that? Of course, they did, and that was the plan anyway, wasn't it? They were meant to think she was shifting

loyalties from Harry and Ron to Snape.

"I know the incantation, but it won't work for me. The place isn't set against using them. The Carrows come in that way, see, and that's how the others will come in once they leave Azkaban after they Disapparate to all different places."

"Maybe you aren't saying it right," she said thoughtfully. "Or perhaps you aren't waving your wand correctly."

"Show me."

"Will you take me with you?"

"What? Are you mad?"

"I won't show you unless I can go. Do you think I like being here any more than you?"

"I... Granger, I can't. I just want something to get my mum out of here. My father, he might not be overly happy with some things that have happened, and..." Draco frowned. "Or maybe he won't mind and might want to get away just as much as me and my mother. Things aren't what..." His voice trailed away, and he looked at her fearfully.

"Things aren't what they'd seemed in the past."

He nodded.

"I will only make the Portkey if you will allow me to go with you. I'm sorry, Draco, but I have to think of myself as well. That's the price if you want the knowledge."

"You don't think I'm going to let you use my wand?"

"What other choice do you have?"

"I can ask someone else!"

"And risk them snitching on you?"

"You... Damn it." His pointy chin quivered with uncertainty before his head bobbed once in agreement. "All right."

"Have you something to use?"

"A flannel in the bathroom would be fine. I'll go in there and leave my wand in the last drawer by the bath." He swallowed nervously. "Make the Portkey with it, and you'd better not try anything, Granger, or I swear I'll say it was all you, and I'm good at Occlumency. They'll believe me!"

"When I make a deal, I don't go back on it," she said honestly. "Make sure you do the same."

He nodded. "Leave the flannel and the wand in the drawer. I'll go back in after and get them. You can tell me later what time it's going to activate if you don't trust me. Then we'll just make plans to be at the same place at the same time."

"Fair enough."

"You'll see when I use the loo. That will be when I'll do it." He flicked his wand, ending the charm. "Fine then!" He stomped off and sat next to Wormtail, grumbling about not being able to persuade her into telling him any of Snape's secrets.

"Stupid boy," Pettigrew said, "I told you where her loyalties are now."

~~~~~ O ~~~~~

Hermione didn't feel guilty about betraying Snape and making plans for escape with Malfoy. Her freedom was more important to her, as she could be doing more good for the cause if she were actually with Harry and Ron. They needed her help. Though she was loath to admit it, when Snape had commented about them possibly not figuring out whatever clue he'd left them without her, part of her had agreed with him. They'd never been much on researching things or studying. That was her job!

The break from Azkaban had gone smoothly as far as she could tell. The entire gang began to Portkey in at different intervals and a drunken party ensued. Hermione thought it odd that Voldemort hadn't come around to greet his followers, but then someone let slip that he was off on the continent dealing with something personally...some old vendetta. Hermione's heart went out to the person he was after. It wasn't likely he'd escape.

While she was the punch line to a few crude jokes, not many of the people thought much of her being there and mostly ignored her, even Lucius Malfoy, who'd not left his wife's side for a moment since his return. The once lustrous hair was now a little scraggly and dull, and his face didn't have that same handsomeness that it once had. No, there was something different about it...perhaps the look of defeat that had replaced his once arrogant demeanor made the difference notable.

She'd finally told Malfoy what time her Portkey would activate, taking them to Ottery St. Catchpole, near the Burrow. She'd quickly Apparate to the safety of the Burrow's wards while the family went wherever they chose. The tricky part, however, would be sneaking over during the night to grab onto the flannel with the Malfoys without waking anyone else or rousing Snape's suspicions. Had Draco told his parents? None of them let on that they knew anything. Did they mind that she would be fleeing with them? Were they planning on betraying her?

As the hours dwindled down, she began feeling nervous. Once she Portkeyed away, what would become of Snape? Would he suffer for allowing her to escape? Would Voldemort and his followers hunt down the Malfoys and kill them as they'd done to Karkaroff, who'd also fled? It was when she lay next to a lightly snoring Snape that guilt began to settle in the pit of her stomach.

He might be killed for what was about to happen. Could she live with that, being the cause of his death? While he'd not given her solid proof of his loyalties or further explanations on the workings of things, her instinct told her to trust him. Her instinct also told her that she might be signing his death warrant.

Perhaps she should stay... pretend to be surprised when it became known that the Malfoys had fled during the night.

*You should talk of betrayal, girl. That Weasley boy fancies you, I know, and look where you sleep at night!*

Wormtail's accusations flitted through her mind, slapping her in the face harder than the two blows she'd inflicted upon him. Was he right? No! She'd show him. She'd escape. There was work to be done, and her place was with Harry ... and Ron.

*He's not an afterthought,* she bitterly mused, remembering Snape's words.

It was settled. She would creep over to the Malfoys near four o'clock and Portkey away with them, guilt or not! Whatever happened just would, and there was nothing she could do about it, as sorry as she felt for Snape's fate. The rest of the lot be damned. They could all rot in hell as far as she was concerned.

When the time neared, she quietly rose, not bothering to change her clothes or to try to take anything with her. She would simply say she was going to the loo if Snape woke or if anyone approached her. As far as she could tell, though, they'd all had a fill of yet another night of celebratory drinks and were sleeping off the aftereffects, giving

her a little more confidence.

Halfway across the room to where the Malfoys were, she realized that something was wrong. She could hear fervent whispering, but she was unable to make out the words. One voice belonged to a female while the other was a male. Moving closer, she saw that it was Draco and his mother, both tugging on the flannel. It was apparent that his mother didn't want him to use the Portkey...or that she didn't want to leave her husband behind. Hermione noticed that Lucius was sleeping soundly on their makeshift bed.

"But he doesn't have to know. We'll just put it in his hand and be off," Draco whispered pleadingly. "Mother, we have to. Don't you see?"

"We'll be killed!" she said sharply. "You are only safe under Severus's protection... under your father's care. Why, if I allowed you to... Who's there?"

"Me," Hermione said softly, stepping into the dim glow of wandlight.

"Oh, er... S-she...er..." Draco stammered.

So he hadn't even told his mother that he'd had help making the Portkey.

Narcissa raised her wand and pointed it at Hermione, but Draco spoke. "No, Mum, she helped. She made it."

"*She* did?" she said incredulously, eyes wide. She forcefully snatched the flannel away from Draco and held it away from him. "It's a trap! Severus will surely know what's afoot!"

"No, he doesn't," Hermione said quietly, motioning for the nervous woman to keep her voice down. She checked her watch and felt her heartbeat quicken. "We've less than a minute! You have to decide what you're going to do!"

"Mother, please, this is the only way," Draco said, obviously not caring that Hermione was witnessing his begging.

"If you don't want to go, hand that over," Hermione added. "We'll take it."

"I can't leave without my mum," Draco said, turning towards Hermione. "That's the whole point. Father... I don't think he'd want to go."

"And with good reason," Narcissa hissed. "He knows the consequences we'll face...either way!"

"No, I know people who can help you. Really." Hermione tried to smile reassuringly. "But first, we'll have to use that Portkey to get out of here."

"I don't trust you," the woman said uncertainly.

"Thirty seconds," Hermione said nervously. "Please."

"I have to talk about this to Lucius. I can't just leave this way."

"Mother!"

"God, twenty seconds, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Lucius," she said softly, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up."

"Mmm?" he mumbled loudly. "What's that, Cissy?"

"Sshh, quiet!" she admonished.

"Ten seconds," Hermione said, stepping closer. She intended to wrench the Portkey from the woman's grasp and be gone...to hell with them if they were so indecisive. She would definitely ream Draco, however, for not preparing his mother sooner. Doing it at the last minute had caused too many problems!

Lucius was sitting up groggily, hand extending to his wife, and Draco jumped closer, pushing his mother towards his father, and then suddenly, there was a faint glow of blue light, and all three of them disappeared. Hermione simply stood there in shock, looking at the place they'd last been.

They'd left without her. The Portkey had activated, and only three of them had been touching. Her heart sunk. She was still Snape's prisoner, and she would likely pay for her part in the Malfoys' departure...worse if they reappeared later and told them all that *she* had made the Portkey in the first place.

"What is going on here?" asked a silky voice from behind.

She turned around and burst into tears before she could answer. Candlelight began to filter through the room as the others who'd been asleep woke, causing Hermione to sob harder.

"Explain," Snape said, eyes narrowed, face a mask of anger.

"They're gone, the M-Malfoys. Portkey. Left me here."

She was grabbed roughly by the arm and pulled closer to him. "What do you mean by this? Was this a plan? Did you just happen upon them and beg them to take you?"

Wormtail scurried over and said wheezily, "She and the Malfoy boy just a couple of days ago were quite cozy, Severus. She must have talked him into this. They were talking and warded me out of their conversation!" The smug look on his rat-like face and the light shining in his beady little eyes confirmed to Hermione that he'd been biding his time and hoping to pay her back for the way she'd treated him.

"That's a lie!" she said suddenly.

"You filthy little bitch," Bellatrix said. "What's happened to my sister? Where've they gone?"

"I don't know! I was just going to the loo when..."

Bellatrix grabbed a handful of hair and yanked her head back, wand pressed against her back. "Liar! Where?"

"Enough!" Snape said, trying to pull her from the woman's grip.

"No! She's done something to them, this clever little witch, and I intend to find out what." Her voice was shrill and deranged.

"They used a Portkey," Hermione said again. "I swear, I didn't...ouch! Stop it!"

Snape had ripped her away from Bellatrix, but she was certain that some of her hair had remained in the woman's fingers. "There is one way to find out *Legilimens!*"

Trying her best to block what had truly happened from her mind wasn't working. Almost immediately she thought of the moment she'd talked to Draco... then her flicking

Draco's wand over the flannel to make the Portkey... walking towards the arguing Malfoys... watching Snape undress... slapping Pettigrew...

"Stop!"

He released her quickly, and she tumbled to the floor, tears in her eyes and flesh aching where his forceful grip had been. She could see the glint of betrayal shining in his eyes and closed her own to keep from seeing it. This was it. He would have no choice but to turn her over to Voldemort. She was doomed and would be killed for her part in things.

However, time seemed to stand still for her when he finally spoke, voice hard.

"It appears that she is telling the truth and was merely on the way to the toilet when she wandered over to see what Draco and Narcissa were arguing about."

"My sister would never plan to leave without telling me!"

"Then why has she gone?" Snape queried.

"Lucius did keep plying me with the drink tonight," Rodolphus added. "Might have been the plan all along."

"Azkaban's made him soft, I say," Rabastan put in. "Likely making a run for it."

"I tell you that my sister..."

"Has fled," Snape finished for her with a smirk. "You can make her excuses to the Dark Lord when he returns tomorrow."

Everyone became silent with worry. Snape reached down and yanked Hermione up. "As for you, my*dear*, we shall return to bed."

Without a word, she allowed him to lead her back to their room where he shoved her onto the bed and blew out the candle next to it. When he lay beside her, she could practically feel the bed shaking with his rage.

"We will discuss this in the morning," he said maliciously. "Then I will decide your fate."

"Severus, I..."

"Silence!"

She knew better than to say anything else. He was displeased, and there was no telling what might happen if she mouthed off. The fear of possibly being turned over to Voldemort made her tremble. What would Snape do with her? He'd lied to them for her so far to cover up her part in things, but would he continue to do so?

~~~~~ O ~~~~~

Snape and Hermione were outside where they could speak privately. It was the first time she'd been out in many days, and she was trying to soak up as much sunshine as possible. It felt glorious...the heat on her skin, the touch of warmth, the small breeze cooling her.

"What were you playing at?" he asked her bluntly, bringing her attention back to him.

"You never tell me anything!" she accused.

"Idiot!" he said angrily. "I don't tell you much because the Dark Lord would know!"

"But how? I won't tell him. He's not..."

"He will look into your mind each and every time that you are in the same room with him. Surely, you know this!"

"He's c-coming here?"

"We're going to him today, thanks to your little stunt! Someone will have to answer for this."

"Oh."

"I would prefer it to be Bellatrix, who should have known her sister was planning on leaving."

"But she wasn't. Draco, I mean...he was the one. That's why they were arguing."

"I deduced as much." He raised his wand. "I'm sorry, but I have no choice."

"Wait! What are you going to do?"

"I will alter things, make you remember only seeing them fleeing, nothing more and certainly no part you had in it!"

"You can't do that!"

"And risk the Cruciatus for lying for you? For not turning you in? For not controlling you better?" He glared at her for a long moment. "He is not always forgiving, Hermione."

The tone of his voice caused her to swallow. "Will you give this back to me when the time is right?"

He flicked his wand, saying nothing aloud.

Hermione felt dizzy and swayed, blurriness blocking her vision.

"Are you all right?" Severus asked.

"I don't know. I feel odd."

Arms came around her waist and steadied her against a chest. "Perhaps you overexerted yourself. It's been a long time since you've been out. Running around like that isn't very bright, is it?"

"Oh, I feel so nauseated. Maybe I should lie down for a while."

"I'll guide you."

They made their way inside, her arm around his waist and his arm around hers, not caring who was looking on. Once he helped her kick off her shoes and placed her on the mattress, he smoothed the hair away from her face.

"I have to go with Bellatrix to see the Dark Lord. He may want to see you later, but I'm not certain. You will be warded in...alone but safe. All right?"

She nodded and succumbed to blissful sleep.

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**Southern's Notes:** Ah, well, one plan foiled. I wonder if she'll try that again soon? And what's become of the Malfoys? Find out next!

## Chapter 13

*Chapter 13 of 30*

The Malfoys find refuge at an unlikely place. Hermione is starting to have conflicting feelings about things, and something happens that forces her and Snape into a compromising position.

**Disclaimer:** I'm snatching some of JKR's characters for some fun...no Galleons for me though. Damn.

Thanks go to my beta, Charmed\_Nay!

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"Severus, are you all right?" Hermione asked, stepping towards him. She'd only just woke a few minutes earlier, but the sun had gone down already, proving that she'd slept most of the day away. How? Had he given her a draught for sleeping? What had exhausted her so much?

"Fine," was his clipped reply.

"You're obviously *not* fine." There were dark circles under his eyes, and he looked a little shaken and obviously angry.

"When one returns from a visit with the Dark Lord, it's not unusual to feel unwell."

"What happened?" she asked, stepping to the side and taking a seat on their bed. "Earlier, I just felt so... exhausted suddenly."

The glare he flashed her made her pause. "I had to give a report on the state of things here." He moved away from her to rummage through the wardrobe.

"Did he think you had anything to do with the Malfoys?"

"Mmm."

"But how could you have known? You were sleeping!"

He spun around with narrowed eyes, opened his mouth, and then promptly closed it, turning away from her to continue his search.

"I told you already! I don't know what happened exactly. I was going to the lav, and when I heard them, I went to see what was going on, and then they disappeared." She frowned and asked, "How is it that Portkeys can work here anyway? I thought you'd set wards to..."

"Bellatrix lifted them and didn't place them back." He faced her again. "For the others to come and go."

Hermione saw that he had a tube of some salve in his hand before she noticed that he was motioning for her to come forward. Quickly, she went to him, eager to help him so that his bad mood would pass. She knew they'd probably never be friends, but if they had to spend time together, she'd prefer to get along with him. She felt a little uneasy, but she wasn't sure why. His tone and gaze seemed to indicate that he was angry with her. She supposed he was just taking out his misfortune on her.

"I will need you to apply this."

Her eyes widened when he lifted his robes, turned his back to her, and lowered his underpants, revealing a nasty burn with a few boils lining it. It spread from his lower back down to the right cheek of his arse.

"What did he do to you?" she asked, quickly squeezing the tube and applying it to his flesh lightly, starting at the top and working her way down.

"Bellatrix thought it prudent to hex me once my back was turned."

"Oh." So, it hadn't been the Dark Lord then. "And did you retaliate?"

"No."

That surprised Hermione, but she supposed he wouldn't want to displease Voldemort. As if he knew her thoughts, he spoke.

"She is likely worse off than I am. I was told to leave while our Master deals with her directly for her actions."

"Did she have something to do with their departure?"

There was no answer for her, only the abrupt intake of air as her finger grazed one of the larger boils.

"Sorry!"

"Just pay attention to what you're doing. Rub it in completely."

The want to press his wound extra firmly on purpose rose up within her; however, she refrained from doing so, pitying him. Truth be told, he was hurting, and while it wasn't pleasant, that was a valid reason to be irate. After the last of the salve was absorbed, she leaned closer and lightly blew against it, watching gooseflesh rise on his skin...noticing how firm his arse was. Relishing the fact that he was reacting to her in such away...especially after his many proclamations of indifference...she placed a hand on his waist to steady herself as she did it a second time. This time she elicited a small groan of pleasure from him. In surprise, she backed away immediately, turning away from him, cheeks aflame with shame.

What had possessed her to do that? Had she gone mad? Her hands had just been on his naked flesh, her breath had just blown across the pale skin of his smooth arse, and she'd enjoyed seeing his reaction, hearing his moan. Swallowing thickly, she closed her eyes tightly and willed the image away. How could she have done that? She heard the rustle of fabric and knew he was righting his clothes.

"Remain here. I will bring your food in to you after I've secured the premises." He paused next to her for a moment. "Tonight will be the last night for the Carrows to be here...and most of the others."

Hermione simply nodded and held her breath until he was safely out of the room and unable to see her burning cheeks. The first thought to surface was of Ron and Harry. They would be disgusted with her. This thought, more than any other, had her eyes watering.

"It's mental!" she said quietly, bringing her hands up to cover her face while she tried to collect herself *It's not an attraction. I was just seeking to soothe him. That's all. I'll act as if nothing happened.*

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Arthur Weasley paced nervously through his garden and was so deep in thought, he failed to see the two gnomes mimicking his every move. He was waiting on Ron and Harry's arrival and hoping that Molly wouldn't see either of them until he'd had time to speak with them first.

When the Portkey came into view just feet away, followed by the both of them landing awkwardly next to it, he was able to breathe easier. "You're here! Quickly! This way!"

"What's the emergency?" Harry asked, looking towards the house.

"Is Mum all right?" Ron asked worriedly.

"We're all fine, but... Oh, come along!"

He beckoned at them to follow him and began a trek over to the chicken coop, not seeing the pair gaze at each other incredulously but hearing Ron's comment.

"Hope he doesn't think we've time to help him clean the coop out!"

"You'll be quite interested as to what I've got in here, son. You, too, Harry."

"I'll bet."

Arthur stopped, looked around nervously, and flicked his wand a few times before opening the door. "In you get," he said, waving his hand towards the door. After they entered, he stepped in behind them and warded the door again.

If the situation wouldn't be serious, he'd have laughed outright at the expressions on their faces as they gazed at the Malfoy family, who were dirty and disheveled, but well hidden from the world in a dingy chicken coop.

"What's going on, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked, pulling his wand.

"They need help, son," he said, putting his hand in front of Harry to make certain he didn't hex them. "On the run, see."

"How'd they find the Burrow? It's got protection around it," Ron said suspiciously.

"Granger," Draco said. "She made a Portkey for us and sent us here."

"Hermione, what?"

"She all right?"

"Boys," Mr. Weasley began, "I've already discussed it with them, and there's much to learn from them, but first, we must figure out what to do with them. I haven't told... That is to say..."

"Mum has no idea."

"No," he admitted.

"Well, they can't go to headquarters," Harry said immediately. "I won't risk it."

"Could be a trick," Ron agreed.

"Trust me, we don't want to be found," Draco said.

Arthur felt a little sorry for the boy. He almost seemed on the verge of tears, and he'd done most of the talking so far. Lucius just seemed shocked and uncertain while Narcissa looked worried.

"I wouldn't ask it of you, Harry, but if Molly found out..."

"Found out what?" came a voice from behind.

"Molly!"

"Ron, Harry!" she said excitedly, rushing to hug them, not noticing their guests. "I've just finished making some soup. Come in and eat! What are you lot doing out here in..." Her voice trailed off. "Arthur, why are there three filthy Malfoys in our chicken coop?"

"Filthy! How dare you," Lucius said indignantly. "I can trace my..."

"No, you idiot... I mean to say that you're filthy!" She pointed to their robes, normally pristine, lined with mud and feathers.

"Er, see, I was off to see Xenophilius this morning, and I saw them Portkey right near me! I took their wands right away, of course, and questioned them...like a good Ministry worker should, mind. After hearing their story, I thought it best to talk to Harry and Ron."

"And what of me? This is my home!" she said angrily, hands on hips.

"I didn't want to upset you," he said quickly.

"Molly," said Narcissa. "We need help."

Molly's red face paled slightly as she measured up the woman across from her. When her eyes became softer, Arthur knew that all would be well. His wife had too big a heart not to help those in need.

"All right. Come in and have a spot of lunch, the lot of you." She turned to her husband with a small warning. "We'll talk later."

As they all followed his wife into their home, Arthur noticed the boys had lagged behind and were whispering to each other, eyeing the Malfoys as they did so. He very much wanted to ask them questions, but he knew from experience that they were quite evasive these days. Deciding to watch their guests for any signs of treachery, his eyes moved ahead once again, and he knew a moment of hostility as the three looked around his home disdainfully before taking a seat at his table. The instant they sat down a look of such relief came over them that he hadn't the heart to rebuke them.

It didn't take long to have the dishes set out and filled with soup and bread... or for the boys to start their questioning.

"So," Harry began, "how is Hermione? Is she hurt? Being mistreated?"

"She's fine," said Narcissa after wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Severus is seeing to it that she remains protected."

As if he didn't trust her words, Harry looked to Draco. "Malfoy?"

"It's as my mother said."

"How'd you get out of Azkaban?" Harry demanded of Lucius.

"Death Eaters came to break us out. It was easy enough with the Dementors helping."

This time Arthur spoke. "But there must have been a leak...someone working on the inside that helped. Who?"

"Are you going to turn me in?" asked the man, arching a pale eyebrow.

"There's no deals here, Malfoy!" Ron said heatedly, interrupting his father's response.

"Indeed? I rather thought we had information that you might want... in exchange for protection and freedom."

"Granger said we'd find help!" Draco added, looking between Harry and Ron nervously. "Helped me get my family out of there!"

"Why didn't she come with you?"

"Oh, she... the Portkey..."

His mother finished for him, saying, "The Portkey activated sooner than she thought. She wasn't touching."

"Probably left her behind!" Ron said angrily, looking as though he wanted to lunge at them.

"Of course not!" Narcissa said, not meeting his eyes fully and looking to Draco instead.

"We had a deal," Draco added. "She made the Portkey with my wand and wouldn't say when it would activate to make sure she'd come with us. We... I meant for her to come. I did."

"Why do you look nervous, Draco?" Harry asked, scrutinizing his nemesis. "And why should we help you after all you've done to us?" This last part was said to the elder Malfoy.

"You were *there*, that night!" Draco said, cutting in. "Granger said you know that I wouldn't have... couldn't... Said you'd told everyone."

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

Lucius leaned forward. "Running isn't the smartest thing to do, but my family has found a way for us to leave, and I'll do what I can to protect them now that I am able. However, I do need help." He sat back and looked to Molly. "What do you think of all this?"

She gazed at them and then to the others. "I can't see as how we can turn them out. Not when they need help." Her eyes narrowed, and her voice took on a steely edge. "Though I'm not stupid enough to think you'd do the same if the tables were turned, see. You're lucky it's in our nature to be kind."

"You don't mean for them to stay here," Arthur said, aghast.

"I certainly do. Where else have they to go? We can lodge them in that secret testing room the twins made!" she replied. "Why, I never knew it was there until they told me about it! If anyone comes looking about, they won't even know the Malfoys are here."

Arthur nodded. "Well?"

"We've no choice," said Lucius as he gazed around the room. When his eyes met Arthur's, he firmly said, "I'll do what I must for Cissy and Draco."

"That's settled then," said Arthur.

"Who all is with you?" Harry asked.

Arthur listened attentively while sipping his soup as all three Malfoys began talking and giving information, apparently grateful for the help and wanting to cooperate to ensure none of them saw Azkaban...or worse. When the conversation moved back to how Hermione was faring, things changed.

"What do you mean she is sharing a room with Snape?" Ron asked, shock evident on his face.

"You mean she sleeps near him for protection?" Harry asked hopefully.

"No," Narcissa said almost sadly. "She shares his bed."

Ron stood and knocked his chair back as he did so. "But... no ... she wouldn't."

"She's no choice," Draco said. "It's where the professor orders her to stay."

Narcissa nodded. "Yes, she's his... property."

"Property!" both boys and Molly yelled.

Lucius cleared his throat. "I haven't talked to her at all since I've returned, but she looks... content and cared for...if that helps anything."

"The Dark Lord has gifted her to Severus."

Ron fled out the back door without another word. There was a loud bang as something hit the outside of the house. Harry seemed rooted to the spot, mouth agape. "She puts up with this?" he asked incredulously.

"She wants to live, doesn't she?" Draco said sarcastically.

Harry frowned and sat back, quietly thinking things over before nodding. "We'll find a way to get her out of there soon. Now, tell me everything you know about where you were staying."

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Nearly a week had passed since the Malfoys had escaped, and there was still no sign of them. A good thing that came from all the chaos was that Bellatrix and her husband were ordered to remain near the Dark Lord for a while...as a penance, Hermione supposed. And once they'd gone, Wormtail was sent for soon after. It seemed that they needed someone to wait on them and felt he'd be perfect for the job.

Hermione was glad to see them gone. However, that still left Rabastan with them, and without the Malfoys or the others there, she felt less secure, not that they'd have helped her out, but she did feel that there was more safety in numbers.

Snape, thankfully, had never mentioned what had happened when she'd been healing his wound, and so she was able to put it out of her mind, mostly, and chalk it up to a momentary lapse of judgment. What did bother her, though, was that he'd seemed so cold towards her since then. There were no unnecessary chats between them, and she caught him glaring at her occasionally without provocation.

Most nights she went to bed long before he did, as he was keen to stay up and play chess with Rabastan or work on his potions. Only a few times did he actually leave her alone, though warded into their room, but she hated his disappearances all the same, preferring to have an indifferent Snape there than none at all...especially with Rabastan about. Instead of asking why he was treating her that way...afraid to hear his answer...she simply minded her own business, chalking it up to the fact that he'd disliked what she'd done to him.

*But he didn't and you know it* a pesky inner voice whispered.

And so it was that she found herself reading in one of his books near the fire when things suddenly changed completely. Each time she looked up, Rabastan would leer at her on the sly and fondle his beloved dagger, sharpening it, sometimes cradling it like one would a child.

Snape saw his antics while turning the page of his book and said, "If you love that thing so much, why don't you marry it?"

Rabastan continued to sharpen his dagger, smirking the entire time. "I think that if you aren't going to use her," he looked up pointedly at Hermione, who paled slightly, "you should allow me to have some fun."

Snape continued to look through his book, but his icy words belied his pretense of indifference. "If you dare to touch what is mine, you will feel the blade of your own knife parting your flesh whilst I watch you die." He flipped the page nonchalantly, brow furrowing as he read.

"Damn, she must be good," the other man said, looking over to Hermione again and licking his lips. A tanned hand slid down to grope his crotch. He licked his lips suggestively and continued to fondle himself. "Does she still fight you, Snape, like she did at first, or does she give it to you whenever you ask? I never hear you anymore."

"That's not really your concern, now is it?" Snape finally said.

The color began returning to Hermione's face. Snape wouldn't let that evil bastard touch her...not if she behaved as promised. She ignored his leering gaze, lewd gestures, and turned the page of her own book, though she continued listening intently.

"Well, you never take her while I'm about anymore. Can't be! I never hear her scream or argue. What have you to hide by putting up a Silencing Charm? I wouldn't mind hearing or watching, you know." He smirked. "Or sharing."

"Yes, but unfortunately for you, *I do* mind having an audience," Snape said quietly, finally lifting his eyes to stare coldly at his friend. "It would bode well for you to remain silent."

"I'll just mention to the Dark Lord that you don't seem to be bedding her any longer. There's nothing else she's good for...aside for keeping the place as clean as a house-elf would." He slipped his long, curvy knife into his sheath. "Sort of suspicious, that."

"Why, Rabastan, whatever do you mean?" Snape asked, slowly putting his book aside and leaning forward. "Are you insinuating something? That perhaps I am not taking my due from her?" He nodded in Hermione's direction, but his glinting eyes never left Rabastan's.

"No," the other man blurted. "Not at all. Just thinking you might have some... problems that you don't want any of us to know about...the private shagging, the not sharing." He stood and moved over by the fireplace, putting extra room between them as Snape slowly rose from his chair. "But, ah, that doesn't make sense. I heard the way you made Narcissa moan like a whore."

"Is that right?" Snape asked coolly. "I don't recall Narcissa ever sounding like someone's whore while she was here."

Hermione's eyes widened. What did he mean by wording it that way? Did they have sex elsewhere? It was possibly he was offended that his friend would refer to Narcissa that way. Or was he lying to Rabastan? She took in Rabastan's disbelieving expression.

"Yeah, right, and, uh, I think Bellatrix was telling Rodolphus that her sister felt used. So... you had no problems fucking Narcissa, even if the Dark Lord ordered it." He nodded to Hermione. "Maybe it's just because she's a filthy Mudblood that you can't get it up."

A quick flick of Snape's wand saw Rabastan flipped upside down and levitating in midair. A second flick had him moaning and grabbing at his crotch.

Hermione flinched with the piercing scream that followed. Her face, already red with indignation, heated angrily as his words filtered through. He thought that Snape didn't want her because she was a Muggle-born witch! She itched to yell out and tell him that Snape simply had more honor...er, mostly...but her lips wouldn't move. She knew better. To say that would be to seal her future.

"Cut it out, Snape! I was just fucking with you! Just trying for a piece!" Rabastan yelled, pain etching his words.

"We'll see who's not taking their due!" Pride wounded, Snape released Rabastan, letting him drop to the floor in a heap. He spun around on his heel and headed for Hermione. She looked up and saw that his eyes were alive with menace. She yelped as he roughly pulled her up, causing her to drop her book, and half dragged her to the corner where they shared the makeshift bedroom. After pushing her towards the bed, he gruffly said, "Take your clothes off."

"W-what?" she stammered, eyes wide. "But..."

"Are you deaf? Undress." His tone left no hope for changing his mind. He turned around and pulled the curtains closed, knowing that Rabastan would still be able to discern a little of what was going on through the sheer material. Snape didn't put up a Silencing Charm, obviously needing the man to hear them in order to keep him believing that Hermione was as satisfying to him as Narcissa had been.

When he turned back to Hermione and saw that she'd pulled her robes off completely, but her worn, old dress was only partially unbuttoned, he growled in annoyance. Although she was near tears, he swooped down on her quickly, roughly pulled the dress open, sending buttons flying to the floor, and he then pulled it off of her entirely, leaving her clad in her bra and knickers. As he began unfastening his robes, her lips began to tremble.

He brought a long, pale finger up to his lips and gave her a knowing look and a nod of his head in Rabastan's direction in attempt to reassure her. The relief on her face



was immediate, though she swallowed thickly and gazed at the nearly transparent curtain, afraid of what Rabastan might see. She bit her lip and kicked her shoes away, opting to keep her socks on. She quickly got under the duvet, feeling uneasy, not sure what to expect. Once his robes were gone and his boots had been kicked away to join hers, he began unfastening his trousers, which he rarely wore, deftly removing them and leaving his underpants intact. In one swift movement, his shirt was over his head, and he was getting beneath the duvet with her.

They both peered in the direction of the fireplace where Rabastan could be heard, apparently stoking the fire. The shadowy forms of the furniture could just be made out. Snape suddenly rolled over, wedging his body between her unsuspecting thighs.

She gasped and held her breath as his mouth descended slowly. *Oh, my God. This cannot be happening. He's going to kiss me.* Revulsion warred with excitement, causing her to close her eyes.

Instead of finding her mouth, his lips went to her ear where he whispered softly, "If you want to remain under my care, you must go along with this." He pulled back to look at her.

"All right," she whispered, wanting to scream in anguish. She didn't want to be forced to have sex with him just to keep herself alive, but if she didn't do it, he would not be the only one to force himself on her. Rabastan would not stop until he would figure out a way to have her.

"Good," he murmured in a low voice, easing down to press his bare chest against her nearly naked one, crushing her breasts as he did so. His mouth made its way to her ear again. "We'll have to... sound as if something is going on." He paused. "And enact things just a bit."

"Do you mean...?" Relief flooded her body. He didn't mean to have sex with her. He only wanted to pretend in order to trick Rabastan.

"Indeed." He paused before adding, "It would not bode well for you to have the Dark Lord learn that you aren't providing me with my just rewards. From now on, we will make certain to keep up the pretense more carefully and maybe make it look as if you are becoming enamored a little as we'd previously discussed."

She swallowed nervously and nodded in agreement. Her entire body began trembling as he propped himself up with his hands and gazed down at her, his hair hanging down about his face. For an instant, his hard eyes seemed to soften with something foreign... but she could not be certain as to exactly what it was. In the next instant, she was gasping again, for he rocked his body against hers roughly, causing sparks of tingles to flow through her veins. Although they both had on underthings, she could still feel him well enough, digging against her up and down, arousing her. Hermione closed her eyes again and felt her cheeks redden with shame as she wondered if he felt the heat between her legs. *My body is betraying me.*

"Oh!" escaped her lips. The next jab against her body felt different. It seemed that his body, too, was betraying him, for with each new rock of his hips, she could feel him hardening.

"Legs," he whispered suddenly, bed creaking beneath them as his movements quickened.

She immediately lifted her legs up to wrap around his waist, knowing instinctively that was what he wanted, though he only said one word. Peeking up at him, she saw that his eyes were closed, and his head was thrown back, as if he were enjoying their fake coupling. It was obvious that he had to be feeling some of the jolts that her body was experiencing; otherwise, he wouldn't have had an erection. Even as she watched, he picked up the pace, rubbing himself against her erotically, grinding his hips for more friction, as if they truly were having sex. He seemed to have decided to make the most of what was happening. Her breasts had little room for movement, but they were moving in time with his thrusts, and her hardened nipples were rubbing against his chest through the thin fabric of her bra. She found that her back was arching slightly, as if wanting his moving chest to graze them with a little more pressure. Her legs tightened around him, forcing him closer still.

The sudden bang of the headboard against the wall broke their spell, and he gazed down at her for a long moment, still rutting against her... with her. The continued rhythm of their bodies, hers now eagerly meeting his, the beating of the headboard against the wall, and the heavy, obviously aroused, breathing seemed to mesmerize them both. Of its own accord, her head lifted just as his began to lower, and their lips met, tentatively pressing against each other.

His opened first, tongue seeking an entrance. She parted her lips, bringing her fingers up from his waist to his back and hair, wanting to keep him close and feel his body flush against hers. Her tongue eagerly tangled with his until she threw her head back, breaking off the kiss. His mouth greedily nipped at her neck.

"Oh... ah... God," she said vocally, not caring that Rabastan was nearby, though mostly forgetting that he was. Her body's sensations were quickly building to a peak, and Snape's now more forceful and quicker pumps against her body coupled with the sucking of his mouth against her throat. The sensations were too much, and she moaned and panted in release.

In the same moment, she felt him growl against her, though her skin muffled whatever words he might have said. She didn't care. She'd just had a most wonderful orgasm... from Snape...again. The last two words filtered into her brain, and she tried to push them away, wanting to keep this moment a contented one for a little longer. As he lay panting on top of her, her legs collapsed down onto the bed, but she kept one arm around his waist, rubbing his slick back while the other smoothed down his tousled hair. The duvet had been kicked away at some point. When? She had no idea. The entire interlude hadn't taken long... had it? She had no idea. She'd simply been lost in the experience.

Suddenly she frowned, her prior thoughts coming back strongly. Ron. This was not Ron...with whom she should be sharing these experiences. This was Snape, who was holding her prisoner, claiming to want to spare her life, to help, but never opening himself to her. This was Dumbledore's killer.

As if sensing the change in her feelings towards him, his body tensed, and he quickly got up. Hermione watched as he pulled on his trousers, covering his underpants and the obvious evidence of his orgasm, and exited through the curtain without a single glance at her. Tears welled in her eyes. It wasn't that they'd just done something wrong or that she'd been violated, she knew that neither had a choice...not if she wanted to continue her somewhat peaceful existence. In fact, she couldn't really voice why she wanted to cry. There seemed to be so many things wrong that it was hard to pinpoint just one.

Upon hearing Rabastan's catcalls as Snape entered the loo, she reached down and pulled the duvet up over her, hoping he'd bring her some warm water and a cloth so that she might clean herself off in privacy without having to face Rabastan. *When will I get out of here?* She sniffled quietly and swiped at the tears upon her face. She was too confused to even internally voice what she was feeling...especially now. A loud sound next to her bed jarred her, and she sat up quickly.

Snape had returned, and to her surprise, he *had* brought her a cloth, water, and even the book she'd dropped in his haste to get her to his bed. He tossed the cloth to her, dropped the book on the bed, and began pulling on his shirt. She gazed at him, tears still falling uncontrollably from her eyes, hoping he'd say something.

He sneered at her as he pushed the last button through its hole. Her gaze lowered...unable to bear his scorn. "Don't cry," he said softly. When she looked up at him again, meeting his eyes levelly, the disgust upon his face was apparent, and he coldly added, "You fucking liked it." With that, he pulled on his robes indifferently, not bothering to fasten them as he left her there alone.

The moment he was out of sight, she began crying in earnest. Whatever she'd wanted him to say, that wasn't it. Of course he thought her to be crying because of what they'd shared, but that wasn't it at all. "It's just as well," she whispered, rising to clean herself and change her knickers. The only thing she now had to add to the misery she'd felt before was the loss of the Snape she'd just experienced...the one that was able to let himself go for a few moments and just feel. Back would be the cold, sneering, hateful Snape that made her feel as if one glare had enough malice behind it to harm her.

Maybe when Rabastan moved on, they would have time alone...time where she could talk to him to see if he could let her go back to her friends and family. She sighed, knowing deep down that she would likely be stuck there until the war was over... or until Voldemort requested her death.

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**Southern's Notes:** Does anyone recognize the "Don't cry, you fucking liked it" bit? Weehee. It's from a show that I adore. Ever see the movie "Fear" with Mark Wahlberg? ~grin~ More up soon, all! Thanks for reading. I appreciate it.

# Chapter 14

*Chapter 14 of 30*

Snape is trying to decipher his growing affection for Hermione. We see how the Malfoys are getting along at the Burrow, and then Harry gets a surprise from Voldemort--pertaining to Hermione.

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters...only the twisted plot is mine.

*Thanks go to my beta, Charmed\_Nay. What a gem!*

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"Severus, a word," Rabastan said almost nervously, nodding towards the door exiting their hideout.

Following his colleague out the door, Severus slid his hand into his wand pocket. Since the man had taunted him about Hermione a couple of nights before, they'd not had a private conversation, and he'd put nothing past Rabastan...not when he seemed so edgy. Something wasn't right. Once outside in the bright sunshine, his friend stopped and turned to face him.

"Still mad about the other night, eh?"

"What about it?"

"Oh, come off it, Severus. You know what I'm talking about," Rabastan said, one hand moving down to seemingly protect his crotch. "Don't bloody appreciate what you did, see?"

"I warned you before, did I not?"

"You don't think that I was serious about that?"

"I do."

"Well, maybe a little, but I was mostly just trying to get the girl riled up. There's no other fun round here. You know, like how she was the other time? You've been uptight. Figured you needed some. And I haven't noticed anything going on. Makes a bloke suspicious, that."

"One doesn't have to have sex daily to be satisfied, Rabastan. I happen to have other things on my mind...more important things."

Rabastan guffawed. "Like what?"

"That is not your concern."

Kicking a nearby rock, Rabastan growled in frustration. "I'm bloody sick of being stuck here with nothing to do! If Bella and Ro wouldn't be coming back today..."

"What do you mean 'coming back today'?"

"Didn't you know his plans? The Dark Lord has something to do and wants them away...all of them."

"What of Wormtail?"

"He's coming, too. Oh, and remember that task I'm to do with him?"

"Yes."

"The Dark Lord wants it done this Friday."

"Curious."

"What's that?"

"He's not summoned me to tell me this himself."

"Oi, don't look at me like that. Just saying."

Severus frowned. Something definitely didn't seem right. Why would the Dark Lord not mention this to him? Shouldn't he know about this before anyone else? Wasn't he his most trusted servant? "Is that all then?" he asked.

"Aye."

"Very well." He started to turn away but heard Rabastan's frustrated sigh. "What now?"

"Snape..." The man looked away. "Ah, nothing."

"No, go on."

"D' you ever think he's got some other plan going?" At this, Rabastan looked around nervously.

"What do you mean?"

"As I said before, seems to me that I can't do anything right lately. Don't know what he's got against me suddenly, but I'm suspicious about this duty he's having me do. Do you think... that maybe it's a setup?"

"The Dark Lord needs us. He wouldn't be rid of us unless absolutely necessary. You've said this before. Is there something else you've not mentioned?"

"Well, it's the girl." Rabastan nodded towards the building. "Why are *you* allowed this? Why won't he let us in on the prize as well? I've asked, you know."

"I expected that you would."

"Under no uncertain terms are we to bother you...or her."

"Then why did you?"

"I talked to him after that, mate."

"*Mate*, is it?"

"I was mad. That's the second time you hexed my crotch. Makes a bloke angry."

"I warned..."

"Yeah, yeah, you warned me, but what makes that girl so special? She's a fucking Mudblood!"

"She's very valuable to us and our cause. I've a plan afoot."

"I think you are getting away from the plan, Snape. I think you're really starting to... to feel something for her. I can tell." He shook his head in disgust. "We may have to up and cut loose one day. She won't be able to come with us!"

"What are you on about?"

"If the Dark Lord... if something goes wrong."

"Are you planning on running, Rabastan? You know what happens to those who run. Think of Karkaroff. Think of what will happen to the Malfoys once they are found."

"And about that! You can't tell me that your girl didn't have anything to do with it. Right suspicious if you ask me now that I think about it."

"I've delved into her mind and saw nothing. She is no Occlumens. I reported everything to the Dark Lord as I saw it, and he agrees with me. In fact, he feels that Bellatrix is hiding something...maybe she knows where they've gone."

"I don't believe it. You know how Bella is about her sister."

"Exactly right. She'd protect her as much as possible, wouldn't she?"

"Not like this. You also know how she is about the Dark Lord. She'd choose him if she had no other path to take, Narcissa be damned."

"Perhaps, but I'm certain that if Narcissa wanted to flee she'd not tell her sister, as she also knows this."

"You not knowing any of this, doesn't that make you feel a little uneasy?"

"I have no need to question my Lord's motives."

"Damn it, Severus!" Rabastan kicked another rock, sending it flying into a tree's bark with a loud thud. "Fuck it then!"

"I will think about what you've said," Severus said quietly.

Rabastan's face brightened. "Good. That's real good. We've always been friends you and I, and I know I've stepped over the line, but... hell, you know what I'm trying to say."

With a nod, Severus said, "Indeed. I suppose we should prepare for our *guests*."

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Granger, are you serious about her?"

"She's mine, Rabastan," he said firmly. Not certain what else he should say to the man, he thought of the Dark Lord and what might be repeated back to him. "I feel she is adequate for my needs, and she does have appealing qualities. Being Potter's friend is an added bonus. Do you know how much he'll hate the fact that I'm fucking her and have her eating out of the palm of my hand?"

Rabastan snickered at this and nodded in approval. "Understood. Come, let's have a shot of something."

Severus followed his friend inside, poured each of them a glass of port, and partly listened to the man telling tales of sexual conquests prior to being sent to Azkaban. He'd heard the stories already of course, as the man didn't brag on much else.

His mind, however, kept wandering to Hermione and how she'd looked lying beneath him, legs wrapped around his waist, eyes widened in lust and innocence. Part of him wished he'd never got her mixed up in things, but another part of him was glad that he had. That same part of him whispered to him and told him that he ought to appreciate the opportunity that the Dark Lord was giving him. And it wondered why he shouldn't deserve the girl and have her. He'd certainly done enough over the years...for both sides...and should have a little something for himself.

But he couldn't, could he? He was simply lonely. Hell, he didn't even really like the girl. That one tryst with Narcissa aside, it had been a while since he'd been with a woman. Lust and the need to have it sated did strange things to a man. He could accept that as a reason for his desires and fondness for her.

Eyes moving towards the curtain, he saw that she was moving about, and he wondered what she was doing. They'd barely spoken to each other after their shared experience. His lip curled in disgust. Tears. She'd been crying. Tears of regret and revulsion. He wasn't going to sit around and feel guilty about what had happened. If he hadn't done that, Rabastan would have told the Dark Lord that he truly hadn't been seducing the girl...bloody snitch...and perhaps some questions would have been asked.

*I'll have to do it again*, he thought to himself. *Rabastan should hear something else. Otherwise, he might start to suspect things again, and I did warn her that we'd have to carry on a bit to keep suspicions down*, he justified.

"Where's your head?" Rabastan asked, interrupting his thoughts.

He placed his glass on the table before him. "If you will excuse me," he said smoothly with a slight smirk and arched eyebrow.

"Ah, I see where it is. Good place to be."

The instant he entered their room and closed the curtain behind him, she spun around to face him, obviously knowing by instinct that something profound was about to happen. Her eyes never blinked as she watched him peel his robes away from his body, leaving him clad in only his underpants. *I'm glad I didn't put on my trousers and shirt today.* He needed only to nod towards the curtain before moving to the bed and lying on his back.

Not looking at him any longer, she began sliding down the atrocious dress that Narcissa had made for her out of old sheets. He made no noise of approval as he took in her lovely soft skin and curved body, but he wanted to. He longed to tell her that she needn't blush, cover her body with her hands, or be embarrassed...that she was just as much a woman as Narcissa.

But he wouldn't. Couldn't.

"Come here," he said softly when she remained still. He patted his thighs and extended a hand to her to help her onto the bed and over to where he was, settling her astride him...her knickers against his underpants. *God, I can feel her heat.*

"Isis he watching?"

"Yes," he whispered, sliding his hands along the tops of her thighs and moving them to her waist. "You need only move a little. Nothing like last time. *Unless it's what you want.* He didn't have to touch her, but he wanted to, wanted to feel her soft, nubile flesh beneath his calloused palms.

"All right," she replied, still not looking at him.

He quelled the impulse to ask her what she was thinking, knowing that he truly didn't want to hear the answer, as it couldn't be anything good. Instead, to make her more comfortable, and to draw his gaze away from her cotton-covered breasts, he closed his eyes and turned his face away, though his hands began to guide her in her tentative movements against him.

Why not get something out of this? They could both have something...mind-numbing bliss would take them both away from their situation, albeit briefly. Just like before. Slowly, he began to shift his hips and undulate against her, relishing the feel of heated pressure against his hardening cock. As he continued to do this, he gradually gained speed and force, wanting to feel more of her.

It would be so easy to move their garments aside and slide into her.

*Do it.*

*Fuck her.*

*She wants you.*

No, he couldn't do that to her. Wouldn't.

Then he heard her breath hitch and felt her hands move down to cover his briefly before coming to rest on his chest as leverage. Her gyrations changed, and he could feel her moving against him more firmly, as if she was making certain each push and pull and grind caressed her clitoris.

"Ah, yes..." he blurted, cursing himself when her movements momentarily faltered. Unable to resist, he turned his face towards her and opened his eyes. Her own were closed, and there was a look of utmost concentration upon her face...brow furrowed, top teeth biting into her lower lip.

In that moment, he couldn't remember any other woman ever looking as lovely while riding him. What the hell had got into him? Was he so desperate that getting a dry fuck from a girl who was little more than a conspiring captive could satisfy him? Rabastan's words came back to him. *I think you're really starting to... to feel something for her,* he'd said.

Impossible! Not in the way he'd meant.

"Oh..." she uttered above him, now moving frantically against him.

He pushed his thoughts aside and ground against her, helping her, guiding her, enjoying the way she moved and shuddered against him.

"Ah... oh... God!"

And then she came, her entire body trembling against his, and instead of turning him on, he felt sudden shame. What had he done? Again? There was no real cause for him to do this with her at this moment...only his own desire to feel her against him. When she collapsed onto of him, he stopped moving, not caring to find his own release, as he could do that by hand later. He allowed her to lie atop him and dared not to look at her, not wanting to see her eyes, which were undoubtedly filled with tears again.

Breathing heavily, she asked, "Did you...?"

"No," he replied.

"Oh."

He didn't know how to judge her feelings by that one word. Did she now fear that he would carry on until he did so? Did she wish that he'd be able to have an orgasm as well? Did she feel that she'd taken something from him instead of the other way around? He wasn't about to ask her and made no move to stop her as she slid to his side and turned away from him.

Finally finding his voice, he said, "You needn't worry. I've no plans to continue defiling you this day." He rose and found his robes, needing to get away from her.

"That's not what..."

"I shall return in a couple of hours. I have someplace to be. You will be warded in and safe...guaranteed."

"Severus... you don't have... Where are you going?"

"Something has come up, and I think a visit to my Master is prudent." He then looked over to her and was surprised to find her staring at him through dry eyes. "I shall explain later."

"All right, but could you... Would you wait until I've used the loo and cleaned up?"

"Right, yes." He hadn't thought of that and stooped down to grab her discarded dress, tossing it to her and turning away while she tugged it on over her underclothes. To cover the sound of her rustling fabric, he added, "We will have guests here once again...the Lestranges and Wormtail."

"Great," she said sarcastically. "I'd like to stay in here as much as possible then."

He turned around and watched as she tried to smooth away the wrinkles in the horrid fabric. "You will remember that you should play your part," he said quietly.

"I won't refuse you if you ask me to come out, but you could also play yours as well, Severus. If you're supposed to be getting on my good side, you would be giving in to my whims, wouldn't you?"

"Only to a certain extent. Now, come along."

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Draco kept his eyes closed and feigned sleep. His parents were having a conversation and thought him unable to hear. They'd been hiding in a large, hidden room in the Weasleys' hovel, and though he was loath to admit it out loud, it wasn't as bad as he'd always imagined. Sure the whole thing was probably held together by magic, but it had a feel to it that his manor had never had.

"Lucius, you can't mean that! He'll kill us all if he finds out. Think of Draco!"

"I am thinking of Draco," Lucius said firmly. "Why do you think I want to go home and get some of our things? If things go wrong here, we'll at least have enough Galleons and our own clothing to get far away."

"We can't risk this," Narcissa's voice wavered. "I love you, you fool, and I won't lose you again. If things go wrong here, we'll just flee and find a way to survive."

Draco heard his mother sniff and his gut clenched. He hated seeing her so upset and wished his father would leave off to give her peace of mind. However, he could understand where his father was coming from. It would be nice to have some comforts from home...clothes that actually fit him, not the Weasley rags he'd been given to wear. Their Wizarding Wireless would be a plus as well. There was only so much one could read from such a limited source...the Weasleys had old Muggle magazines from God knows what year, plenty of books on practical jokes, and old, ratty school texts.

"Perhaps I'll ask it of Arthur. He's always itching to get into our home for one reason or another."

"Yes, let him do it," Narcissa agreed. "If there are any traps, he'll fall prey to them, and him being a Ministry worker, it won't look very suspicious to anyone who might be watching...not if they think he's searching the manor for something!"

"The only problem," Lucius said in a resigned voice, "is that if I give him the passwords and tell him about the wards, he'll have access to nearly everything, and there's no telling what he might find to use against us."

"I thought you'd secured everything below in the dungeons? They can't get there."

"With the Dark Lord having free reign over our home most of the time and having Bellatrix about, there's no telling what's changed since we've been there last."

Not wanting to listen to any more, Draco yawned and stretched, blinking his eyes open as if he were just waking. "Morning," he said through a fake yawn.

"Good morning."

"Hello, son. Sleep well?"

"Well as can be expected," he said, sitting up. "You?"

"Hmph," Narcissa said. "Did you know that they weren't kidding when they said there was a ghoul here! Imagine. I heard him rattling his chains all night long."

"And moaning," Lucius added. "If this were my home, I'd..." He grimaced. "I'd flee."

All three Malfoys began snickering as they imagined owning a home such as the Burrow. Their laughter was cut short as Molly Weasley entered, carrying a full tray of assorted breakfast items and tea and juice.

"Good morning," she said brightly. "Have a good night, did you?"

"Oh, er, yes, thank you," Narcissa said politely.

Both she and Lucius seemed to be looking the tray over to search for any poisons or filth. Draco knew that an awkward moment was coming, so he stood and approached Mrs. Weasley, taking the tray from her and setting it down on their small table.

"Bangers. Good." He hoped he seemed pleased and eyed the woman cautiously. He couldn't let his parents ruin this chance to be free and to live a normal life again. Potter was just too damn lucky and would most probably come out on top in the end. If they played their cards right, they could be right there with them and share in the glory.

"Eat up, Draco," Mrs. Weasley said jovially. "You look like you could do with at least another stone." She gazed at his parents. "Come on then. Get a spot of breakfast. We've much to do today. Kingsley and Arthur will be round soon to talk to you."

"We'll be ready for them," Lucius said, still not moving, though his eyes travelled to where Draco sat, munching on a slice of toast.

"Right then. Let me know if you need anything. Three stomps in a row, twice, should do it. I'll know it's not the ghoul!"

After the woman bustled away and closed the door on them, Draco rounded on his parents. "You've got to stop doing that!"

"What?" Lucius asked indignantly. "Wasn't I kind enough?"

"As was I," his mother added.

"You were kind, yes, in words, but your manners... *We need* these people. They don't have much, but... but at least they're willing to share it and help out. Right?"

"When did you become such a good man, Draco?" Narcissa asked proudly, moving forward and pouring a cup of tea for Lucius from a scuffed, silver teapot. "Here."

"What do you know! Darjeeling!"

"Mmmm, why, they do have style after all, don't they?" Narcissa said with a smile.

Draco said nothing and continued to devour his meal, unable to stop thinking that Mrs. Weasley's cooking was just as good as their house-elf's any day. He also expected that the Weasleys didn't normally drink Darjeeling but were simply trying to make his family comfortable. Just for that, he appreciated them all the more. He stopped chewing, however, as he realized why he'd had such good fortune. Granger. Was she still angry for being left behind? He'd have to explain that he hadn't meant for it to happen that way when he saw her. Surely she'd understand.

And she would be found soon. He, his mother, and his father had been able to give a great deal of information about the area they'd been in, including that it was an old infirmary. Granger would be out of the Dark Lord's clutches soon enough. He only hoped that it wouldn't be too late. He then thought of Ron Weasley and how angry he'd been upon finding out that Snape was shagging his girl. Snape had better watch out. Weasley would be out for blood.

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Severus left the Dark Lord's chambers feeling uneasy. He didn't feel that he was in any danger, but for some reason, he couldn't help but to think that Rabastan's worries had merit. The man seemed to be in danger either way...if the task failed or was successful. Should he warn him? Should he let things go as they were meant to be? Wouldn't Rodolphus warn his brother if he knew anything? It was possible that Bellatrix knew something, as she always tried to be at her Master's side.

Snape had told his Master some of the conversation he'd had with Rabastan, mostly just stating that he'd learned there would be guests and asked if there was anything required of him. After that, the Dark Lord delved into his mind, but he seemed satisfied with the things he witnessed: Hermione's head lifting up to meet his face in a kiss, her head tossed back as she moved on top of him, her helping him with the potions, his argument with Rabastan over her. The man had even commented on how well he was taming the girl.

However, there was a request made, and he was certain that Hermione wouldn't like it. She'd have no choice of course, and she would do it...if she wanted to live and keep things going smoothly. He was certain that her want to survive would surpass any embarrassment she might feel.

As quietly as possible, he made his way to their room and was able to get there undetected by the dozing Rabastan. He found her reading a book, one hand lazily holding the book while the other was poised above her head with a finger twirling a strand of hair around it.

"Hi," he said uncertainly, wondering how she'd react after their tryst earlier.

"All right?"

"Yes. Have you eaten?" He breathed out deeply in relief. She seemed all right.

"An apple."

"Would you like me to fix something for us? You must be as hungry as I."

"Oh, okay." She gazed at him suspiciously, as if wondering why he was being so kind...especially after what he'd made her do earlier. "Did something happen?"

He sighed. There would be no putting her off. "After we eat, all right?"

She nodded and put her book aside, scooting to the edge of the bed. "I'll clear the desk off. We can use that."

Saying nothing, Severus left again and went to the small kitchen area, finding a fresh loaf, some cheese, and ham. That would suffice for now. He wasn't in the mood for anything heavy anyway. Not with what he had to tell her. And just why was this bothering him so much? He'd always been one to do what he must to get by. This shouldn't be any different.

Once back in their room, they ate in silence, each trying not to eye the other. The moment he'd finally found the right words to say, she spoke.

"Why are you so nervous?"

"Nervous?" he asked, eyes snapping to meet hers. "Hardly."

"Well, there's something off about you." She frowned and put down the uneaten portion of her sandwich. "He wants to see me, doesn't he?"

"Not exactly, no."

"He wants you to... kill me?"

Snape chuckled. "Of course not. You're my prize."

"Then what?"

"He feels that it would be amusing to see if Potter would make any mistakes after seeing a memory of you and I together."

"I thought this day would come. What exactly does he want?"

With a sigh, he said, "I suppose any intimate situations that I choose to send...spontaneous, not contrived."

"Do we actually have to... have sex?"

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "Hermione, we won't send anything like that." He didn't say the next words he was thinking: *just yet*.

"And you can't use anything so far, as they'd be able to see that we weren't actually doing anything."

*Oh, we did something all right, my dear.* "Precisely." He mentally kicked himself. He'd definitely have to do something about this roaming mind of his and stick to the task at hand.

"When should we do this?"

"Within the next couple of days...as soon as possible, I'd say. He hadn't time to put memories together, as he has another agenda, thankfully."

She looked away from him, and he was certain that her lip trembled slightly. "Will I ever get out of here?" she asked in a small voice.

He didn't reply right away, taking the time to chew the last bite of his sandwich. "When the time is right, you will be free."

"Yes, but will the time ever be right?" She looked back at him and lifted her chin almost defiantly. "If it's not to be contrived, let's speak no more about it. I'll initiate something that you can send." Her eyes narrowed. "Don't expect it to be anything too intimate."

"I don't expect that," he said coldly.

"Fine." She finished her sandwich while he went to check on his potions.

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Harry looked at the phial that obviously contained memories, as the silvery mist swirled along its glass. Should he trust it? Should he wake Ron and ask him to have a look with him? For some reason, he didn't want to do that, but at the same time, he didn't want to just toss himself into Dumbledore's Pensieve while viewing memories that might actually be something else.

An idea occurred to him. Quickly, he made his way to the grate and tossed in some Floo powder. "Headmistress McGonagall's office." When the flames turned a shade of emerald green, he stuck his head in and waited for her office to come into view. Soon after, he saw her empty desk. "Professor McGonagall?" he called.

"Potter?" she said, coming into view. "I was just leaving. It's late. What's going on?"

"I know I shouldn't ask this of you, but would you mind terribly coming through? I need your help."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "All right."

He moved back and waited for her to come through. Once she had, he indicated that she should sit down. "An owl delivered this to me earlier." He held up the phial. "It's got a memory or two in here."

"Do you know who it's from?"

"There was no note at all."

"I can understand your concern. Perhaps we should ask Alastor..."

"No, I'd rather not." He nodded at the ceiling. "Ron's been having a rough few days and has taken some Dreamless Sleep, so I don't want to wake him." His brow furrowed. "Feels like I shouldn't anyway. I've no choice but to have a look, and I'll need you on this end...just in case something goes wrong."

She reached out and took the phial from his hands, tapping it with her wand a few times. "Seems all right."

"I've the Pensieve locked in this cabinet." He quickly went to get it and took the phial back from her, pouring its contents into the stone basin. "Here goes nothing." He leaned forward and was lost in the misty strands.

Harry fell neatly into a large, soft chair as if it had been placed there for him purposely. Fighting the urge to pull his wand from his sleeve, he watched as Voldemort walked to the chair across from him and regally took a seat.

"Welcome, Potter, I trust your chair is comfortable."

Harry said nothing in response, though he did reach for and grasp his wand, uncertain as to what was going on. Voldemort couldn't see him, could he?

"I know that you've been worried about your friend, Miss Hermione Granger, so I thought you might like to see for yourself that she's being well taken care of by Severus...oh, how he dotes on her." His voice was light and seeped with false pleasantries. "I do hope you enjoy this assorted collection that Severus has prepared for you. We'll send more soon."

The last thing Harry heard before the scene began changing around them was Voldemort's cold, high-pitched laughter.

He found himself standing in a large room that could only be the place the Malfoys had described to them. He looked towards the group near the fire with disgust. The Lestranges...all three of them...were playing a game of Exploding Snap. Wormtail, who was obviously not invited to partake in the game, was sitting nearby and watching eagerly.

Snape was sitting in chair much like the one Harry had been sitting in and was holding a book in one hand while lazily using the other to affectionately caress the mass of brown hair belonging to Hermione, who was sitting at his feet, also reading.

"Why aren't you trying to get away, Hermione?" Harry asked incredulously. "Look a bit cozy, don't you?"

"She can't hear you."

Harry jumped and swirled around, wand drawn and pointed at the intruder. "Professor McGonagall! What are you doing here?"

"I saw that all was well, and I couldn't help myself. I wanted to see what was going on."

He shoved his wand back into his pocket and nodded towards Hermione. "Look at her. She's just letting that git touch her and ... liking it!"

McGonagall moved closer and squatted in front of Hermione. "Come here, Potter."

"What do you see?"

"Look," she pointed to Snape's hand. "It's like he's trying to comfort her. Every couple of strokes on her hair, he gives her a slight pat, and look how she responds."

"She takes a deep breath, and...oi! I know that look. It's like she's determined to see this through."

"A set up," McGonagall said.

Harry nodded fervently. "I never would have realized, and I know her as good as anyone. I would have thought..."

"You would have thought that she was content and enjoying Severus' intimacies. That's just what Voldemort wants you to think."

"Does he know this is a set up?"

McGonagall shook her head. "I don't think so." She moved aside as Hermione stood and stretched.

"I-I'm going to bed," she said softly and stood there as if waiting for something.

"Shall I join you?" Snape asked silkily, eyes gleaming.

"Of course," she replied, smiling and holding out a shaky hand.

"I think, Harry," McGonagall said softly, "that she and Severus are doing this to trick the Dark Lord into thinking whatever plan he has is working."

"A plan to sidetrack me," Harry said with a nod. "Come on then." He started to follow the pair towards the curtain, but the room began to change around them. He and McGonagall were suddenly standing at the foot of the bed that Hermione and Snape were sharing.

"Good morning," Snape said, propping himself up on an elbow and looking down at her.

"Morning," Hermione mumbled. "It's too early."

"Yes, we did stay up rather late, didn't we?" Snape said suggestively. Hermione simply smiled and hid her face below the duvet. "Hungry?"

They heard a muffled, "Mhmm."

"I'll get something then." Snape sat up, causing both Harry and McGonagall to turn away, as they didn't care to see his naked body.

Harry's voice was cold as he said, "Well, there goes that theory."

"I would be willing to bet my last Galleon that Hermione isn't undressed."

She quickly moved to the side of the bed and stooped down, peering at the duvet Snape had cast aside. Her triumphant smile brought Harry over to see. "Look."

Through a small part sticking up from the bed sheet, they could clearly see that Hermione had on a nightshirt. "Another trick," Harry said excitedly. "If they'd truly done something, she'd be as naked as he, wouldn't she?"

"I would like to think so."

"Maybe she got cold."

"Severus knows warming charms."

"Perhaps."

The scene quickly changed once more. They were still in the room, but it was darker. Snape was just easing into bed, startling Hermione awake.

"Just getting in?"

"Yes."

She leaned towards him and kissed him on the lips. "I tried to wait up."

"S all right." He cupped her face. "Are you too tired?"

Hermione yawned. "I am. Would you mind if we... put things off till the morning?"

"Of course, my dear. I am content just to have you with me."

Harry watched as her friend hugged the man again and allowed him to kiss her and ease her back down onto the mattress as only a lover would. Before he could say anything, the scene faded, and he found himself back at Grimmauld Place with McGonagall.

"Ron can't see this," he said. "He wouldn't understand."

"I agree. Shall I take them back with me for safe keeping?"

"No, he doesn't know how to unlock this cabinet. There's a trick to it that Sirius told me about."

"Very well." She frowned. "That was hard to watch, but I'm positive that it's all staged. Severus has been sending you information and trying to help you. I think that his efforts are sincere."

"I don't know what to think." He shrugged. "Even if she... you know," his cheeks reddened, "did allow something to happen, she's just trying to survive, right?"

McGonagall nodded. "She and Severus have things in hand. Let the Dark Lord think he's winning something here. As long as he thinks his little ruse is working, she'll be safe."

"I agree. How will we let him know it's 'working'?"

"I believe I'll have Aberforth let something slip at the Hog's Head...how he saw you having an argument with me and seemed to be in a rage. It will get back to someone who will tell the right person. I'm certain."

"Probably bloody Rita Skeeter. She'd just love something to write about me and how I'm having another breakdown."

"All the better, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He sighed and ran his fingers through his untidy hair.

"What's wrong?"

"I never saw Professor Snape that way before. He looked almost human." He shuddered, imagining Hermione's horror at having to touch and kiss the greasy-haired git.

To his surprise, McGonagall smiled. "I've seen him like this before."

"Really?"

"Yes," she replied with a nod. "Would you like to hear about it?"

"No," he said with a laugh. "It has nothing to do with me and would probably give me nightmares!"

"It has everything to do with you," she said softly, seriously. With that, she pulled a long, silvery strand of memory from her temple with her wand and tossed it into the Pensieve.

He sat down with a thump and waited for her to tell her story or to invite him to view it.

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**Southern's Notes:** And here's the next chapter. I've been very busy with my Kung-fu classes lately (Woohoo!), but I'm still going to keep updating as often as I can.

## Chapter 15

*Chapter 15 of 30*

Harry finds out about Snape's past, and the Order meets to discuss plans while Snape and Hermione grow closer still.



**Disclaimer:** Not my characters. Just having fun with them.

*Thanks go to Charmed\_Nay for the beta (she's always so busy!). I'd also like to thank amsev for giving this a read through as well.*

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Harry couldn't help himself. He wanted to see the memories McGonagall had given him once again. It had only been a couple of days since they'd had that talk about Snape, but he'd seen the memories many times, unable to stay away. The first one had been a shock to him, causing him to rethink things almost immediately.

*Lily Evans packed her books into her bag slowly, as if waiting for something. Harry saw where her eyes were drawn: to Snape. Like McGonagall, he moved to the left side of the room to get a better look at her face. It was drawn and sad. Realizing he didn't have to busy himself and pretend to be uninterested, he walked forward just as Snape began to pass by his mother.*

"Severus?"

*Snape stopped, but he didn't turn to look at her.*

"I'd like to speak with you."

*Still no response.*

"The library's tower? Tonight?"

*There was a minute nod before Snape began walking away. Harry watched as his mum beamed brightly and bit her lip.*

Harry pulled a memory from one of the phials neatly lining the cabinet's shelves. This one was labeled as *The Library's Tower*. "Why do I do this to myself?" he muttered aloud. Taking a deep, calming breath, he leaned forward and allowed himself to be drawn into the memory.

McGonagall...in cat form...crept against the shadowy walls of the tower, getting as close as possible. Harry walked straight over to his mother and watched her as she gazed out across the lake of Hogwarts. She was very beautiful, her long hair blowing in the cool breeze, her lips lit with a bright smile, and her eyes glowing in the moonlight.

He knew from the way she looked that this was after the memory he'd seen in Snape's Pensieve. Why? Why would she want to talk to Snape after he'd humiliated her and called her Mudblood in front of everyone? That was the question that he couldn't stop thinking of.

Yes, McGonagall had explained that they'd known each other and had been friends before Hogwarts, but still... he'd called her a Mudblood! Tossed her friendship aside to save ugly face!

He heard the soft steps behind him and the swishing of a cloak.

"Severus, you came," Lily breathed.

"What is it that you want, Lily?"

"I want to talk to you."

"You've not wanted to talk to me in months. Why now?"

"Next year will be our last year at school, and I've come to realize that I don't want to go through another term like this past one...you and I on the outs. I miss you and hate not being able to speak to you."

"Lily," Snape said softly, stepping closer and gathering her into his arms.

Harry's frown deepened, as it always did, and he leaned against the ramparts in hopes he'd hear something new. Something that explained this better. Oh, he knew the truth, but he simply didn't understand it. His mother sobbed a few joyful tears and lifted her face to Snape's.

When she opened her mouth to speak, however, Snape pounced on her...lowering his head and pressing his lips to hers. Harry looked away. He'd seen the kiss many times: long, passionate, full of pent up longing. He strained his ears, hoping to hear some new whisper, but there were none of course.

Snape's shaky voice was the first to speak. "How I've longed for this."

"Why did you never tell me?" she asked, voice full of awe.

"I...I thought you knew all along," he admitted.

"I'd hoped, but then... that day."

"Don't speak of it."

They began to kiss again, both mumbling words of love, and as McGonagall left to give them their privacy, Harry, too, was removed from the memory.

She'd told him that she would show him more memories, but she'd only do that after he'd digested these first two and mulled over all she'd told him. He felt he was ready to learn more. There were so many unanswered questions.

His mother had started dating his father at some point in their last year. Why would she be with Snape like this in her sixth year? What had happened to change things between them, sending her to the one man Snape hated?

A tapping on the window drew his attention.

~~~~~ O ~~~~~

## **THE EVENING PROPHET**

Harry Potter Destroys Section of Hogsmeade Pub

*Brought to you by Rita Skeeter*

I have just returned from the Hog's Head pub in Hogsmeade where the proprietor, who demands to not be named, claims to have had to toss out the Chosen One, Harry Potter! He says that the boy was there in disguise, meeting with a certain red-haired friend. We can be certain that this is his sidekick, Ronald Weasley. It seemed they were fighting about a woman.

Where was the other friend who normally accompanies them? She was not to be seen. And she is possibly the woman who was cause of the argument that ensued and Harry Potter's rage! Remember back in his earlier Hogwarts years when I reported that Miss Hermione Granger had hurt our poor hero by leaving him coldly for the Quidditch star Viktor Krum? It's apparent she has done it yet again! Whom did she go to this time? Has she been leading both boys on? Our hero has enough to deal with already without the likes of her adding to his burden.

For patrons interested, the Hog's Head will be closed until tomorrow evening. All repairs should be made by then. It was an unknown hex Potter used to bring down part of the wall and ceiling, so it's taking a bit longer to fix...although it's been said he's paying for damages and has apologized. Stay tuned for more information as soon as I can get it! I'll definitely follow this up and stay on top of things!

~~~~~ O ~~~~~

"I still don't see why we had to do it like that," Ron said uncomfortably.

"Because," McGonagall said, "Voldemort will think he's coming between the two of you and will believe that Harry's cracking under pressure."

"Besides," Moody added, "this will keep your friend safe. If he thinks her being a hostage is useful in this way, he'll keep her around."

Harry frowned. "I hope so." His eyes moved to meet his old head of house's confident gaze.

"We will know soon enough, won't we?" she said softly. After a small sigh, she asked, "Anyone else have any questions?"

Kingsley stood. "I think with the information the Malfoys gave us, we've a better idea of where some of these Death Eaters are hiding. By the end of the week, we'll have it narrowed down."

"Aye," Moody said. "And maybe Granger will be with them."

Tonks laughed. "Who'd have thought the Malfoys would have truly wanted to tell us everything. Perhaps they are trying to change."

McGonagall nodded. "Or trying to stay out of Azkaban."

"When do the boys have to stage something else?" Molly asked. "I don't like the negative feedback from this already." She nodded towards Ron. "We've got some owls that were rather nasty."

"Yeah, a couple have found me here." Ron stood and stretched. "Well, so long as it keeps Hermione safe." His eyes lowered to the floor.

Harry knew that he was thinking of what the Malfoys had said about Hermione having to share a bed with Snape. He hoped his friend would stay strong and be accepting of things. As soon as he could, Harry vowed to explain everything to Ron...the staged memories as well...

"Everyone is invited to come back to the Burrow with us. Molly's made her famous meatballs," Arthur said jovially.

"We 'ave uzzer plans," Fleur said with a small smile.

"Yeah, sorry, Mum. Maybe tomorrow we'll come 'round?" Bill added as he noticed his mother's frown.

"Oh, all right. Newlyweds," she said softly. "Ronald? You'll come, won't you?"

"Er... yeah, sure. Harry?"

"I'll meet you there," he said.

"Why? What's going on?"

"I thought I might go talk to Dumbledore...his portrait, I mean."

"Oh, want I should come?"

Harry grinned. "I'll go through the Floo with McGonagall and back the same way. You can go to your mum and dad's."

"Thanks, mate," he said. "See you there."

Minutes later, Order members began clearing out, leaving Harry and McGonagall alone.

"Is something wrong?" she asked immediately.

"Yeah, I got another batch of memories just before the meeting," he said, leading her to the locked cabinet that held his Pensieve and other memories. "If Ron's mum hadn't been here, he might have seen me get them."

"Quite close then."

He nodded. "I didn't look at them, but they can only be more of the same."

"If you'd rather not..."

"I have to. There might be something in there that's a clue."

She nodded. "In you get. I'll follow shortly after."

"Right then." In a practiced move, he quickly fell into the basin to live through the memories.

As before, Voldemort was waiting for him.

"Welcome, Potter," he said with a high-pitched cackle. "I heard some news that you aren't doing well." He made a tscking noise with his mouth. "Pity, that, isn't it?"

The man's red eyes seemed to pierce him, though Harry knew he couldn't truly see him. He felt hate and anger bubbling in his chest. One day, Voldemort would pay for everything he'd done in his life.

"Same rubbish as last time?" McGonagall asked.

"Yeah, he's going on about how it's such a shame that I was so angered and how good Snape's taking care of Hermione."

"Mmmm. I thought as much. Prepare yourself, Potter. We don't know what all we'll see."

"I'm ready."

As if on cue, the scene changed around them, leaving them again in the old building the Death Eaters had been using to seek refuge. This time, however, Hermione was kneeling over Rabastan LeStrange and applying some cream to his arm. There was blood all over his clothes, and he was obviously in much pain, writhing and flailing about.

"Hold still," she hissed, forcefully pulling his arm back to her.

"Let go of me, Bella!" Rodolphus yelled from across the room. "I want to see to my brother."

Snape leaned over the man. "Rabastan, what's become of Wormtail?"

"Dead," he said before moaning loudly.

"Please. Hold still," Hermione said tearfully.

He grabbed her by the front of her dress. "Nearly got killed myself!"

Snape pushed him back down while Hermione went about healing his wounds with the salve.

"Why's she helping him?" Harry asked. "She ought to let him die."

"It's in her nature, isn't it? To help those who need it."

"Yeah, but *he* is a Death Eater."

"And also a man who might die," McGonagall said. "Besides, if she did nothing, wouldn't it look strange?"

"Yeah, I expect it would," he agreed.

The scenery changed, and this time, Hermione was placing a bowl of soup next to a sleeping Rabastan LeStrange. "Severus says to give this to him. There's pain potion mixed in it as well."

Rodolphus nodded without looking at her, simply gazing down at his brother. Harry was shocked to see that the man truly cared for his brother. Bellatrix, however, was over by the fire reading a book and seemingly unfeeling about it all. Following Hermione across the room to Snape's makeshift laboratory, Harry had a strange feeling come over him.

*She seemed at home, didn't she?* He voiced as much to McGonagall but was hushed.

"He's still sleeping," she said softly.

"I suppose that's a good thing," he replied tersely.

To Harry's surprise, his friend placed a hand on his arm and squeezed it in a gesture of comfort. Snape looked down at it and then up at her again. In a move that was now familiar to Harry, Snape gathered Hermione in his arms, placing his chin atop her head.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Harry's gaze met McGonagall's, and he could see that she sensed something had changed as well, but the woman didn't speak, not even as the scenery altered once again.

"May I come in?" Severus asked, opening the door.

Hermione sank lower in the bubble-laden tub. "Yes, but I thought I'd locked the door."

"You did." He lifted his wand and shrugged. "I wanted a word."

As if he had the right to do so, he crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bath, watching her intently while she shifted and faced him slightly.

"Is something wrong?"

"You've been a great help these past few days. My master is pleased and sees why I have chosen you."

"Severus..."

"Let me finish."

"All right."

"I want to know. Are you happy?"

"I don't like being a hostage."

"Do you feel like one?"

"Not exactly."

"Even Bellatrix is being kind to you."

"Yes, she ignores me completely now and has ceased calling me a Mudblood."

"And has brought you a gift as thanks from the both of them for your care of Rabastan."

"What? Soap to wash my filthy hands?"

"Robes... a few of them."

Hermione smiled. "I would like to wear something normal." She nodded towards what looked like a discarded sheet on the floor. "Those dresses... ugh."

Snape leaned over, and just as he'd done before with Lily, he seemed to pounce on Hermione...hands and lips on her face. Harry turned his face, not wanting to see any more. McGonagall continued to stare, however, and Harry saw a soft smile on her face.

"What are you smiling at?" he asked.

Hiding her smile, she coughed and said, "I'd bet that she's not naked under there."

"Well, you won't catch me going look, will you?"

"It's all staged still."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Looks sort of real to me. You can't say that she doesn't seem... happy...or him for that matter."

The scene began fading away, and they found themselves back at Grimmauld Place.

"Do you truly believe that?"

"Well, he looked at her like... like he looked at Mum in those memories you gave me!"

"So, you've been thinking about what I showed you then?"

"How could I not?"

"Are you ready to know more?"

"Yes," he said immediately. "I want to know why she met him that night, and if she loved him," here he made a horrified expression, "why did she end up with my dad?"

"She met him because she did love him, and the reason she eventually turned to your father... Well, she loved him, too."

"I'm confused."

"Things had changed too much by then. She disliked Severus' friends, and the feeling was mutual. Her friends certainly disliked Severus. They thought by meeting privately, they would be at peace."

"But someone found out?"

"Yes, Sirius Black."

"Oh." Harry thought back to the way Snape and Sirius had spoken to each other...extreme dislike on both their parts. He thought of the way Sirius had mistreated Snape in the memory he'd seen.

"Yes, exactly. Of course, there was trouble for them after that, and what with Severus' parents being killed, things were only going to get worse."

"Killed?"

"Yes, Muggle car crash. It was horrible...even made the *Prophet*."

"So, he lost both parents, too, then. Like me."

She nodded. "I'm going to leave you with a few more memories."

"You really like him, don't you?"

"I always did, yes. He was a studious boy, and sometimes, we professors wish to reach out and try to guide some students. He seemed to need our attention, as it was obvious he wasn't getting it at home." She frowned. "Never really let us get close though. Too proud, you see."

"If he's such a good man, why join Voldemort? Why kill Dumbledore? Why leave my mum?"

She looked at him appraisingly. "I think it's time you talk to Albus. I think you're ready to hear everything from him." She moved towards the grate. "Come."

Harry nodded and followed her, feeling relieved. He was about to find out the truth...finally. And he wouldn't leave Dumbledore's office until he learned the full truth about the tower that night either. He only hoped that soon enough they'd find Hermione and stop her from truly developing feelings for Snape. She was *Ron's* girl after all.

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Severus had come to bed ten minutes earlier, and no sooner than he'd undressed and extinguished their lamp had the noise started...the noise being moans, grunts, and breathy gasps from across the room. It seemed that Bellatrix and Rodolphus were taking advantage of their conjugal rights. Hermione tried to keep still, but she couldn't help shifting and squeezing her thighs closer together every so often. The sounds they were making, coupled with the sexy section of the romance book that she'd just read, had her completely aroused. She wished that Severus would leave their bed so that she could touch herself, make herself feel some of what they were feeling.

How could he not be affected by the sounds of sex? Just the imagery was enough to heat Hermione's blood...even if it was those two. Imagining the heroine and her savior from her book was easy enough. However, the heroine's face kept changing to hers, and the hero... Why wasn't it Ron? She couldn't see a distinct face, but he had black hair, much like Snape's. She idly wondered if the elf-made wine had anything to do with her feelings. Severus had allowed her to have the rest of the bottle after dinner, and although it was only just over half, it was more than she'd ever had in one sitting, causing her to feel a little restless and giddy for a little while. They'd all had wine, toasting Rabastan's regaining use of his arm.

*Movement.* He was turning on his side to face her. There was only a small sliver of moonlight shining through the boarded windows, but it was enough to silhouette him, showing her that he was propped on his elbow and likely staring down at her. Could he see her face? His was shadowed, so it was possible that he could see her open-eyed gaze. She dared to move her head to glance at him fully and could just make out his nose.

A finger upon her lips startled her. It traced her bottom lip first, then her top lip, and then it moved along her jaw. Her body stiffened as his inched closer, his bare chest brushing her arm.

"Do you hear them?" he questioned in a light whisper, liquored breath close to her ear.

"Y-yes," she answered in kind. So... it did affect him.

His hand abruptly left her jaw and moved slowly down her throat, over her collarbone, and to the valley between her breasts, causing her to pull in a sharp breath and hold it.

"Let me fuck you," he said in a low voice, not exactly a whisper, but loud enough so that only she could hear it. Nonetheless, her heart began to pound within her chest.

Her eyes widened even more in surprise, and her stomach flopped and tingled. Just how much had he drank? She released the breath she'd been holding in answer. "No..."

"Yet you want me to even while you say no," he said, slight slur in his voice, hand now circling one of her breasts, teasing its peak through the fabric of her nightgown.

She said nothing, only closed her eyes against his silhouette, allowing his touch to continue and willing herself not to respond openly. When his mouth found her neck, just below and behind her ear, chills moved through her body, causing her to gasp in delight and grope at the sheet with her hand. However, instead of clutching the fabric of

the sheet, she grabbed at the fabric of his underpants and his unmistakable erection.

"Oh," she said in surprise, releasing him quickly.

It was too late, though, for he ground against her hand and hip, vigorously tugged at her throat with his lips and tongue, trying to mark her as his own, and traveled down to the juncture of her thighs with his hand.

When she made no move to fondle him again, he commanded, "Touch me."

She still did not comply. This was wrong. They'd both drank after dinner and were simply aroused because of the moans of the other couple in the room. He didn't truly like her...they'd only be putting on an act...and she returned the sentiment. Mostly. *He's a murderer*, she tried to remind herself. But that Snape was long gone to her now that she'd been staying with him. *God, his touch feels so good.*

Beneath her knickers his hand slid, fingers curling in possessively, one finding its way inside of her.

"So wet," he murmured against her skin. He leaned over and bit at her breasts through her gown. "Get it off."

"Please don't," she pleaded in confusion. She didn't want to betray Ron, and yet... she wanted his touch to continue. She wanted to feel release. A naughty voice whispered, *What's the difference? It wouldn't be the first time that he's touched you or enabled you to feel pleasure. What's another little touch?* But this seemed different.

"Get it off... I want to taste your flesh," he said again, slur leaving his voice, replaced by a more needy tone.

She moved to tug up her gown, pulling it up and over her head. The moment she settled down against him again, his mouth fervently renewed its ravaging of her breasts, and his fingers, which never left her knickers, continued to explore and then delve into her and trace a path along her heated flesh, teasing her relentlessly.

"Ah," she gasped, pressing her skin against his mouth more firmly.

"I want to fuck you," he said, accentuating his words with a frantic movement of the pad of his thumb over her clitoris. "Just say the word..."

"J-just touch me," she heard herself say. "Nothing more."

He shifted, maneuvered his body, and kicked away his underpants, pulling her hand down and pressing it against his hard arousal. "Reciprocate," he purred.

Pushing away all thoughts of rejection and of her morals, she began touching him with the same intensity, pressure, and speed that he touched her with. It was as though he knew just what to do to light a fire within her body. Thoughts seemed to rush out of her mind, and then there was only the moment. The light dampness near the head of his shaft was spread over and used as a lubricant so that her hand could slide over it easier.

When his tongue began forcefully flicking over her hard nipple, coupled with the grinding of a digit against her clitoris, she cried out anxiously, wanting more and knowing that an orgasm would soon find her and take her away from reality briefly, making her feel free even though she was not. Faster and faster her hand moved over his skin. She wanted him to feel what she was feeling, and by the way he was breathing, she could tell that he was enjoying her firm stroking. She increased her pressure when she wanted him to do the same, and eventually, it brought about simultaneous results.

Her peak finally began to climb towards explosion, she moaned and panted to encourage it along, finally crying out exuberantly when she felt her body explode with sensation. Snape's fingers never stopped until she stilled them with her free hand and squirmed away moments later from over sensitivity. It was then that she realized that she'd stopped pumping him, but she knew that he'd joined her, as there was a sticky, hot wetness against her forearm and stomach.

The instant she tilted her head to attempt to see his expression, his lips descended onto hers possessively. While surprising, it was not unwanted. She returned the kiss with equal appreciation, thinking of how soft his thin lips felt as his mouth devoured hers. A final sweep of his tongue against hers and a last press of his lips chastely against hers ended their kiss.

He sat up, and she heard a smacking sound and what seemed to be a small groan of appreciation. *What is he doing?* she wondered briefly before realizing that he'd brought his fingers to his mouth to taste her. Had he done that the time before on Grimmauld Place when he'd touched her there? She wanted to talk to him, to touch him, to be close to him... if only for this night, but she felt the whisper of magic against her flesh, cleaning away her sin. He settled back down next to her, but instead of turning over, he remained on his side facing her and pulled up the duvet to cover them. Minutes of silence later, his breathing evened out as he succumbed to slumber.

How would he feel about what happened in the morning? How would she feel? This was something different than what they'd been doing...the pretending in front of the others and the staged intimacies. She didn't want to think about it. Instead, she craved some sense of comfort and moved as closely against him as possible. She was rewarded with one of his hands being placed on her stomach. It wasn't exactly a warm embrace, but she felt oddly satisfied all the same. Sleep finally came for her.

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**Southern's Notes:** Hmm. So, things are definitely changing a bit for Snape and Hermione. It's a pity she's still his captive. Perhaps that will change soon enough, eh? Sorry this took so long. My beta has had a very busy RL lately.

## Chapter 16

*Chapter 16 of 30*

The pair deals with the morning after awkwardness while Ron stumbles upon Harry's unguarded Pensieve. And just what is Rabastan up to?

**Disclaimer:** I'm snagging some of JKR's characters to play around with. I'll send them home later.

*Thanks go to Charmed\_Nay for the beta!*

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Hermione snuggled into the warmth at her side and sighed in contentment. There was rain pelting on the rooftop, and the cool air helped it to keep her in a sleepy state. Life had been good to her. She and Ron had married and had beautiful children. Her son was tall with black, silky locks and dark eyes to match...just like his father. Her eyes opened with a snap. Ron had red hair of course...not black! Severus.

She and Severus were lying together...legs entwined, her head on his chest and her arm around his waist while both of his arms held her to him tightly. There was a dull thud in her head, which was a telltale sign she'd drank too much wine the night before, but what had happened wasn't foggy at all. She remembered every detail of it and could feel her cheeks heating as the memories of their shared passion replayed in her mind. He'd wanted her, had said it plainly and had tried to show her.

And she'd liked it and wanted him in return. She was uncertain exactly what had stopped her from allowing him to have his way with her. And the excitement and curiosity of what might have been faded only to be replaced by guilt. Ron. She'd betrayed Ron. What she'd done had not been acting. She'd not been putting on a show for anyone. She'd wanted Severus Snape beneath it all, and she'd enjoyed what they'd done together.

What would he say? How could she face him now? Promptly closing her eyes, she decided to pretend to be asleep until he got up and left their room. Surely she could figure something out by then.

"I know you're awake," Severus said, voice still laced with sleep.

"Good morning," she said, trying to sound calm, though she was mortified about her near nakedness.

"If you wouldn't mind turning over, I'd like the use of my arm again."

"Sorry," she mumbled and pulled back and away from him, quickly turning on her other side. He hadn't sounded angry, so things might be all right after all. To her surprise, which she hid admirably, he scooted closer to her, slipping one of his legs between hers and placing a hand on her waist. He was still completely naked, as she could feel his morning erection pressing against her arse. Unsure of what to do, and not wanting to be awkward, she moved her arm so that it would rest on his, their hands touching...hers covering his.

She felt him nuzzle into her hair and inhale deeply. "How do you manage to smell like citrus, even here? I've always associated that scent with you."

Surprised, but not displeased, she replied, saying, "When I was little I would always go to my father's parents' home, and my grandmum always had fresh oranges. It's something that reminds me of being happy, so in third year when you taught us how to make scented oils, I began making my own and dab some on me each day. The scent lasts a very long time and is just subtle enough to not be overpowering. Well, at least that's what Mum says."

"How did you make it here? I haven't the ingredients."

"I had a shrunken bottle in my pocket that day."

"I checked your pockets."

"Not my hidden pocket," she said a little smugly. "I'm nearly out though, and I normally use a similar scent in my hair, depending on what's for sale."

"I will see it done," he said quietly, moving his head slightly.

She was certain he'd just kissed her head affectionately and smiled softly. Was this how it felt to lie with a lover after a night of lovemaking? She and Ron had never done anything like this. Why hadn't they? It felt so right, someone to hold her, keeping her warm and safe from the evil in the world.

"Thank you, Severus."

"I suppose I should get up. I have to go to see the Dark Lord this morning. Since Wormtail's untimely and fortunate demise, there are other things that I need to see to." He squeezed her tightly and pressed his lips to her head once more. "Do you need anything other than that?"

"Nothing," she replied easily, snuggling more deeply under the duvet after he moved away.

He lit a lamp, casting more light in the dimly lit room. She opened one eye to watch him covertly. He was quite thin and about the same height as Ron, but he moved with a grace Ron could never possess and seemed more confident in himself. When he bent over to grab a pair of underpants from a drawer, she bit her lip while staring at his firm, white arse. In that moment, she almost wished that he'd turn around so she could see exactly what she'd been touching the night before, what had just been pressed firmly against her backside, but as always, he kept his back to her. After he pulled his robes over his fresh underpants, he turned back to her and caught her looking.

Smirking slightly, he said, "Very good... this morning."

"Sorry?"

"The Dark Lord will be pleased to have our conversation to send along to Potter. He'll think we were waking after a night of sex." He glided over to the dresser to pick up a hairbrush.

Hermione swallowed. So it had been only an act to him. It hadn't been real. Feeling foolish and disappointed, she closed her eyes, not wanting to see him...and not wanting him to see that she was upset.

"Nothing to say?" he asked.

"Are..." Her voice cracked. "Are you going to show him last night?"

"I...no..."

He turned on his heel and left her alone without another word.*It serves me right*, she thought bitterly. *What was I thinking anyway? How could I have let myself feel like that about him? I'm so sorry, Ron.* What exactly did she feel anyway? It wasn't love, and she supposed it could be categorized as lust, but that didn't seem right either. "So confused."

To her horror, tears filled her eyes. Why had this disappointed her so much? She should have known better. "Well," she muttered, "it won't happen again. Shouldn't have in the first place."

"Granger?"

Hermione froze. Rabastan Lestranger had just called her name. She debated on pretending to be asleep so that she didn't have to answer him, but Severus might have mentioned that she was awake or he might have heard her talking to herself.

"Yes?"

"Can I have a word?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she said, horrified that she was still in bed and in the very undressed state she'd been in the night before. If she got up now, he would likely see her through the filmy curtain.

"Look, I just want to talk. I'll go over by the fire, and you can come there."

"All right," she agreed, uncertain as to why. When she heard his receding footsteps, she slid from the bed, pulling the duvet up with her...just in case.

After dressing hurriedly and brushing her hair, she peeked out into the other room. Only Rabastan was present. Where had the others gone? Was this a trap? She hoped he wouldn't try anything like he had the last time. The only thing that gave her the courage to walk over to him was the fact that she knew he still wasn't all the way healed.

"What do you want?" she asked, standing up instead of taking the seat he'd indicated.

He sat back and shook his head so that his long, brown hair wouldn't hide his eyes. "You and me, we didn't start off right."

She looked around uncomfortably for a moment. "I have something to do, and I shouldn't have come out." Taking a step back, she resisted the urge to run back to the safety of her room. She should have never agreed to join him, especially with Severus gone.

"You have nothing to fear from me, lass, ever again." He smiled crookedly. "I'm trying to say that I appreciate what you did for me, taking care of me that way."

"Oh... you're welcome."

He stood and pulled something from his robes, causing her to take a step back. "Thought you might like to read this... sort of a friendly gesture." It was his turn to look around uneasily. "I don't know how much Severus tells you about things out there." He shrugged. "If you'd rather not..."

"No," she said immediately, moving towards him and taking the paper from his hand. "*TheDaily Prophet*! I don't know what to say."

"Say thanks."

"Thank you."

He smiled again. "Right then." He sat back down. "Say, do you play chess?"

"Not really."

"Come. I'll show you."

She looked down at the paper and wished he'd just let her go and read it, but if he was trying to be kind to her, she should allow it. One never knew when an extra ally would be needed. "My boyfriend plays well."

"Boyfriend?"

"Er, yes... well, I suppose not any longer."

"Not with Severus making you his own, eh?" he said jovially. "You're right good for Severus, I think. Haven't seen him this way in almost twenty years. Hell, I was in bloody Azkaban most of it, but still..."

"He's had a girlfriend before?"

"Yeah, back in school there was a girl." He set up the board. "Jealous?"

Her cheeks flushed brightly. "Just curious."

"Mmmhmm," he said in disbelief. "I told him she wasn't good for him, but he didn't listen. Stubborn, see. Guess you can't choose the ones you love. She...owww! Shite!" He dropped the Bishop he'd been placing on the board.

"Are you all right?"

"Me hand, it hurts." He rubbed it with his other hand. "Been twitching all morning, but it feels like little blades are sticking me."

"Do you want anything for the pain? Severus has some potion available."

"Aye."

Hermione quickly went to pour a dose in a cup for him and brought it back, watching him toss it back immediately. After a few deep breaths, some of the color returned to his cheeks. "Better then?"

Rabastan nodded.

"What happened exactly?" she asked, wondering if he'd tell her. Severus had changed the subject each time she'd asked, just saying that Wormtail had met his demise on some mission.

"Wormtail and me, we went to retrieve something for the Dark Lord. Wormtail, the bloody berk, didn't follow instructions...drank some potion and then wanted some water. Now, we were warned to not do that. Just drink it and get what's beneath it." He shook his head and was then lost in thought.

His eyes narrowed and darkened before he continued. "I waited in the boat. Thought the git could do it on his own." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I didn't like it from the beginning. Something wasn't right. Wormtail, never bright, that one. Soon as he fell down at the water's edge to lap at it like a bloody dog... the water came alive."

"What do you mean?" She had heard a story very similar to this one before, and she was certain that she knew what he'd say next.

"Inferi. Loads of them. Grabbed Wormtail right away, ripping him to shreds and pulling him down into the water, and then they noticed me." He sat back, gazing towards the fire. "I panicked, tried to row away. They started rocking the boat, and then... I saw my old mate, Regulus."

"Regulus Black?"

"Aye. He... he was one of them and is what happened to me arm. Tried to rip it right off me. Almost did, but my knife, I stabbed him with it. He barely flinched and snatched it from me, bastard. And then I remembered fire kept the fuckers at bay." He sighed and then looked at her. "Always wondered what happened to him. Just disappeared one day."

Another emotion passed over his face, one Hermione couldn't decipher, and she had the urge to say something kind. "He must have been trapped there on a mission, too."

"Or just cast off... like Wormtail. That could've been me!" he said bitterly.

There was nothing she could say to that. She had no idea what Voldemort had been planning by sending them there, aside from the obvious, but she was very afraid that Rabastan had discovered that the Horcrux was gone.

"Were you able to get what you were sent for?"

He shook his head. "It went down with Wormtail, whatever it was. I didn't even see it."

"I'm sorry you had to deal with that." And oddly enough, she truly did feel sorry for him.

"You're a bit of all right," he replied with a nod.

A crack of Apparition alerted them to someone's presence. Hermione turned around and saw Severus enter. He stopped and took in the scene with an arched eyebrow.

"Just talking, mate," Rabastan said right away. "'S all."

He strode forward and grabbed Hermione by the arm, pulling her towards their room.

"Now don't hurt the girl!"

"I'll deal with you shortly," he told the other man over his shoulder.

"Stop! You're hurting me," she said, nearly tripping in his wake.

Once inside the room, he roughly pushed her to the bed. "What do you think you're doing?" he said in an angry whisper.

"Nothing at all! We were only talking, I swear it," she said, hurt that he was handling her so roughly, especially after the previous night. And then her humiliation and anger came back to her. "Why should you care anyway?" she yelled suddenly.

"You are not to leave this room and meet with *anyone* alone!"

"He wanted to say thanks for..."

Severus leaned over in front of her and said, spittle flying from his mouth, "I don't care what he wanted. You should know better! Do you not remember what happened the last time he was alone with you?"

"I just thought that..." She crossed her arms defiantly and looked away, too angry to form her words. He was right of course, but he didn't have to be so harsh about it.

"And, to make matters worse, you..." He looked down at his feet and stepped back before stooping to pick up the copy of the *Daily Prophet* that Rabastan had given her.

"Oh..."

"Where did you get this?" he asked suspiciously.

"He thought I might like to read it."

Snape pulled his wand out before she could blink and hissed, "*Incendio!*" The paper caught on fire.

"Why?" she asked in shock.

"You only need to know what I tell you. Nothing more."

"So I *am* just a hostage!" she yelled. Before she realized what she was doing, she'd jumped up and began swinging her fists at him. "Just when you start treating me as more of an equal, you go and act like an utter arse!"

He finally caught her fists and sidestepped a kick to his shin. "Calm down, girl!"

"You didn't think I was a girl last night!"

And then she was pushed down onto the bed with him on top of her, both of her hands still clasped within his. His lips found hers, nearly bruising her mouth with a kiss that seemed to go on for several minutes. Somehow, at some point, her legs had moved from beneath him and were suddenly snugly wrapped around his thighs.

One of them moaned just before their kiss broke, and she ground against him, wanting to be closer. How had this happened? She'd vowed that she wouldn't let anything happen again, yet here she was in bed with him.

"Severus... don't."

He didn't move off of her, but he pressed his forehead against her cheek, his fast breaths sounding loudly in her ear. After many moments, he finally spoke quietly. "I trust no one, Hermione. How can I protect you if you won't listen to me? Anything could have happened."

"I won't do it again...won't leave the room if you are gone," she said. "But we have to talk. What's wrong with me reading the paper? What aren't you telling me?"

He sighed, released her hands, and rolled over to lie next to her. "Things have been happening, and I'd rather you learn of them from me...not some biased reporter's report."

She turned and propped up on her elbow. "Then tell me."

"Very well."

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The fire in the grate at Grimmauld Place burned emerald green, and Ron walked out, sputtering and dusting soot off his jumper. "Harry?" he called, looking around the empty room. "Still at Hogwarts, I expect."

He started to stride across the room, but stopped short when he noticed a Pensieve sitting on a shelf near some cabinets on the far wall. "What's this then?"

Had McGonagall showed Harry something important? Should he have a peek? Shaking his head, he backed away and went up to his room to find the copy of a Muggle magazine Hermione had left behind. He'd mentioned it to his father and was asked to retrieve it. Once he'd snatched it from under his bed, he quickly went back down and paused as he passed by the Pensieve again.

Harry was at Hogwarts. Nobody was about. Who would know? Curiosity won out, and he decided to have a quick look to see what McGonagall had showed him. Ron placed the magazine on the shelf and leaned down so that his face touched the silvery mist at the top of the Pensieve.

A feeling of falling passed through him, and he felt as though he were falling through space before landing on his arse on a stone floor in a dark room. When he turned around, his heart dropped, and he fumbled for his wand. Voldemort sat in a chair and gazed towards him with a smug smile on his reptilian face.

"What the...?" His wand slipped from his grasp and rolled across the floor. He dodged for it and quickly lifted it to send a hex towards Voldemort... only to see his spell go straight through him and to see the man addressing a chair across from him, obviously thinking Harry was sitting there.

To his shock, the man began taunting Harry about what had happened at the Hog's Head. "Well, at least our plan worked," Ron said with a proud smile. However, his smile



faded as Voldemort continued.

"It appears, Harry, that you didn't appreciate the things I showed you last time. Oh, dear me," he said mockingly. "I assure you that your little friend is being well cared for. Why, Severusssss positively dotes on her. She's even taken to caring for his friends and them growing fond of her in return." A high-pitched cackle sounded from the man's harsh, cold lips, making it an even more eerie sight to behold. "I do hope you don't have any tantrums after seeing this. It would be unbecoming for the *Chosen One*."

Ron didn't know what to think first. Obviously, this wasn't the first message Harry had received. Why hadn't Harry given him word on Hermione? He frowned. It could only mean one thing: that there were things here that Ron truly didn't want to see or know. Things he'd thought about, of course, especially after what the Malfoys had told them. He'd been trying desperately to remind himself that Hermione had to do whatever they'd said if she wanted to live, but he hadn't really tried to dwell on what those things might be.

Knowing he should back out of the memory, but not being able to do so, he watched with wide eyes as the next scene played out for him. He found himself in a large, drab room that was obviously home to many people, as certain places were sectioned off with several beds. Before him, a man was howling in pain as Snape and Hermione tended to him. Off to the side, Rodolphus Lestrange, who was being magically and physically held back by his wife, yelled loudly about needing to help his brother.

To Ron's horror, Hermione cried in pity as she helped the man, obviously trying her best to save him and soothe him. She wasn't a prisoner or chained to a bed as he'd imagined. She was walking about freely and actually helping a Lestrange!

Before he could really get close to listen in, the scene changed. Rabastan Lestrange was still lying down, but he was now clean and sleeping, his brother sitting beside him. He watched as Hermione spoke to the man and made her way back over to where Snape was. And then he nearly stumbled before he could reach them, for Snape and she were locked in a tight embrace.

Anger began bubbling inside of him. Why didn't she look miserable? This wasn't how it was supposed to be...not when someone was being held against her will. And then it dawned on him... It was quite convenient that she'd gone to meet him on her own. Had she arranged for it all to happen? Had she bartered with him, giving herself to him in return for his help with things?

He frowned in disappointment. Surely she wouldn't. "She loves me," he mumbled, hoping to reassure himself. "This is just... She's only doing this for show...to make Snape think she's on his side."

A scowl replaced his frown as the scenery changed again with him standing in a different room as Hermione had a bath. Her skin looked as soft and as lovely as he remembered, and he longed to go to her to touch and hold her. How he'd missed her and longed to have her with him again. The door opened and Snape walked in, asking if she minded his presence.

"As if she has a choice, you ruddy git!" he spat angrily. Did the man allow her no privacy? Who did he think he was showing up while she was bathing? Ron hated Snape more in that moment than he ever had, and he'd been seriously considering tossing something at him when he heard Snape's next words.

"Are you happy?"

*Tell him to bugger off, Hermione!*

"I don't like being a hostage."

*That's it. Don't be afraid to tell the prat that you hate him and what he's making you do*he thought smugly, glad she was finally being honest.

Her reply to his next question, however, stunned him. "What do you mean 'not exactly'? Of course you should feel like a hostage!"

As the conversation unfolded, Ron's mood became darker. They were joking about the way Bellatrix had treated her and how the bitch was now buying Hermione something to wear. "Freed like a house-elf then, are you?" he asked bitterly, wishing she could hear him.

When Snape leaned over and took her face in his hands, Ron watched as his girlfriend, the woman he'd hoped to marry, tilted her head up and accepted the kiss eagerly, forgetting about being modest...the tops of her breasts, soapy and sleek, peeking out from under the bubbles. When one of Snape's hands slid down below the water, likely fondling a breast, Ron backed out of the memory, unable to watch any more.

He stared at the Pensieve for a long moment. How could Harry have kept this from him? Had he just received it? The Pensieve hadn't been out when the Order members were there. Had McGonagall brought this to show him? Why not include him? He was Harry's best friend and always helped him with things. Did they think he couldn't handle it?

His chest heaved with his furious breaths. They*had* been keeping it from him. This wasn't the first time Voldemort had contacted Harry. They'd used him and hadn't trusted him enough to play out his part in the staged Hogsmeade argument. Sure, they'd told him that they wanted Voldemort to think they were breaking down without Hermione and that things weren't going well, but it had to be because of this.

The opened cabinet revealed more phials of memories. He snatched one and tossed it into the Pensieve. How dare they keep him out of the loop like this?

Ron found himself on top of a tower at Hogwarts. The night was dark, a small moon lit the sky, and he could make out the figure of a woman leaning against the ramparts. As he got closer, he saw her long, flowing red hair. "What's Ginny doing here? When was this?"

However, as he moved next to her, he saw, surprisingly, that it was Harry's mum, not Ginny, who was standing there. Ron wondered where the memory came from, and his eyes widened as the sallow face of a young Severus Snape appeared out of the darkness.

So many things went through his mind that he didn't pay attention to their conversation too closely. Snape was sending memories of Lily Evans? Why? Was he trying to confuse Harry? Get on his good side?

"Lily," Snape said almost breathlessly as he quickly gathered her close.

Realization hit Ron. Snape was treating Harry's mum the way he'd treated Hermione in the other memories. Did he really feel something for Hermione? What was an act and what was real?

Disgusted, Ron was happy when the scenery faded and he found himself back at Grimmauld Place again. He'd seen enough. He wanted to yell, he wanted to hit something, and he wanted to drink something... anything to release the emotions he felt!

Things weren't like he'd imagined at all. They were much worse. Hermione wasn't being beaten or raped, and he was glad for that, but she was freely living with Snape as his... girlfriend, doing things with him that she shouldn't want to do. He wished she'd at least shown some unease with her situation, but he didn't see any at all.

Forgetting the magazine on the shelf, he stalked over to the fireplace, grabbed a fistful of Floo powder, and tossed it into the grate. "The Three Broomsticks," he said angrily. There was someone he had to talk to. Someone who'd believed in him all along. Someone who might have some good advice for him.

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Severus sat across from Rabastan and stared at the man intently. When nothing was said, he finally asked, "Well?"

""Well' what, Severus?"

"What are you playing at, Rabastan? Why did you give that paper to Hermione?" His voice was low, but the menace underlying his words matched the glint in his eyes.

"I wasn't trying to undermine anything. I just thought the girl should know that I appreciate what she did."

"She did what I told her to," Severus snapped.

Rabastan shook his head. "See, that's where you're wrong, Severus. No matter how I've treated her in the past, she didn't want me to die and really was concerned. I think she'd have done that without you telling her to."

Severus pursed his lips, thinking of what he should say next, as he wasn't exactly certain of Rabastan's motives. "Surely you knew that I've not told her about the things happening with Potter?"

"And why is that?"

Frowning slightly, he replied, "That's not your business. I am doing things as I see fit, and I'll not have you ruining things."

"And now? Still keeping her in the dark?"

"No," he said tersely.

"You know what I think?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"I think, Severus, that you're afraid."

Snape snorted. "Afraid? Are you daft?"

"Oh, yeah, you're brave and all that, but what would you do if you went to bed only to have her refuse you, to look upon you with loathing and fear...like when you first brought her here?" He nodded. "You don't want that to happen. You're getting comfortable with her."

"How dare you presume to know..."

"I've known you for most of my life, have seen you with someone you've cared for before." He sighed and leaned forward, elbows propped on his knees. "You barely glanced at Narcissa the whole time she stayed with you." He nodded towards the curtain. "Your eyes rarely leave her."

"She is my property, and I..." He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you taking such an interest in her, Rabastan? Planning on winning her over?" His hand inched towards his pocket where his wand lay.

"No, I wouldn't do her the dishonor. Not now." He sat back and looked at the ceiling. "I think she cares for you, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Seemed jealous when I mentioned one of your old lovers."

"What lover?" This time his hand did clutch his wand.

"I said no names." He smirked. "And she watches you, too. Same gaze you have for her... sends it right back at you."

Still uncertain what his friend's motives were, but feeling as though he was speaking truthfully, he said, "Regardless of how I may feel for the girl, captor or protector, I will not forget my duties. Neither should you."

Rabastan didn't reply to this, simply stood with a nod and made his way over to his bed in the corner. Severus ran his fingers through his hair, wanting to prolong going to bed. He knew Hermione was still reading, and he wanted to avoid her...especially after the way he'd lost control the night before. With a small smile, he remembered the ingredients he'd bought when he'd gone out earlier. He'd make the citrus scented oil for her as a surprise.

**Southern's Notes:** And I hope you've liked this latest installment. Well, we all figured Ron would eventually learn the truth, but I wonder what he'll do with it now that he knows. Snape seems to be truly falling for his charge... or is it an act? Hmmm...

My beta has been terribly busy lately, and she hasn't had time to look over this just yet. I've proofed it once and will go over it again tomorrow after my mind settles some. I figured I'd rather get the update out instead of letting it sit in her inbox for a week or so. Please forgive any errors (heh, had errors there at first... not a good sign! lol). I shall correct anything I miss when she returns it to me. Cheers.

## Chapter 17

*Chapter 17 of 30*

Harry learns new things, but his joy fades as he realizes his error. Hermione and Severus finally voice their feelings.

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters; just having some fun!

*Thanks go to Charmed\_Nay for the beta read!*

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Harry didn't bother to dust the soot from his robes after he stepped out of the grate. He'd talked to both McGonagall and the headmaster for a long while and had found out many things about Snape and his mother that he'd never known. He was quite uncomfortable with all that he'd learned, but in an odd way, it all fit together and made sense. One thing was for certain: Snape was definitely on the Order's side, not Voldemort's.

Deciding to grab a sandwich, he made his way out into the hall and paused at the stairway. "Ron? You back yet?"

When there was no reply, he carried on to the kitchen and found Kreacher bustling about. "Er... hello," he said uncertainly.

The ugly little elf turned and nodded at him. "Master wants something?"

"I can get it."

Muttering, the elf went about what he was doing and ignored Harry altogether. Sandwich made and juice poured, Harry sat down and chewed absently as he thought about what Dumbledore had told him.

*"So you see, Harry, there is no way that Severus would ever betray you. That would mean that he's betraying her memory." Dumbledore frowned sadly. "I don't think he'll ever get over her either."*

*"Sir, I've been seeing memories that Voldemort's sending, and..."*

*"Ah, yes, Minerva told me about Tom's latest antics. I think you are taking the right approach. Be open about what you see. Severus is a good actor if nothing else."*

*"Do you think it's all an act?" Harry blurted.*

*"Are you saying that you believe your friend and he are engaging in a relationship?"*

*"No, I mean...do you think that he might actually feel something for Hermione? Are you sure it's an act? He's doing things that remind me of what I've seen him do with my mum."*

*Dumbledore was silent for a moment, and then he looked over towards McGonagall. "What do you think, Minerva? You've known him since he was a boy."*

*She pursed her lips, eyes flickering between the portrait and Harry. "I fear he might become attached to her...if he hasn't already."*

*"I knew it!" Harry said, rising from his chair. "But Ron... he'll be devastated. It's bad enough that he already thinks something is going on, but what if something truly does develop?"*

*"Would it be so bad if Severus and Hermione found love?" McGonagall asked.*

*"Yes!" Harry said heatedly. "It's not right."*

*There was a sigh from Dumbledore. "Harry, I think that no matter how Severus feels on the matter, he'll not pursue her further once they get out of this."*

*"How can you be sure?"*

*"He's done it before," McGonagall said. "With your mum."*

*Harry sat back down. "What do you mean?"*

*"When James finally talked her into going on a date to Hogsmeade with him, Severus was hurt, of course, and he talked to her about it. She told him that James had changed, but if he didn't want her to go, she would break the date. He asked it of her."*

*"And she did it?"*

*"Yes."*

*"And then?"*

*McGonagall shook her head sadly. "Lily met Severus that day instead of going to Hogsmeade with her friends. They went out to the Forbidden Forest, but they weren't alone long. Some of his Slytherin friends happened upon them. Most of them made derogatory remarks about her. Severus defended her and dueled with one of his friends. Afterwards, he told her that perhaps that had been a sign...they'd truly grown too far apart and could never be happy in each other's world. So..." Her voice trailed away.*

*"Just like that? He let her go? And she accepted it?"*

*"I'm not certain about all the details, and this might be a little more than what you're wanting to hear, but they made love that day...for what may have been the first time, or not, but it was their last. They agreed to part forever."*

*"He... and she?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Ho-how do you know about this?"*

*"I told her," Dumbledore said softly. "I heard her tearfully recounting this to Remus later that night. I then shared this news with Minerva since your mother was in her house and had worried about them before that point. It seemed he wanted her to be happy and set her free."*

*"And he'll likely do the same thing with Hermione, knowing that a life with Ron would be better for her."*

*"Harry, do you honestly believe that Hermione would return feelings for him?" McGonagall asked.*

*He shrugged. "It could be possible. She's softhearted, that one." Then he laughed. "No, I guess she wouldn't, would she? Loves Ron and has for a while now."*

*"Then you've nothing to really worry about," she said.*

*Harry felt a little relieved, but he was still unsettled. What about Snape's feelings? This thought surprised him deeply. What did he care?*

Startled, he found that his sandwich was gone, as was his drink. How long had he been sitting there? "Ah, Ron, I wish I could talk to you about this," he said softly. "Maybe I'll go round to the Burrow to see what they're up to."

The moment he entered the sitting room again, however, he knew that something wasn't right. He'd left the cabinet open and the Pensieve out in his rush to go to Hogwarts with McGonagall. "Good thing Ro..." His words died in his throat. There was a magazine...Hermione's Muggle magazine...on the counter next to the Pensieve. It hadn't been there before. No, it'd been upstairs, and that could only mean one thing.

"Shite! Ron's been here!"

Heart pounding, palms sweating, Harry quickly checked to see what Ron had witnessed, which made him panic even more. How could he have been so stupid? Why hadn't he been more careful?

"The Burrow," he yelled as he tossed in a handful of Floo powder. The instant the flames turned green, he hopped in and was whooshed away. He nearly toppled over Mrs. Weasley as he entered her kitchen.

"Harry dear, all right?"

"Where's Ron?"

"Gone to get something at your place for his father."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "I was just there and didn't see him."

"Is something wrong? What is it?" she asked worriedly.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley had come in when he heard their raised voices.

"Ron's gone," he said simply. "I've got to find him. Have to explain."

"What are you on about?"

"I can't really say, but he found out something that he shouldn't have, and I'm afraid of what he might do."

"If this has to do with my boy, you need to tell me!" Mrs. Weasley said firmly.

"Evening, Potter," Draco said from the doorway.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"I mean... what are you doing down here? Anyone could come and see you."

"I've put a hex on the grate, windows, and doors. Anyone who doesn't know the Malfoys are here won't be able to get in or see in until one of us tells them to enter," Arthur said proudly.

Harry nodded and waved his hand dismissively. "I'll be back later."

"You can't just leave, son. Tell us everything."

"No, I can't!"

"I'll go with you," Draco offered.

Both Weasleys and Harry turned to gaze at him incredulously.

"No thanks," Harry said crisply, grabbing some Floo powder. "I'll be back once I've found him and tell you all that I can."

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"Severus?" Hermione called tentatively. She'd been sleeping when he'd gone to bed the night before...if he'd even been there at all...and she'd woken alone. The old infirmary was cold and quiet, giving her a feeling of foreboding. She'd never been left completely alone before.

Deciding to put off looking around until she'd been to the loo, she walked across the room and opened the door, slipping inside and closing it. She locked it for good measure and went over to the sink to wash her face and brush her teeth.

"Where is it?" she said aloud as she searched for her toothbrush.

"In the second drawer next to mine," Severus said from her far left.

Her scream rent the air, and her heart thumped wildly. "What are you doing?" she yelled, holding a hand to her chest as if trying to keep her heart from escaping.

"I'm having a bath." He smirked. "Did you think that I never bathe?"

"In the dark? I thought nobody was here!" She pulled her eyes away from his wet, bare chest and turned towards the sink again to get her toothbrush. However, her eyes found his reflection in the mirror.

"There's light from the window," he said as he passed his lathered flannel over his arms.

"Not very much," she commented. "You know, you needn't be so dark and mysterious all the time," she added in an attempt to lighten the situation. "This will only add to the rumor that you're truly a vampire."

He chuckled and began to rinse himself. "If I'd been a vampire, I'd have already given you the bite of death."

It was her turn to laugh. She was glad his foul mood had finally lifted. He'd been very angry the day before when he'd found her talking to Rabastan, and even after, when they'd talked over all that had been happening with Harry, his tone had been brusque. At least he'd filled her in on everything...or mostly everything anyway. Perhaps now she could ask him what she'd been wanting to.

"This is a first," he commented.

"What is?"

"The fact that you're in here while I'm having my bath. Make a habit of keeping Potter and Weasley company as well?"

She rinsed her mouth before turning to face him squarely. "I hope you aren't being serious."

In a surprising move, he stood, causing her to look away quickly...but not before she saw his naked body...water sliding down his pale skin, muscled legs, a dark thatch of hair surrounding his seemingly erect penis.

"Severus..."

"From your reaction to a nude male, I'd say that you haven't," he concluded, reaching for a towel. "And, no, I wasn't serious. I was simply making conversation."

"I shouldn't have stayed," she said, turning and easing towards the door.

"Hermione, I..."

When he stopped and said nothing else, she fled the room and went to the fire-lit grate, hoping the flames would ease her shivering. What had she been thinking to stay in there? Why hadn't he asked her to leave? Why had her pulse increased when she saw his body, mentally wishing she could have had a moment more to gaze at him without his knowing?

A click of the door told her that he'd come into the room where she was. A moment later, she heard the soft steps of his bare feet moving towards her. "I want to show you something," he said, finally drawing her gaze away from the fire.

"What?" she asked curiously, taking in his appearance. His hair was still damp, and a few glistening drops fell from a few of its ends, making a watery stain on his grey bathrobe. He only beckoned to her, and she followed him towards his makeshift laboratory.

Severus lifted a stoppered bottle from the counter. "Last night... I couldn't sleep, so I made this for you." He thrust the glass into her hand and looked away as she unstopped it to smell it.

"My fragrance, you've captured it perfectly," she said with an appreciative smile as the light, citrus scent wafted in the air. "Thank you so much for this."

"I am pleased you like it."

She sensed that he wanted to say something more, so she waited, dabbing some of the liquid onto her wrists.

"There is a brew on the end that is settling. It's the same scent, but you can use it to wash your hair," he said finally.

"Thank you." After an awkward pause, she asked, "Where is Rabastan? The others?"

"Summoned."

"Oh." She didn't like the expression on his face. "Is something wrong?"

"I am not certain." He brushed by and went to their room, her on his heels.

"There's something you aren't telling me."

"Lots of things actually."

"I know!" she said loudly in frustration. "Why?" Hermione quickly turned around when he dropped his bathrobe to change into his clothes.

"We've been lucky so far," he said. "I am warring between resuming your Occlumency lessons and simply modifying some things in your mind."

"No! Don't you dare mess with my mind!"

He touched her shoulder, causing her to turn around and face him. Thankfully, he was fully dressed. "It's an option we must consider. More and more, the Dark Lord has mentioned you, enjoying how we are thwarting Potter." He frowned. "Some things haven't been right, Hermione. Rabastan... Anyway, I am afraid he'll see things in your mind that he shouldn't."

"Well, start my lessons again then."

"You aren't good enough to hide something effectively. Not yet. He would know you were trying to hide something, pursue it, and eventually find out what we don't want him to know." He sat down on the bed. "I've discovered a way to Occlude you, but it's quite tricky, and if I happen to not be with you, it wouldn't work."

"So, you want to modify my memories."

He sighed and lay back on the bed, gazing up at the ceiling. "I don't know what I want."

His voice sounded so strained and soft that she felt sorry for him and wished she could ease his burden somehow. She sat next to him and looked down at his face. "I know if I tried harder, I could learn Occlumency." She smiled. "You know me, I don't like to fail at anything, and it just might be enough to protect us when you aren't with me to Occlude me like you said." He simply gazed at her intently, and she couldn't help remembering his eyes as they met hers the night he was on top of her, grinding his body against hers that first time.

Her stomach tingled as the memory played in her mind. What would it be like to be his lover? Truly his lover. She remembered how they'd lost control only a couple of days before, him mostly, but her also. The argument had led to snogging and then to a talk. Would he refuse her if she asked him to go farther?

*Don't even think about that, Hermione. Ron. He's the one for you.*

Unfortunately, she wasn't all that certain about that any longer. Ron didn't fill her mind as much as Severus did. How could she be faithful to him when her mind wouldn't allow it any longer? And just what did her heart have to say about things? She sighed. Once she was free, things would go back to normal. Severus would move on, so would she, and this would eventually just be a memory.

He sat up suddenly, eyes level with hers. "Hermione, I just entered your mind, and you had no idea I was there."

Flushing instantly, she tried to look away from his questioning gaze; however, his fingers on her chin forced her to stay still. "W-what did you see?"

Closer he came, his eyes flicking toward her lips, and then she felt his lips pressing against hers hesitantly. It wasn't the confident, brusque kiss that they'd perfected and displayed to others. Nor was it the passionate kiss that exploded between them upon occasion. It was something different entirely. It was soft, it was warm, it was intoxicating. His tongue moved languidly with hers, exploring and tasting. Of their own volition, her hands slid up his chest and rested on either side of his face, pulling him closer still.

She felt her body being gently guided back to the bed, and she didn't fight it. Hermione wanted the kiss to not stop. One of her hands moved down and around his waist while the other slid behind his neck. His hands, though, weren't so immobile. One was beneath her, rubbing her back, and the other glided over her bare thigh. His lips finally left hers and traveled to her throat, enabling her to catch her breath and then moan as his mouth brought about delightful sensations.

"Hermione," he said, voice rumbling in her ear. "This will have to stop."

"I... But why?"

"I want you."

She was silent. He was serious. What did she want? Ron's face flitted before her, and she exhaled deeply. This had to stop. If it didn't, she'd lose her heart to him.

However, she breathlessly said, "I want you, too."

"Whatever we might want, Hermione, we can't take that next step." He moved back a little to look into her eyes. "Do not be offended. Make no mistake," he ground against her, his erection firmly pressing against her belly, "there is nothing wrong with you. You are everything that... If we do this, the consequences will be too much."

"I can deal with choices I've made," she said defiantly. And she would. If she could just have this... only this to remember him by once they parted, she would be satisfied. Ron need never know. *But you'll know*, a voice whispered.

In that moment, his eyes softened, and she thought that he'd relent. His words disappointed her. "I find it hard to deal with certain choices at times, and there are some mistakes that I vowed to never make again." He pressed his lips against hers in a soft, chaste kiss. "I am sorry."

And then he was gone, leaving her to reflect on what had just happened. He was right. They shouldn't let things truly go that far. What had she been thinking? What had happened to her since she'd come to stay with him? What would Ron say? The citrus fragrance that he'd made for her assailed her nostrils once more, and she smiled. Whatever happened in the future would happen. Even if that meant never finding out what she sometimes thought about.

What mistakes did he not want to make again? And just how had she, of all people, been able to affect him in such a way? His eyes, once black and cold, now seemed much warmer. What she needed to do was soul searching. At the moment, she was someone she didn't recognize at all.

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"Miss Brown," McGonagall said sternly, "I will ask you once more. Where was Mr. Weasley going?"

"I don't know!" she said, arms crossed over her chest.

The tear tracks on her cheeks were nearly drying, and Harry had the urge to shake her and force her into talking. Angrily, he said, "You're lying!"

"I'm not!"

"Yeah?" He whipped out his wand and was pleased to see her recoil.

"Potter," McGonagall said shakily, uncertain what he was about to do.

In a move that Snape would be proud of, he pointed his wand at her and said, *Legilimens*."

To his surprise, it worked. He was suddenly seeing things that were definitely not from his memories. And there it was... Ron and Lavender kissing and talking. He could feel her happiness and anger that he'd come to see her, yet was leaving to find Hermione. Other things began to flash before his eyes, and he could feel her desperately trying to push him from her mind, but before she could, a scene of her conjuring a map for Ron and him pointing to a section came to him. He pulled out of her mind.

"Where did you learn to do that?" McGonagall asked, clearly shocked.

"Snape," he replied.

Lavender looked frightened and scooted back. "He's... he's going after her, Granger," she admitted. "But not before he gets someone to go with him. He said he couldn't show up empty handed and was going to trade someone for her." The tears began falling again. "He used me. It's always about *her*."

Harry ignored her. "I know where he's going," he said. "I'm going to go after him."

"Miss Brown, you are dismissed," she said, adding, "but we will discuss your punishment tomorrow." Once the girl was gone, she turned to Harry again. "You cannot go alone." She brought a hand up to tame her long hair, which had been let down for the evening.

"I'll have to, won't I?"

"Harry, I beg you. Please trust Remus to help you. What of Bill Weasley or Arthur?" She nodded. "I'm certain Arthur would jump at the chance to help in some way."

"I can't believe I was so stupid! This is all my fault!" he said, angry with himself.

"It is," she agreed. "I have played my part in this as well, and right now, I'm asking you to please talk to Arthur Weasley. Let him give you advice."

Nodding, Harry said, "I think I'll talk to Lupin first and then Mr. Weasley."

"And Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"While I don't exactly... approve of what you did, I must say you make me proud."

He was embarrassed to see that her eyes were shiny. "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"Off with you. Keep me posted."

"Yes, ma'am."

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**Southern's Notes:** I'm sorry this is a bit short, but the next part shouldn't be separated.

## Chapter 18

*Chapter 18 of 30*

Ron's plan becomes known, and Hermione has to make a decision--one that will change her future forever.

**Disclaimer:** Still having fun with JKR's characters (and still not making any Galleons!).

*Thanks go to Charmed\_Nay, who has been working way too many hours each week, for the beta job!*

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Ron Apparated near the Burrow and made his way through the wards undetected. He quickly slipped inside the old shed to get his broom and the old one he used to ride before his parents gifted him with the new one after he'd made Prefect. After mounting his and placing the other beneath his arm, he craftily made his way up to a window where the Malfoys were staying, the night helping to hide him from anyone that might be looking out.

As luck would have it, only Draco was in the room, his parents obviously below still, talking with the others. He flew over and tapped on the glass, smirking as the boy inside looked over to the window in terror at first before relaxing.

"Weasley, what are you doing out here?" he asked when he opened the window. "Potter was just here looking for you."

"I don't want to talk about him right now."

"Lovers quarrel then?" Draco asked with a snicker.

Ron drew his wand out quickly. "I've a question for you."

Looking at his wand with wide eyes, Draco asked, "What's that?"

"Were you serious earlier when you said that you wished you could help out?"

Draco nodded. "I'm sick of being stuck here. I want to do something to...hang on! Are you asking for my help?" There was suspicion in his voice. "You said you didn't trust me."

"I don't, not really, but you can prove yourself." He put away his wand and extended the spare broom towards Malfoy. "Come with me and help me find where they are keeping Hermione."

"Are you mad? I'm not going there!"

"Look, you just need to show me where it is. I know you're a coward. You don't have to get too close." He shrugged. "You can fly back here after with your tail between your legs for all I care. Leave the rest to me. I just need your help in finding it. I've got a map and have an idea about where it is, but you'll know the area when you see it."

The blond mulled this over. "This would prove that my family truly is trying to be helpful," he said finally. "But my father and mother have already told the Order all we know about where it is. Shouldn't you get them to help you?"

"They're sitting on their arses, and meanwhile, Snape's using Hermione more and more, fucking with her mind and body! I have to save her. Now! I can't wait on Harry and the others. It's obvious she's not on the top of their priority list."

And that was the truth. Harry knew what was happening, and yet, he'd not said or done anything about it. The git! Ron blamed him nearly as much as anyone else. Like Draco said, with what the Malfoys had told them, they could have found the place by now and taken on the lot!

Nervously, Draco said, "All right. Just let me leave a note for my mum."

"No. I don't want them coming to mess this up. Get on the broom and come on."

"You call this a broom?" he said with a sneer.

"Don't even go there," Ron warned, gazing at him fiercely.

"Fine. You lead to this place your map says, and once we're there, I'll see what looks familiar. After that, I'm coming here, Weasley. I can't go back inside there."

"Thought as much, you git. Come on."

The first thing he'd do is hex Snape...make him pay for what he'd been doing...and then he'd deal with Hermione. Hopefully, there wouldn't be too many others there. He'd stalk the place first and see what he could before moving in. Hermione was obviously under some sort of spell or potion. He'd take her off where they could be alone and try to sort her out before returning to the Burrow with her.

He thought of Lavender and how she'd said she would always do anything for him and how she loved him...and only him...and would be waiting for him to come to his senses where Hermione was concerned. If he could force himself to love Lavender the way he loved Hermione, things would be so much simpler, wouldn't they? Why couldn't he? It wasn't as though she couldn't please him... though she was quite annoying. Was he a fool for caring so much about Hermione? How could she not fight Snape's spell? Shouldn't she know deep down that it was wrong? She'd seemed too at ease and not like anyone under a bloody spell.

*Ah, I suppose she wouldn't know though. The git's probably using dark magic, and she did have trouble lifting that Imperius when the fake Moody taught us. She'll be so upset once she realizes what she's been doing, been letting him do. I'll be there to help her through it though.*

However, another thought came to him. Could he handle touching her and having her after Snape had been all over her? Would he see Snape's greasy hands touching her each time he'd kiss her or hold her? Ron shuddered and pushed those thoughts away. He'd find a way to get over it eventually. Right now, Hermione needed him, and if he had to trade Draco Malfoy for her safety, he would, and he wouldn't feel the least bit guilty about it either. The prat was a coward and wasn't doing this to help her; he was doing it for his family's fate...nothing more.

This was war. So be it if there were a few casualties. Ron simply wanted to make certain that his Hermione wasn't one of them. Once she was sorted out, he'd confront Harry and the others. He wondered exactly how many people had known about what was going on? Who'd been keeping this from him?

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Harry crossed his arms and watched as Lupin made himself comfortable. There were so many things he wanted to ask the man...so many things he wanted to be angry about. He knew that now wasn't the time, though, and he tried to calm himself.

"What's the emergency, Harry?" Lupin asked.

"There are some things we need to talk about, but we'll have to do that later. For now, I'm going to let you in on some things that you haven't been aware of."

"Sounds serious."

"It is. Voldemort has been sending me memories to view in a Pensieve. Professor McGonagall and I have been dealing with them."

"That was very foolish. You should have told us!" Lupin said incredulously.

"We didn't see the point, and trust me, we analyzed each of the memories for clues."

"What are they about?"

"Voldemort is trying to make me think that Hermione's turned against me and is having an affair with Snape. He's sending memories that Snape's giving him to show me...all of them where she and Snape are... quite close."

"Good God."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, so you see why I couldn't show Ron."

"Of course. But that doesn't mean you couldn't have told me!"

"We've figured out that Snape and Hermione are faking it. Making Voldemort think they are doing his bidding. If you look closely, you can tell that it's all an act. So, it wasn't reason enough for us to tell everyone. Not when it would only end up hurting Hermione in the long run." He frowned. "McGonagall has also been showing me memories of Snape when he was younger...Snape and Mum."

Lupin let out a sharp breath. "Harry..."

"Why did you never tell me?"

"That...that was Severus' business to tell."

"And mine!" he retorted hotly. "She was MY mum!"

"And capable of making her own choices without having to answer to her son."

"I deserved to know! If I'd known that, so many things would have made sense to me!"

Lupin shook his head. "Well, you know now. There's no point in acting like a child about it. We can talk more on that later. What's the emergency? Surely this isn't it!"

"Ron's seen the Pensieve... and some memories. He's gone after her."

"Shite."

"Exactly. What's worse is that he's told Lavender that he's going to trade someone for Hermione. I have no idea what he's up to."

"He's snapped! They'll never let him out of there alive, regardless of his foolish plan."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and turned away. "I need help...someone I can trust... you."

"Certainly. Where do we start?"

"Do you think we should talk to Mr. Weasley or Bill about this? Maybe ask them along?"

"Harry, I think you'd be a fool not to. There's no telling what Ron's going to get himself into or what's waiting for him. Voldemort himself might be there. I say we get the Order involved, all of them!"

He turned back to face Lupin. "Not everyone. I don't think Mrs. Weasley or..."

"I agree." Lupin thought for a moment. "Bill, Arthur, Alastor, and Kingsley."

"And we will make it clear that Snape's not to be harmed. He's on our side," Harry said confidently.

Lupin nodded. "They know he's been giving us information."

"But they might be a bit wand happy, too." He smiled and extended a hand, which Lupin grasped. "Thank you."

"There's no need to thank me, Harry. I will always be here for you and try to help you as much as I can."

"I know... for my dad."

"No, Harry, for you," Lupin said firmly.

Harry nodded in appreciation of his openness. "You get the Weasleys, and I'll get Moody and Kingsley." He paused. "And Lupin?"

"Yes?"

"Try not to alert Mrs. Weasley that anything is going on. She already knows Ron is missing and wouldn't stay put if she knew we were going after him. I told her I'd be by to let her know something as soon as I could."

"So that's why you're sending me to the Burrow." Lupin grinned. "I'll meet you back here as soon as I can."

"Right then. See you."

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Hermione felt the bed shift as he slipped in beside her. He'd been careful to make no noise as he'd entered and undressed. If she'd been asleep, she'd never have been aware of him. Sleep hadn't come to her, though, as she'd been thinking about him, about Ron, about many things. She kept her eyes shut tightly even as one of his hands softly caressed her hair and retreated.

They both wanted to experience each other, and yet, he wouldn't do it. She knew he wanted to, however, as he'd explained as much to her. She wanted to as well. There was undeniably something between them. The urge to explore that and to know him was quite overwhelming at times. And she wasn't fooling herself into thinking it would be anything lasting. Once she got out of this...if ever...she would continue on with her life and goals as she had before.

Unable to resist, she scooted closer to him to place an arm around his waist and her head on his chest. He must have thought her to do it while she slept, for an arm tightened around her, and he whispered, "What will I do with you, Hermione?" Then she felt his face in her hair, heard him inhale deeply, and felt a small kiss pressed softly against her head.

In all her life, she'd never felt so needed. What sort of man would he be if he'd not led the life he'd chosen? Would he be a tender lover, considerate husband, and loving mate? Would the rude man she'd known to be her professor have never existed? "Oh, Sev..." she said with a sigh, hugging him more tightly. He stiffened beneath her. "Just hold me."



"What did you call me?"

She'd meant to say Severus, but only the first part had come out. However, he shouldn't be so uptight about it. If anything, he should be more annoyed that she was actually awake and had heard what he'd said and felt what he'd done. "Surely someone's called you that before."

"Y-es." His voice cracked.

She tilted her head up to look at him. "Are you all right?"

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" The steel was back in his voice, and his expression was inscrutable.

But she'd heard the emotion in his voice. Had his first love called him that? "I couldn't sleep," she said softly before pressing a kiss to his bare chest.

"Hermione, don't."

She did it again, this time opening her mouth and moving her tongue over his cool flesh. The shudder she felt go through him was delicious. Emboldened, she did it again, moving over to his flat nipple and taking that into her mouth, laving it and sucking lightly.

His gasp was loud. "What... Stop."

Hermione released him with a small popping noise and a smile. "I just want to feel close to you, to know you."

"When this is over, you will regret much of what we've done already," he said, gently putting her away from him. "I don't want you to look back on this time and loathe me. I..." His voice trailed away.

"I could never loathe you. Not now that I know you."

"But you just said it yourself. You don't know me. You only want to know me, think you know me." When she tried to get closer, he held her off. "I am but a man, Hermione. Would you have me use you and cast you off as soon as I am able? That's all that would come of it, and I've come to respect you too much to take advantage of that."

"You would have made love to me that night if I'd allowed it."

"I'd had too much to drink, and my mind was clouded, which is a mistake I'll not make again."

"Severus, I know you don't love me, and I'm not asking for that. I just... We're here and we're adults. I should have said yes that night, but I was confused and just didn't know what I wanted."

He sighed. "You still don't know what you want."

"I just want to be with you...for now. When the time comes to leave you, I'll go on and not look back or blame you for anything."

"Hermione, you've been locked here with me for a long time now. Whatever loyalty and curiosity you might feel..."

She interrupted his words with a brief kiss. "Can you just hold me? Make me feel safe? When I'm close to you, I feel so... so good. Please." Relief washed over her as he pulled her back against him and held her close. She placed a leg between his and cuddled closely. "Thank you."

Even though he didn't reply, she knew that he'd wanted to hold her, too. Things had changed between them. Too many days and nights of pretending had made her comfortable with him, had allowed her to see him as more than just Severus Snape. No matter what she told him or herself, she knew deep down that she'd never forget him and would always hold him dear to her heart.

"Are the others gone still?" she asked after a long moment.

"Yes, though Bella and Rodolphus won't be back. They've been sent on a mission for the Dark Lord," he said.

"What of Rabastan? You seemed worried about him earlier. What were you going to say?"

There was a long pause, and she almost thought he'd not answer her. Then finally, he spoke. "Lately, it seems as if the Dark Lord is displeased with him. I am uncertain why this could be. Perhaps he's sensed something in him that none of us could possibly know. Everything he does, it's not good enough...he gets sent on dangerous missions, is punished excessively... and so on."

"Why wouldn't he just kill him at once?"

"I've been wondering that as well."

"Severus, how is it that you are in such good graces?"

"How do you think?" His voice was suddenly cold, and she felt him try to pull away.

Clinging to him, she said, "I know why he thinks you to be his man. I know that, but what I mean to say is why are you not treated this way? Like Rabastan? In fact, I've seen all the others go through horrible things, and yet, you..." Her voice trailed away. *Wouldn't it be horrible if you've been hoodwinked, Hermione? What if he's truly Voldemort's man and has been playing you like a violin since you've been here?*

Impossible. She would feel it if something were wrong.

Severus spoke then. "I am not always without my punishments, Hermione, and he doesn't make a habit of harming us. We get rewards often enough. What do you think you're doing here with me?"

She huffed slightly. "I think his methods are horrible."

"He retains the respect of his followers by instilling fear. That doesn't mean that he is always torturing everyone. Quite the opposite. However, he brooks no room for many failures or disappointments."

"If he's such a tyrant, why would people continue to join him?"

"Some are forced, Hermione. What would you do if you were told to do his bidding or watch your entire family be murdered? It's not so simple as it sounds in most cases."

"I wish that things would be different."

"As do I."

A comfortable silence settled in, and they both fell asleep. Much later, there was a loud bang that startled them both awake. Severus was up before she realized what was happening.

"Get dressed! Now!"

She grabbed a nearby robe and tossed it on over her nightgown. There was another loud bang. "What's going on?"

"The wards!" he said, completely dressed and stalking forward. "Someone's breached them!"

"God! Severus, wait!" Was it the Ministry? Other Death Eaters? The Order?

"Silence! We don't know who it is," he said warningly, grabbing her arm and making her stay behind him as he led her out into the darkened main room. In a whisper, he added, "Whoever it is has no idea we've been alerted. They will be entering soon. Come, I will hide you."

"No!" she said firmly. "I won't leave you."

"Be quiet, girl! Your mouth could cost us our lives."

She remained silent as he dragged her to the broom closet next to the bathroom. When he pushed her inside, he said, "I'll be back for you. The door will remain hidden to anyone but me."

As he closed the door, she reached out and grabbed his hand, saying nothing and simply squeezing it. He nodded and then he was gone. It was then that she realized her entire body was shaking. Who was there? Was she about to be saved or killed?

*Saved.*

If it were the Order or Aurors, what would happen to Severus? She thought of Harry's anger and loathing for Snape. Severus might be killed! Should she do as he said and stay there, or should she try to go help him? But how could she help him with no wand? And what if it was someone who wouldn't care about hexing or killing her? The Lestranges were out. Maybe they'd come back to finish them. That could have been their mission!

"No," she whispered, "they wouldn't have set off the wards."

She shrunk back against the wall of the closet, straining to hear anything that might happen. She didn't have to wait long, for there was a loud slam and a bang right after, repeated by another bang and a thud on the floor. She'd seen the flashes of light beneath the crack in the door and stifled her surprised yelps. Who'd been hexed? Was Severus all right? Who were the intruders?

"Got you now, you slimy git!"

Ron.

"Get up! Face me!" he yelled angrily.

Hermione barely recognized his voice. It was filled with such anger, and it seemed deeper somehow. Surely she'd not been away that long *Dh, no! Severus!* She had to stop him from hurting Severus. It was obvious that he'd struck Severus down, but how? Severus had been expecting someone to burst in. Why wouldn't he have the upper hand?

"Using Draco as a shield then? I might have known you were a coward, Weasley," Severus said coldly.

This puzzled Hermione. Why would Draco be with Ron? Had the Malfoys asked the Weasleys for help? She needed to make herself known, but she was afraid to leave without knowing exactly what was happening.

"It's what he's good for, isn't it?" Ron said. "Not such a big man without your wand, eh, Snape?"

"I'm not afraid of you, boy."

"Where is she?" Ron asked again, voice rising.

"Who?"

"You know who! Hermione!"

"She's not here."

"I'll trade you Malfoy for her. Tell me where she is."

"No."

"Have it your way then, Snape. Knew we couldn't trust your arse from the beginning."

Hermione heard the determination in his voice and knew that he was about to do something she wouldn't approve of. She had no choice but to show herself. As quickly as she could, she threw the door open and stumbled out into the now candlelit room.

"Ron! Stop!"

His wand was aimed at Snape, a deadly gleam in his eyes. The instant he saw her, his eyes softened.

"He's got you locked in a fucking closet? Bastard! Come here, Hermione."

She looked between Severus and Ron and knew that if she didn't go to Ron it would enrage him more, and then she'd be responsible for Severus getting hexed...or worse. She moved towards Ron and heard Severus snort. When she looked back at him, she could tell that he was hurt.

"And you were saying earlier?" he asked mockingly, anger evident in his voice.

"You've addled her mind for a last time, Snape!" Ron said firmly, holding out his free hand towards her. His eyes moved to Hermione for an instant, and he said, "I saw the memories. I know what he's been doing to you. Has you under a spell."

"Ron, listen to me," she said softly. "I can explain."

"No need. We'll work through everything. All right? You're safe now, and we'll send him off to Azkaban."

Draco moaned, causing Hermione to look down upon him. She gasped. "He's hurt! What did you do?"

"Snape hexed him right when we entered."

"Weasley, your gallant knight, used him as a shield upon entering."

"Worked, didn't it?" Ron said smugly.

Hermione bent down to check Draco's head. "He's bleeding. I can heal him. Where's his wand?"

Ron slipped his hand into his wand pocket and pulled out Snape's ebony wand. "Here's the git's wand. I dropped Draco's outside someplace when I made him come in. He bloody wanted to take off. I couldn't let him. Leverage, see."

The way he spoke, Hermione knew that he wasn't thinking straight. If anything sudden happened, Ron would hurt someone...possibly even himself. She took Snape's wand and pointed it at Draco for a moment and then swiftly aimed it at Ron, hitting him with a Stunning Spell.

"I'm sorry," she said, tears in her eyes.

Severus was at her side in an instant, snatching his wand from her and looming over Ron. He seemed shocked and pleased.

"He would have hurt someone," she said softly, not quite believing what she'd done. "I..." She'd chosen Snape over Ron, hadn't she? She closed her eyes painfully. This couldn't be happening. "Severus..."

"Silence. I'll deal with this. Help Draco," he ordered, reaching down and taking Ron's wand from his grasp. "Here." He handed the wand to her a moment later. "There is some Blood-Replenishing Potion in our stores. You'll need it."

"All right."

"He's really messed things up," Severus said, shaking his head. "He's lucky that nobody else is about."

However, as luck would have it, Rabastan Portkeyed into the room in the next instant. He looked around incredulously, taking in Ron's Stupefied form and Hermione's tending to Draco's head. "What the bloody hell is going on here? What did I miss?"

"Weasley came here attempting to trade Draco for Hermione."

"Shite."

"Indeed."

"Want I should take care of the whelp for you?" he asked, stepping towards them.

"No," Severus said. "Help Hermione with Draco."

"Draco must've told him where we were, little bastard. Never could withstand much pressure, that one," he mumbled, flicking his wand to levitate Draco and bring him over to one of the extra beds.

Hermione quickly grabbed a few potions and bandages, joining him at Draco's bedside. She then noticed that Rabastan had a bloodstain on his shoulder. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'll be fine. Just a little nick, this."

"Sure?"

"Aye, lass, but thanks."

She used her wand to clean away the blood from Draco's head and poured an astringent solution on his wound, causing him to moan loudly. "It's not too bad. Thankfully. With all the blood lost, I thought his wound was deep. Still, though, please hand me that bottle of Blood-Replenishing Potion. I'll give him a swig of it."

"Here you are," he said.

"Draco, I'm going to give you a bit of potion," she said softly, tilting his head up slightly with Rabastan's help. He drank it down without coaxing. "Good," she said, quickly wiping some salve on his wound to close it completely. "It won't get infected. I'm not sure of the exact spell, so I'll just put this bandage on until Severus can deal with it." A flick of the wand saw the cloth closed over his wound.

"Good work."

She smiled and went about checking to make sure nothing else was wrong with him while Rabastan walked over to where Severus had Ron. Hermione dared not look back. The accusation in Severus' eyes when she'd gone towards Ron instead of him kept playing over and over in her mind. Once Ron came to, he would probably have the same look in his eyes. Whose hurt look would haunt her more? Why had she done this? Ron would have given her the freedom she'd been wanting!

Hermione was so frustrated that she began to cry softly, wiping her eyes as quickly as she could, though not getting each of her tears before they fell. This was terribly wrong. She should have just... What?

"All right?" It was Severus.

She looked up and shrugged. "I don't know. I'm so... confused."

"You made the right decision, Hermione," he said softly, kneeling down next to her, opening his arms for her.

And all she wanted was to be held, to be told that all would be well. She fell into his arms and cried openly, enjoying the way his hands rubbed her back and hair, the way his deep voice soothed her. It all had happened so quickly. Ron had been so enraged that he obviously hadn't been thinking clearly. She'd done the first thing that came to mind...to save everyone from harm. Deep down, she knew that Severus wouldn't hurt Ron, and she wasn't sure what had happened to Draco, but he'd needed help. Ron, however, would have done something, being so edgy.

"Sssh, love, don't cry," he said softly, pulling back to look at her. His black eyes were tinged with compassion as he wiped her cheeks with his thumbs. Then his lips were on hers, softly leading hers in a reassuring, gentle kiss. It was over all too quickly, and she heard Rabastan's snickering from across the room.

"Looks like she's moved on, eh, lad?"

She turned towards his voice and saw that Ron was sitting up, chained to the wall, and staring at her. There was loathing, disbelief, and hurt in his gaze. What had she done? "Oh, no..." The world began to spin before her eyes.

Severus pulled her up and carried her to their bedroom and placed her on the edge of the bed, kneeling between her legs and forcing her to look into his face. "Hermione, get yourself together. Now isn't the time for this."

"Did you see how he looked at me?" she asked mournfully, hating herself.

"He was a fool to come here," Severus said. "Had Rabastan not come home, I might have been able to help them. However, now, I don't know what will become of him. I

must go to the Dark Lord about this."

"NO!" Both Ron and Draco would be killed! It would be her fault! Voldemort would torture them for information...he'd send Harry the memories to show him what a traitor she'd turned out to be. "You can't. Please."

"Keep your voice down," he hissed, holding her still. "It is out of my hands." With a small kiss, he stood and stepped away from her. "You will not regret this."

But she already did. She'd doomed Ron...Ron, who'd done nothing but loved her and had tried to save her. Would she ever be able to forgive herself? Her gaze went down to the wand still clutched in her hand. Ron's wand. She knew that she should use it to help him... before Voldemort came.

"*Accio wand*," Severus said smoothly. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that." With a turn of his heel, he was gone, leaving her alone in misery. She heard him walk over to Rabastan and tell him something, but she couldn't make out what.

The very air around her seemed to be throbbing in her ears, and her heart was beating madly, the word ~~failure~~ repeatedly sounded in her mind. The bile in her stomach forced its way out of her mouth, and she fell to the floor bonelessly, unable to remain lucid.

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**Southern's Notes:** And this is what being hotheaded will get you (tsk, tsk, ickle Ronniekins). Hmm. I can't say much, else I'll give things away. More up soon.

## Chapter 19

*Chapter 19 of 30*

Harry has a chance to show his leadership ability while Voldemort questions Hermione about Ron and Draco. And just who has breached the wards now?

**Disclaimer:** I'm using JKR's characters for a bit of twisty plot that I've been thinking up. I'll return her lot when I'm done...no need to sue.

*Thanks go to my beta, Charmed\_Nay, who manages to work way too much and still finds time for me when I need her.*

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When Harry stepped back through the grate into Grimmauld Place, he did a double take to make certain he'd not accidentally gone to the Burrow. The room was filled with Weasleys, Tonks, the Malfoys, and other Order members.

"Uh, Lupin?" he questioned, meeting the man's bashful gaze.

"Sorry?" Lupin replied uncertainly.

"Harry! What's going on? Tell us!" Molly Weasley said upon seeing him.

Behind him, the Floo activated again, and he barely had time to step aside before Moody followed him through.

"Guarding your grate, Potter?" the man asked gruffly.

"I was just..."

"It's good to see you vigilant even though you just left my place," Moody interrupted. "What's this lot doing here?"

"That's what I'm wondering," Harry said in annoyance.

He strode forward. "Lupin, what's all this?"

"Ah, well, see..."

"Harry," Molly called from his side, tugging on his sleeve. "Where's Ron gone?"

"Where's Kingsley?" Lupin asked.

"Wotcher, Harry."

"Potter, I thought you said it would only be the few of us."

"Where's Ron?"

"Everyone shut up!" Harry yelled suddenly, stepping away from Mrs. Weasley's clutches and looking around. "Only a few people are supposed to be here," he said when the room quieted. "Lupin?"

"Seems Molly had a pair of the twins' Extendable Ears."

"And I wouldn't be left behind!"

"Well, what are *they* doing here?" Harry asked in exasperation, pointing towards the Malfoys.

"Draco's gone," Lucius said promptly, stepping forward.

Harry's eyes widened, and his gaze met Lupin's. "Shite."

"I think so, too," the man said.

"Think what?" Lucius asked.

"Er... look, everyone, I appreciate this, but with all of you here..." The grate fired up behind him and cut his words off. He turned to see McGonagall walking through.

"I received a Patronus from Kingsley to meet him here," she said with a shrug, looking at the others. "Keeping things quiet still, are you?"

"Apparently not," Harry retorted.

Arthur Weasley walked forward. "What's the plan, Harry?"

The grate flared emerald green again, and Kingsley came through. "I got here as quickly as I could," he said, his deep voice resonating about the room. "Thanks for the Patronus, Arthur. I'd just missed Potter when I got it."

"Right then," Harry said with a nod, coming to a decision. "If everyone would listen up, I'll fill you all in."

The room was suddenly loud once again as they all conjured chairs and made themselves comfortable. Harry gazed at each determined face before him, mentally deciding who would best do what.

"As you all know, there have been things that Ron, Hermione, and I have been doing that we couldn't really confide to everyone. Dumbledore's work." When nods and murmurs of recognition met his words, he continued. "See, even though Hermione's been gone, Ron and I have still been at it. However, there's a lot you all don't know." Here he paused. What would they say? Would they be angry like Ron?

McGonagall stood. "I just want to let you know that Potter has done as instructed by me in this matter. I thought discretion best."

"Well?" Molly asked impatiently.

"Voldemort..." a collective shudder passed through the room "...has been sending me messages. Memories to play in a Pensieve to be exact."

"Of what?" Molly asked again, unable to contain herself.

"Give him a moment, Molly, and he'll tell us all," Lupin said kindly, trying to defuse the situation before Harry could snap at the woman.

"Of Hermione and Snape," he said with a shrug. "I couldn't show these to Ron... or to any of you."

"Oh, good Lord," Hestia muttered. "You don't mean that he and she...?"

Harry nodded. "It's what it's meant to look like, but Professor McGonagall and I examined everything closely, and we've learned that it's all just an act, Hermione and Snape."

"He means to say that they are hoodwinking You-Know-Who," Lupin put in. "Severus has been sending information to us, helping us. Most of you know that much."

"He murdered Albus," Diggle said angrily. "I don't trust him."

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Harry began, "but I do. Better than that, I trust Hermione's intuition. She's been right about so much."

Molly spoke again. "And Ron, he came across these memories, didn't he? That's what prompted him to leave?"

"And has he taken my boy with him?" Narcissa asked worriedly, leaning into the partial embrace of her husband. "To what end?"

Not wanting to incriminate Ron until he knew the whole story, Harry simply said, "Malfoy would know the area. Probably offered to help. He asked if I needed help earlier."

"But he's not that insane," Narcissa said. "To go there is to go to his death."

"Maybe they didn't think they'd be caught?" Harry offered. When she said nothing, he added, "The point is that I... we... are going after Ron. He's hotheaded sometimes, doesn't think things through, and I can't let him do this alone."

"You should have been honest with him from the beginning," Molly pointed out.

"Mum," Bill began.

"No, she's right," Harry said. "I know that, but now's not the time to point fingers, is it? Want to help us get Ron, Malfoy, and Hermione back safely? Good. Then let me tell you what I found out from Lavender Brown."

"Wut es zis to do with zat girl?" Fleur asked.

"Ron went to her at Hogwarts. She helped him with a map and ... other things."

Mrs. Weasley reddened at this and looked at her husband. Arthur spoke. "And you know where he's going then?"

"Yeah. Where we should have been looking all the while! We've not been trying hard enough to find Hermione... or the Death Eaters." He ran his fingers through his hair. "And I haven't pushed it because I knew she was safe, you know? But that's no excuse. We do this now. Tonight. Whatever happens will..."

"What of your work for Dumbledore?" Kingsley asked. "Is that complete yet?"

"It will be. I need..." He looked around the room and decided to be honest. "Only I can kill Voldemort, so don't put yourselves in danger to try to be noble, but I sure could use some help in getting rid of Nagini."

"His snake, what?"

"I'd love to kill that bitch," Arthur said venomously. "Score to settle, see."

"Look what happened to you last time you clashed!" Molly pointed out.

"She's always with Voldemort, and there's a chance that we might meet up with him tonight."

"Especially if Ron's bollixed something up," George said with a nod, dodging his mother's hand.

"He's telling the truth, Mum," Fred said firmly.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" Harry asked. "If Ron and I have been doing the right things all this time, then the next step is Nagini. Anyone can help out with that."

"She can't bite us all at once, can she?" Fred said cheekily.

McGonagall spoke again. "About Hermione... I want to make it perfectly clear to all of you that no matter what You-Know-Who and his lot might believe, she is one of us and is not to be treated as anything else. What's been happening has been out of her control." Her fierce glare met Molly's narrowed eyes. "And she won't need anyone making her feel the worst for it either."

"She's right," Harry said. "I just hope that Ron can understand that... and why I didn't tell him. I thought I was doing the right thing."

"Bloody do-gooder," Moody grumbled.

"About Snape," Tonks began, looking around, "what do we do with him? You say he's one of us still and has been helping, but how do we treat him? Stun his arse, questions later? Just not hex him at all? What?"

"Yeah, the git's probably going to be flinging hexes at us, won't he?" George asked.

"Pretenses and all that," Fred clarified.

"So long as nobody does anything brash," Kingsley said with a nod. "Even if we have to hex him to keep up pretenses of our own...just don't be deadly or harmful."

"We haven't much time," Harry said, pulling a map from his pocket. "Let's get on with it*Engorgio*."

Lucius Malfoy spoke up. "Severus has been aiding you all this time, you say?"

The man was clearly gobsmacked, and Harry frowned at not having the foresight to ask him and his wife to leave the room.

Narcissa said, "Potter, I appreciate that you want to see the good in someone, but Lucius and I can both assure you that we were witnesses to the living conditions there. Severus and the Mu... the girl did indeed share a bed."

"You are being had," Lucius said firmly. "Severus is the Dark Lord's man...no other's."

Before Harry could speak, Moody asked, "And you're sure about this, are you? Why should we believe *you*?"

"Because our son is there," Narcissa answered vehemently. "We'll not risk his life any more than you would risk Granger's or Weasley's!"

Lucius put a hand on her shoulder to calm her. "Allow me." He stood and moved forward. "Have you a Pensieve?"

"Yes."

"What would you like to know, Potter? What would you like to see?"

Harry looked around the room...some expressions were shocked while others were suspicious. "Everything," he said firmly.

Lucius nodded and turned to his wife. "Cissy, make certain to explain to everyone about the rooms in the old building while I show Potter a few things."

"While you show Potter and me," McGonagall said, rising and joining them, silently daring him to refuse her.

"So be it."

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"My Lord," Severus said, kneeling before his master for a moment.

"What is it?" the man asked perceptively. "What's happened?"

"Young Ronald Weasley and Draco Malfoy have found us."

The Dark Lord stood and towered over Severus. "And the outcome of this finding? Has your girl escaped? What of Rabastan?"

"No, my Lord, she was instrumental in their capture."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, my Lord, and Rabastan returned just after."

"I shall want to see this for myself," he said, piercing Severus' eyes with his own, probing his mind.

Severus gladly replayed what he'd seen, unable to stop the pride he felt that Hermione had chosen him. For a moment, he was certain she'd go to Weasley and try to flee. He would have stopped them of course, but it had worked out so well for them all. Well, all except for Weasley and Malfoy, but that was out of his hands. The berk should never have thought to rescue her alone...much less use Draco in such a way.

"I believe you have succeeded in securing her loyalty, Severus," he said approvingly, rubbing his thin hands together in a gleeful manner. "I cannot wait to see what reaction this will bring about in Potter. It could very well be his destruction."

"I agree, Master."

"Bellatrix has gone to Gringotts to fetch something for me. I want to place it in your keeping, Severusss."

"Of course, my Lord."

"Do you not wish to know what it is?"

"It matters not, my Lord. I will protect whatever it is you choose to give me."

The Dark Lord cackled in amusement. "You've always been valuable to me. I no longer feel it is safe where it is."

"May I ask why, my Lord?"

"You may, but I may choose to not answer."

When nothing else was said, Severus asked, "Do you feel she is disloyal?"

"Not Bella, no. She will die serving only me," he said certainly. He then gave Severus a calculating gaze. "Her brother-in-law has access to that vault, and that doesn't sit well with me. I think Rabastan has been defecting from my ranks, bitter about his stint in Azkaban, you see. Have you not noticed this?"

"No, my Lord," he answered honestly.

"No matter. That is a conversation for another time. There are other things that need attending now. Nagini." He beckoned her closer and said something in Parseltongue. "I shall see you there, Severus. Good work tonight."

"Thank you, my Lord," he said, breathing a sigh of relief as the man Disapparated. Hermione would be safe at least. He pondered what he'd learned about Rabastan before following his master.

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Hermione woke and found herself lying on the bed. Someone...Severus...had placed her there after she'd fainted. It didn't take long for reality to slap her soundly. She'd betrayed Ron. How had this happened? Why had she done this?

When she heard a loud slapping sound, muffled curses, and moaning, she sat up to investigate. *Ron!* Shoving on her shoes, she quickly made her way into the other room. Rabastan was hovering over Ron, who was still chained to the wall, but had obviously been knocked down onto his side. There was a trickle of blood on his brow. As Rabastan raised his hand again, Hermione called out. "NO! Stop it!"

He looked at her in askance, lowering his hand and arching an eyebrow.

"Please don't hurt him."

"You're Snape's woman now," he stated, eyes narrowed.

"Yes." She nodded vigorously. "I know that, but..."

"But?"

"He's my friend, Rabastan." Her heart skipped a beat as she watched his expression, and then she saw his eyes soften. *He trusts me*, she thought in amazement. To her, this was an accomplishment. The man had been so hostile towards her at first, but over time, it seemed they'd become friends...really. Her small triumph was ruined by Ron's livid voice.

"Friend, is it?" Ron asked furiously, sitting up. "Traitor!"

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I couldn't let you..."

"Hurt your lover?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. No, Severus was not her lover, but she'd wanted him to be. She'd turned away from what her heart knew to be right, letting Severus inside instead. "Ron, please."

"Should have just left him to it then!" he said angrily. "Thought I was doing something right on my own for the first time." He flexed against his chains. "You're not worth it!"

When she brought a hand up to her mouth in surprise at his ugly words, Rabastan flicked his wand to silence Ron. "Don't listen to that bugger," he said supportively.

"He's right," she said softly. "What have I done?"

"You've done what's right by Severus, by us all." He nodded towards Draco. "Looks like that one is waking up."

"Can I talk to Ron in private?"

"I ain't lifting that hex from him. Git's got a big mouth."

"Not a problem."

When Rabastan walked over to where Draco was, Hermione sat down and simply stared at Ron. His angry glare told her all she needed to know. He hated her, would never understand why she'd done what she'd done. "I'm sorry. There was no other way," she said in a hushed voice. "I can't explain it to you right now, but I will explain one day. I swear it."

He closed his eyes and turned his head away, as if gazing at her repulsed him. She could see his jaw tensing slightly and his chest shudder, and she wondered briefly if he was trying to stop himself from crying. Not that she blamed him.

"There's more to this than you know, Ron. What you saw..." She paused, uncertain how to word what she wanted to say. At this his head turned back to her, but his eyes were still closed. "I still love you," she said. This opened his eyes, and she could see that his expression had become somewhat softer. "There's no way I can fill you in right now, but please, when the time comes, trust me."

When she reached out to touch his face, he gave her a small nod, and though she could see the mistrust and hurt in his eyes, she knew that he was in a more reasonable state of mind than he'd been when he'd first entered. Now she only had to figure out how to get him out of there safely. And why had he brought Draco there anyway?

"Hermione," Rabastan called.

She scooted back and stood. "Is he all right?"

"Yeah, I had to silence his arse, too," he said with a shake of his head.

"What's he saying?" She feared he'd blurted something Ron or anyone else might have let slip. Hermione wouldn't be able to forgive herself if she was the cause of any others' pain. She'd done enough by getting Ron caught as it was.

"Says you're the one who made his Portkey out of here."

"What?" She looked at Draco incredulously. "Why would you say that?"

Draco opened his mouth and frantically said something that she couldn't understand, as his lips were moving too quickly to read. He seemed frightened and angry.

"Severus says he checked your mind, and there's nothing in it about you doing that. I believe him, too." He smirked. "This one's trying to save his skin, is all."

She tried to think back to the night Draco and his family had fled. What exactly did she remember? She'd been going to the loo and had heard them talking amongst themselves and saw a faint glow from Draco's wand. And then they were gone.

Hermione said, "Well, I don't know what he's playing at, but how could I have made a Portkey? I've not used a wand in months... until tonight!"

"And good wandwork it was, lass," Rabastan said. "In fact, I have to say that..."

*Crack!*

Both Hermione and Rabastan turned to see who'd Apparated in, thinking it was Severus, and she nearly fell back in shock. There in all his glory was the red-eyed, malicious-looking Dark Lord Voldemort. His slitty eyes quickly assessed the situation, and he strode towards her direction, his large snake slithering behind him. She backed away slightly, feeling very afraid. What did he want? Was she to be killed? Where was Severus?

Another crack sounded, lifting her heart, as only two people could use Apparition there at all, and Severus appeared, seemingly all right *At least he's safe*, she thought.

"Am I to understand that you did this?" Voldemort asked, his voice high pitched and cold.

She nodded and gazed back and forth from him to Snape to Rabastan.

The man turned towards Severus and nodded. "I shall speak with our traitor first before the Weasley. Take her out of here."

"Very well, my Lord," Severus said, moving forward to pull Hermione into their room by the elbow.

"Nagini, come," Voldemort said to his snake.

Once inside, Severus pulled her into his arms in attempt to calm her shivering. "You'll be all right."

"I'm so afraid," she admitted softly, voice wavering.

"You've nothing to fear. What you've done tonight proves much to him," he said, leaning back to gaze down into her eyes intently. "He'll not doubt you...doubt us."

She shook her head. "But Ron could be killed or tortured. I didn't want this. I'm afraid for him, and Draco... Draco's told Rabastan that I made a Portkey to help his family escape. What if... if *he* believes him? What if he doesn't? What happens to Draco then? And why is he trying to blame me?"

Severus placed his finger to his lips. "That is out of our hands. What matters is that you are safe. Nothing has changed otherwise."

"Nothing? How can you say that?" Her voice was nearly inaudible.

"Think about the long term," he responded, expression unfathomable.

Deep down, she knew he was right. If they played their cards right, things would work out, and the Dark Lord would be defeated. However, at what cost? How could she live with herself knowing that she'd caused Ron harm? *Oh, Ron, I'm so very sorry. I'll make this up to you. We'll survive. Things will be all right.*

She tried to imagine what life would be like for them after the war. They'd settle down, follow their dreams, and start a family... and then her thoughts changed. Severus had appeared in her vision, seating himself next to her while Ron's image vanished. Hermione shook her head in disbelief. Was she so far gone that she couldn't remember what was right anymore?

A series of loud moans broke the silence from the other side of the screened room, but they immediately turned into screams. Severus held her tighter and wouldn't let her turn to look. For many minutes, the torture went on. She didn't know who was suffering...Draco, Ron, or both. Near the end, the voice...voices...finally became hoarse and exhausted.

"Look at me, girl," a cold voice said from behind them, causing Hermione's spine to tingle.

Severus released her, and she turned to face him obediently, albeit shakily.

"Did you aid the Malfoys in leaving?"

She shook her head and said firmly, "No."

His eyes pierced hers, and she was certain he'd invaded her mind. However, she also felt something like a comforting blanket settle over her mentally. She knew that to be Severus' calming presence and wondered if he'd be successful in helping her keep their plans away from the man. The vision came to her again...her hearing the Malfoys and seeing them vanish. Satisfied, Voldemort broke eye contact with her to talk to Severus.

"Young Malfoy says that he was trying to lure Weasley here purposely for his capture. Weasley is defiant, but I've easily seen into his mind that he was the one to approach Draco. However, Draco maintains this was all part of his plan and a well-aimed Imperius Curse aided him." His flat nostrils flared a little. "They shall both be our prisoners. Draco tried fruitlessly to Occlude himself from me. He is a liar, and he shall pay for that, but not until his treacherous mother and father are here to see it."

"And Weasley?"

"Will be killed and sent to his family and Potter," Voldemort said, "but not yet. I want Potter to see the memory of his friend's capture." Here his gaze landed on Hermione again. "And just who is responsible for it. The wait to see what happens to Weasley should be nearly unbearable for him."

She swallowed thickly and lowered her eyes demurely, hating herself and wishing she'd never made a deal with Severus in the first place. None of this would have happened if she hadn't done that.

Before any more could be said, there was a loud bang. "What the...?" Severus said, spinning around. "The wards have been breached! Fuck!"

"Potter," Voldemort said darkly. "Weasley was followed! Come, Severus."

"Stay here," Severus barked, pushing her to the bed.

More bangs sounded. She could hear Rabastan, Severus, and Voldemort all talking and readying themselves. To her horror, she heard that he'd summoned other Death Eaters to join them.

"Severus, lift your Apparition Ward so that our friends might join us while I place one so that nobody without a mark can Disapparate. We finish this now!"

*Please don't let any more of my friends get hurt. Please, God, if you are there and listening to me... please.*

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**Southern's Notes:** And so it begins. I am sorry for the delay in posting. Most of this has been written for a while, but I've just had a great deal going on.

Season's Greetings to you.

And if you're in the mood, join my yahoo!group Potter\_Place. We always have something going on (fun challenges, discussions, polls).

Link: [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Potter\\_Place/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Potter_Place/)



# Chapter 20

*Chapter 20 of 30*

All hell breaks lose.

**Disclaimer:** I've snagged some of JKR's characters for a bit of fun. Weehee. Don't sue and all that jazz.

*Thanks go to Charmed\_Nay for the beta read!*

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Hermione bolted up, bent on joining the fray. She'd find a wand or try to help somehow! How could Severus expect her to remain there while something like this happened? As she got to the opening of the curtain, many robed Death Eaters began Apparating into the large outer room, rallying to their Lord's side. Even after all she'd faced in the past, she'd never seen anything that frightened her so much. Only Rabastan, Voldemort, and Severus didn't have masks on, as they'd been caught unprepared, but the others were all masked.

"Rabastan!" yelled Bellatrix upon Apparating in, her husband at her side. "What the bloody hell is going on here?"

"Infiltrated! Potter's lot," he replied.

She pulled a small package from a pocket within her robes. "Take this, Rab. It's for our Master. Now! Into the locked box with it before the blighters find it."

He nodded and took it from her as she ran to Voldemort's side. When he turned around, his eyes met Hermione's. "All hell's about to break loose. Go hide, lass."

Whatever he held in his palm was something precious to the Dark Lord. Of that, Hermione was certain. *My God! Could it be a Horcrux?* she wondered excitedly. If her calculations were correct, then this could possibly end here! Determination renewed, she decided to play along with things so that she could remain close to what he had.

"I'm afraid!" she said, moving closer and reaching out to touch his arm, as if needing comfort. "What if everyone's killed?"

Just as she'd hoped, he pulled her behind him and shoved the little parcel into his pocket, drawing his wand. "Stay behind me! We'll show those wankers not to fuck with us!"

THUD!

The entire wall on the far side of the room seemed to peel away, blinding them all in dazzling sunlight, as the feet and part of the legs of a giant could be seen. It had to be Grawp, for the next person she saw was Hagrid, wielding his umbrella towards the Death Eaters and shaking a large fist in the air.

Everything suddenly happened in slow motion. Order members came charging into the room, wands lifted and blasting spells. The first person to be hit and flung backwards was a squat Death Eater. Hermione watched in wonder as his body rose and landed with a sickening crack. She scanned the crowd for Severus and saw him to the right of the room, already flicking his wand to protect himself against flying hexes.

"Severus," she murmured and stepped forward.

"Leave him be, else you'll distract him."

"Draco!" She pointed to his prone form on the floor and cringed as someone kicked him in the side hard while passing by. "They'll kill him, won't they?"

"He's a traitor anyway." He roughly pushed her aside as a purple light shot towards them, slipping down in the process. However, the jinx missed them. "Arseholes!" he yelled and jumped up, shooting an array of hexes. Without thinking about her further, he ran forward with the others.

*At least he didn't go hide whatever Bellatrix has given him!* As carefully as she could, she moved towards Draco, noticing that Ron was also lying next to him. "Please be all right," she said aloud.

Kneeling next to Draco, she scanned both of them and noted that they were both alive, but it was obvious they'd been tortured badly. Draco had a gash near his temple, and Hermione feared he needed aid she couldn't give. She tried to rouse him. "Draco? Can you hear me?" He simply moaned but didn't move. "Damn it."

"Leave him, Mudblood," Bellatrix's cold voice said. "Let the filth lie on the floor where it belongs."

Her eyes widened as she looked at the woman, the long shocks of white in her hair adding to her feral appearance. "He's your nephew!"

"And a blood traitor!"

Before she could say more, a white light hit her in the side, nearly unbalancing her. "Narcissa!" she roared. "How dare you!"

"Leave my son alone, Bella!"

"You've gone mad. Have you let Lucius or this pathetic whelp poison you so? You know where our loyalties should lay. Right here with the Dark Lord, as it always has."

"Draco comes first," Narcissa said firmly.

This earned Hermione's respect deeply. "He needs a Healer!" she called out.

Bellatrix turned on her then. "Shut it, you!"

It was exactly the break the other woman needed, as she used that moment to shoot a Stunner at her sister. However, she could only take two steps before she was also blasted by a hex.

"Bitch!" Rodolphus yelled, striding towards the place she'd fallen.

Lucius, however, had finally dueled his way over and began to defend his wife and son. Hermione reached over to snatch Bellatrix's wand from her hand. She felt an odd tingle as the magic of the wand hummed over her palm. Swallowing, she pointed it towards Narcissa, "*Rennervate!*"

The woman immediately sat up and shook her head as if to clear it.

"Over here! You need to get Draco out of here," Hermione said. "He's bleeding and has a wound to the head. I think the Cruciatus was used on him."

"Draco!" she cried as she crawled over to him.

"You can't Disapparate. They've put up wards," Hermione warned.

"We've all been given emergency Portkeys," she said, pulling out an inkwell. "Come with us."

As tempting as it was, Hermione knew that she couldn't go with them. "I can't, but thank you." When she looked up, she saw that Rodolphus had downed Lucius *Petrificus Totalus!* she called, flicking her wand in Lestrangle's direction.

Lucius gazed at her with wide eyes for a moment before giving her a slight nod and scrambling to his wife's side worriedly. "Draco?"

"Needs St. Mungo's," Narcissa replied.

Moments later, the family had Portkeyed to safety, leaving Hermione in the midst of chaos with an unconscious Ron at her side. When she tried to wake Ron up, both with her hands and with her borrowed wand, nothing happened.

"Ron, please wake up! I'm sorry, so sorry."

With wide eyes, she looked around the room, spotting Severus...still all the way across from her...and she noticed that there were three people dueling with him. One looked like Percy Weasley, but she couldn't tell who the others were. There was so much else going on. "Shit!"

She looked down at Ron's pale face and then back over to where Severus fought. What to do? "You'll be all right and out of the way here," she told Ron as she pulled him closer to the grate. "Why didn't I tell the damn Malfoys to bring you with them? And why the bloody hell didn't they offer?" Annoyed with herself, she stood and marched towards Severus, dodging one hex along the way. Luckily for her, it seemed like nobody from either side intended to harm her.

As she approached her destination, she noticed that Harry and Voldemort had squared off, but both were roughly knocked to the ground as a large section of the ceiling was yanked away, raining big chunks of cement and wood down onto everyone.

"Hermione! Watcher!"

"Tonks!" she called, smiling. "Be careful. There's a beam just over..."

But it was too late. The large piece of wood fell onto Tonks, knocking her unconscious. Just as she was about to stoop down to help her, she saw that Severus had fallen to a knee.

"NO!"

She ran forward and brandished her wand at Percy, who had his wand in motion. *Stupefy!* she yelled.

He fell back, and this startled Severus' other assailants, allowing him to get a hex off at one, flinging her...Hestia...away from them roughly. The other, however, had his wand pointed at Hermione now, causing her to stop short.

"George, it's me," she said uncertainly, lowering her wand.

"Yeah, I know it's you all right."

"Listen, Severus is..."

"Give me my wand, you filthy Mudblood!" Bellatrix roared, shoving her to the ground roughly. "How dare you think to use my wand! The Dark Lord will have that knotty little head of yours on Nagini's dinner plate for this!"

Hermione tried to scramble out of her reach, but the woman's boot found its mark in Hermione's stomach. She dropped the wand and curled into a fetal position, trying to catch her breath and deal with the pain.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" said the silky voice she'd become so fond of.

Hermione's mind silently screamed 'No!' as she half expected George Weasley to fall down beside her. However, it was Bella's lifeless, staring gaze that met hers. Severus had killed her. She turned over to face him and an astonished George, taking the hand he extended after snatching up the wand once again.

"All right?" she asked frantically, looking him over.

"Yes, you?"

"I think so."

"I told you to remain in the room."

"I couldn't!"

"Oi, what the hell..."

"Please, George, don't," Hermione said quickly. "Ron's across the room, and he won't wake up. I think he needs to go to St. Mungo's. Would you Portkey him there?"

"I don't see him," he said, looking where she pointed.

"He's just there. Near the grate. Where is he?" She spun around and saw that Ron was on his feet and clinging to the wall. "He's mad! He'll be killed!"

She made to follow George but was pulled back by Severus. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked, holding her wrist tightly.

"I can help!" she said.

"Stay with me!"

"Murderer!" thundered Hagrid, slamming into both of them and sending Hermione skidding across the floor to land in a heap at Kingsley's feet.

"Hagrid!" she screamed. "Wait!"

There was a horrible crunch as he slammed Severus against the wall. Whatever hexes Severus had flung towards the angry half giant seemed to do nothing. Quickly, Kingsley brushed her aside and ran towards Hagrid. She was uncertain if he was going to pull him off or help, but she wasn't going to sit on her arse waiting to find out. It took some effort to rise, and she realized that she must have twisted her ankle, for it hurt terribly when she put pressure on it.

Someone screamed loudly, and a large spatter of blood sprayed the floor in front of Hermione. Arthur Weasley came into view, inflicting a second Slicing Hex on Nagini. She grinned at the poetic justice of the situation.

Another look around told her that many had fallen on both sides, but she was uncertain what any casualties were. She simply knew that she needed to get to Severus and to explain to the others that things weren't as they seemed. She hobbled over to his limp body while Kingsley and Hagrid had a violent row.

Hermione found a pulse and rejoiced. "He's alive," she said to nobody in particular. She was not alone, though, as her mentor kneeled down and used her wand to check on him.

"Broken ribs, I expect," McGonagall said softly and then drew Hermione into her arms. "We've been so worried about you, girl."

Hermione sobbed hysterically. "It's been so long." Things were coming to an end. She would be free! The Dark Lord would be defeated! "Harry," she whispered, realizing he and Voldemort were still goading and trying to hex each other. "But their wands!"

"It seems Voldemort has procured another wand for his use."

"Oh."

Behind them, there was yelling, and she saw George and Ron both dueling with Rabastan. "Please... take care of Severus," she told Minerva as she stumbled over to the trio. Before she could get there, George was hit by a bright jet of light and simply crumpled where he stood.

Incensed, Ron began flicking his wand with fervor. "You scum! *Crucio!*" he yelled.

The curse hit Rabastan before he could dodge out of the way. He twitched violently for a moment and then dropped to his knees, obviously in pain.

"Ron! Stop!"

"Out of the way, Hermione!" he said, not lifting the curse.

She pointed her wand at Rabastan. "*Expelliarmus!*" The wand, which had still been clutched in his hand, sailed towards her. "*Finite!*" she added, stopping Ron's hex. And then she and Ron were facing each other, wands drawn.

"What are you going to do now, Hermione? Hex me?"

"I told you to trust me when the time came. Please... I'm asking you to do that now."

His wand shook with his indecision. "Why should I?"

"Ron, he's..." She looked down to Rabastan, who was panting and gazing up at them. "He's my friend. Please." And so the tables had turned. Would Ron stop as Rabastan had done when she'd asked?

"And you want me to just let him go?"

"Just don't torture him!"

"He didn't mind letting You-Know-Who do it to me, did he?"

"He's got a Horcrux! I'm sure of it!"

"No, Harry and I got them all. We followed the notes from Snape, read over the things you'd been working on, and figured it out ourselves. There's only Nagini."

"Your father killed her."

"Then it's down to the git." He looked behind her. "Harry's still at it."

"Bellatrix had something of Voldemort's that she wanted him to hide. He's still got it on him."

"In me pocket," Rabastan said, breaking the tense silence. "And what notes from Snape?"

"I... I think he's made another Horcrux," Hermione said. "We either missed something, or he's made another one."

Ron shook his head. "Impossible."

"Hang on," Rabastan said. He slowly pulled the package out of his pocket and opened it. "What the hell is this?"

In his hand was a monocle. "But that doesn't make sense. No founder had this," Ron said uncertainly.

Hermione gasped. "Madam Bones! This was hers. Rabastan, he... he killed her himself, didn't he? Her death was in the papers!"

"Aye, that he did. What's a Horcrux?"

"Part of his soul," Ron blurted out and then turned red, remembering to point his wand at the man. "Oi. Sit still, you."

"We have to destroy it. Nagini was one, too," she said. "If Harry kills him, it'll be over!"

Rabastan's gaze moved to where his Master dueled. "Freedom," he said with a snort. "Followed my brother into this and then got locked up for it."

"It's time to do what's right," Hermione pleaded.

"What of Severus? Do you think he'll be understanding about this?"

"He's on *our* side," Hermione said quietly.

Rabastan blinked a few times, trying to understand. "He is the Dark Lord's right hand. Do you not understand that, girl? He's the one what killed Albus Dumbledore that night."

"I know he did, but there's more to that story."

"The git's been helping us on the sly," Ron said bitterly. "Sent us information."

"And has only been pretending to care for me or to want me as his concubine. We were just trying to keep me alive." This last part was said more to Ron than to Rabastan, and she saw the relief all over his face. "It's the truth."

"But the memories..."

"Faked... mostly."

"I saw you kiss him."

"That... I..."

"You care about him."

She nodded, wanting to be honest. "I do, yes."

"And what will you do now? Try to stay with him?" he asked, voice cracking.

"No," she whispered. "I'll go with you. I still want the same things." *I think I do anyway.* She was certain, though, that she wasn't being completely honest, but she would learn to feel that way about Ron again as time went on. He'd done so much for her, had worried for her, had nearly been killed for her... She wouldn't leave him...not now.

He nodded slightly and looked back at Rabastan. "I'll have that, mate."

"What of me?"

"We'll tell them the truth. That you've helped us."

"I don't think that will matter much," he said, eyes scanning the crowd. "Rodolphus?" he asked.

"Petrified," she replied. "Bellatrix, she's dead." She saw him frown and felt sorry for him. "I'm sorry."

Not looking at either of them, he lifted his hand. "Take it."

Ron snatched it from him and neatly said, "*Incarcerous*," securing Rabastan. "Just stay put until this is over," he said, pulling Hermione up.

"My ankle! It's twisted. Be careful."

"Harry!" he yelled and sprinted away.

She turned and felt very helpless as she watched her friend fall. "NO!"

"Untie me, lass," Rabastan said from behind her. "You know they won't do anything but send me to Azkaban... maybe even have me Kissed by a dementor."

"I won't let that happen. Trust me."

"You're wrong about Severus. He's not pretending."

"What do you mean?"

"He's fallen for you."

"Do... do you really think so? But he doesn't seem..."

A collective gasp from many others made her turn back towards Harry.

"Let me free. I can help."

"I'll be right back!" she called over her shoulder, quickly hobbling towards the center of the room where Harry lay on his back flinging curses at the Dark Lord. Somehow he was able to roll this way and that, avoiding the hexes thrown at him. She nearly suspected he might have had a swig of Felix Felicis.

As if in a dream, Harry shot a jet of light at the Dark Lord that blasted his wand apart and knocked the man on his back. Harry quickly scrambled up, pointing his wand down at him.

"Get 'im, Potter!" someone shouted.

"Hooray, Harry!" Hagrid boomed.

"Wait, Harry! Wait!" Ron yelled, sliding to a stop at his side. "Look!"

"How dare you!" Voldemort said, moving to a sitting position. "Unhand that!"

"It's another Horcrux!" Ron added, ignoring him.

Hermione made it to them and doubled over to catch her breath, but she was able to say, "He made another one when he killed Madam Bones, Harry."

"Potter knows what you've been doing, girl. No need to try to save your own skin by pretending to be on his side. You're one of us." He nodded his reptilian head towards Ron. "Who do you think Stunned him and enabled Severusss to capture him? Granger did! Severusss' young lover." He cackled in amusement. "She's not on your side any longer, boy. How does that make you feel?"

"Don't lose your focus, Harry!" she called. "I'm still the same as I always was!" She could see the rage in Harry's eyes and worried that he truly believed what the man had said. "Ron, tell him!"

"She got this from Rabastan Lestrangle. We need to destroy it."

"I'll do it," Hermione said, brandishing her borrowed wand once again.

"Hermione, don't forget about the curses," Ron said, holding up his hand.

"But your dad didn't have anything happen to him after he killed Nagini." She looked about. "Not that I noticed anyway."

"She wasn't an inanimate object. He wouldn't likely curse her, being he needed her alive and at his side, right?"

"Good point, Ron," Harry said. "You'll get yourself hurt or killed, Hermione."

"It'll be worth it to be done with all of this."

The room was quiet, and a look around told her that Voldemort only had a few supporters still standing, most held at wandpoint, but all watching their fallen leader and the

unraveling scene before them.

"No," Harry said finally. "We'll do this the right way."

"Dumbledore's raised you to be quite foolish, boy," Voldemort said as he suddenly lunged for Ron, who was closest to him.

"Geroff, git!" Ron yelled, stumbling back.

Black ink-like smoke began forming around both of them, and Hermione screamed, "He's trying to use Ron's body, Harry!"

Without caring about what could happen to her, she aimed her wand at the Horcrux. If she destroyed it, Harry could take out Voldemort before he could use Ron. *Avada Kedavra!* she yelled. It was the first thing to pop into her mind. *Kill the soul. Kill it.*

The repercussion was quick. A loud bang and a powerful aftershock rocked the already unstable building, sending most people to their knees and more of the ceiling to the floor. She felt a dark, horrible energy filtering her body and clawed at her throat. It was suffocating her. Before she lost consciousness, she just barely made out the most brilliant flash of green enveloping Voldemort's body.

Harry had done it. He'd defeated him. It was over. Finally.

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### Harry Potter Defeats Lord Voldemort...Again

*As you can see from the photograph here, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, an anti-Voldemort group formed by the late Albus Dumbledore back in the 1970s, which was thought to be defunct, clashed with Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters earlier today. The end result: Voldemort is dead! All hail Harry Potter and his friends, for they have freed us from pending tyranny once again.*

*There were casualties on both sides. Full reports have not yet been given, as this is late breaking news, but we will certainly keep you up to date. Many of Voldemort's followers have been taken into custody and transported to the Ministry's holding cells temporarily. It is rumored that the notorious murderer of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, is among those captured. Perhaps we can finally rest at ease, knowing our streets are now safer.*

*A vault has been opened at Gringotts by the Minister of Magic under the name Aftermath Fund. If you would like to make a monetary donation to go to the families of those killed or to the heroes who were harmed, please visit Diagon Alley and make a deposit immediately.*

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**Southern's Notes:** And I did promise another chapter before the holiday, so I hope this helps, even though it does end unclearly as to what happened to whom! Now that the "final battle" is out of the way, it'll be time to carry on with the real story, eh? ~cheers, all~

## Chapter 21

*Chapter 21 of 30*

Hermione wakes up after the battle and ponders all that's happened and talks with her friends.

**Disclaimer:** It's all for fun, no money is being made, and etc.

*Thanks go to my lovely beta, Charmed\_Nay!*

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Hermione opened her eyes slowly and quickly closed them again as the brightness of the room stung and blinded her. She wanted to bring her hands up to her eyes, but she couldn't seem to move. What had happened? Where was she? Why did her body feel as though Grawp had squeezed her in one of his fists?

Things slowly came back to her...Ron had been captured, thanks to her treachery...and Voldemort had been there. But then... Harry and the Order had found them. The image of Severus trying to fling hexes at Hagrid came to mind. Nothing he'd done had helped, and Hagrid had slammed him against the wall like a rag doll.

There'd been a loud crunch, and he'd lost consciousness.

*Severus!*

"Se..." She opened her eyes again, this time more slowly, and found that the room was quite blurry, only bright light and a couple of shadows easily discerned.

"She's awake!"

McGonagall.

"Seve..." Hermione swallowed.

"Keep quiet for now. Let me get some water," the headmistress said, voice tired and excited at the same time. "We've been so worried about you, lass."

A hand slid behind Hermione's neck and helped her up while another pressed a cup to her lips. She closed her eyes and gratefully took a small sip of the cool liquid, soothing her parched throat. Turning her head to the side, she indicated she'd had enough before opening her eyes and gazing at McGonagall, amazed at how long it took for her to come into focus.

The smiling woman beamed down at her. "It's been nearly a week, Hermione. We're so happy to have you back with us."

"Severus?" she managed to ask.

"What about him?" another voice asked.

"Har-Harry," she said, lifting a hand...barely...in his direction. "You did it."

"We did it," he said, taking her hand in his. He gave her a warm smile. "Welcome back, Hermione."

Hermione returned his smile and then let it fade. "He's on our side," she said and swallowed. "Severus. Dumbledore's man."

"I know," Harry said, placing her hand back on the bed. "Don't worry about that just now."

"Where is he?"

McGonagall answered when Harry simply gazed down at his friend. "He's probably at his home. He was here for the first two days, preparing the potions for you and whatnot, but he's since gone home once we knew you'd be safe."

Hermione nodded, relieved that he wasn't hurt as badly as she'd feared, and then she realized that she hadn't asked about Ron. "Ron?"

"He's fine. He was here. Never left your side after he woke up."

"When did he wake?"

"Right about the time Severus left," McGonagall answered.

"He was out, too, for a bit. Part of your spell knocked him into some sort of coma...a little like yours but not as badly. Both of you will be all right," Harry added. "Things can finally be back to normal now, Hermione. You're free. Voldemort's dead."

She couldn't say anything in return, so she closed her eyes, feeling as though her throat was closing up and her chest was tightening. Hermione had the urge to cry but knew that nothing but dry heaves would be possible.

"Something's wrong," Harry said.

"It's all too much for her to take in. Give me the potion." A phial was placed at her lips and potion was forced down. "Sleep, lass. Sleep."

"Rabastan?" she asked, uncertain if they'd heard her.

"Azkaban," McGonagall replied.

"No, he..." And then darkness came for her.

Much later, Hermione felt her bed move but decided to keep her eyes closed. No matter how much she'd missed her friends in the past few months, she didn't feel like talking to any of them. Severus was gone. How would it feel lying in bed alone again? Could she truly go back to her life as it had been before he and she had been thrown together?

She thought of Ron's betrayed expression and knew that she'd have to try. If Harry's attitude was anything to go by, he wouldn't be pleased if she ended things with Ron either. He'd likely blame himself for the entire mess, and it would just cause too many problems for them all in the long run. Time would pass. She would learn to live again as she had before. Why should all of her goals change now? She still ultimately wanted the same things: a job with a good salary and benefits, security, a home, and, eventually, a family.

"Hello, love," Ron's voice whispered from beside her. "I know you're sleeping still, but I couldn't help slipping in. McGonagall is out today. Been a right side peskier than Madam Pomfrey, that woman. Won't let us in for long at all." He snorted. "They're both out today."

Ron sighed softly, and Hermione felt the bed dip as he sat next to her. He then pulled one of her hands into both of his, rubbing it gently. "So much has happened since you've been gone. Harry and me, we've been through a lot, and it was hard without you, I admit that. I guess the git's letters helped." He made a growling noise. "I hate him...his hands on you, his lips on you. Bastard."

His words brought forth several flashes of memories. Severus' head thrown back as he came, Severus restraining himself and not taking advantage of her, the way his mouth felt against hers.... How would she be able to do this? She'd fallen in love with him, hadn't she? While she loved Ron...a great deal...she couldn't deny that it was now Severus who held her heart.

"Of course, I wasn't better, was I? I didn't mean to do it, really I didn't. I thought it was real, and when I saw that, I just wanted to get back at you. You looked like you liked it...like you really wanted him. Harry found me out, mind, but he's not brought it up yet. Him and McGonagall both. I keep thinking I should tell you, but I know..." His lips pressed against each of her fingers. "I love you, Hermione. We're going to make this work. We'll be together just like we planned. Always."

And Hermione's heart dropped. He still wanted to make a go of things, still loved her and wanted her. She couldn't hurt him. Why should she anyway? Severus hadn't stayed around to make a claim on her heart, had he? Rabastan was wrong. It had all been a pretense for him, and now he could live his life in peace, putting what they'd shared behind him...where it belonged, exactly as she should do.

*He's not pretending,* Rabastan had said.

But what was Ron going on about, saying he'd done something as well. She hoped he'd elaborate, but she drew her own conclusions. He must have sought out someone else. But whom? Nobody really went to headquarters that would be available to him. Oddly enough, Hermione realized that the thought of Ron being with someone else didn't hurt as much as she might have thought. Where were the pain, the feeling of betrayal, and the jealousy?

"When you hexed me and took Snape's side, I really thought you'd picked him over me. Boy did I feel stupid. I even... I hated you for it, you know? And that keeps playing over in my mind. That and when you were over by Malfoy and the git went to you, kissing you. It seemed so natural."

He let her hand slip down next to her and moved off of the bed, obviously pacing. "You said you have feelings for him. That's just you being loyal, I expect, feeling thankful for him helping us and all. That'll pass. I mean, oi, I sometimes think about Lavender, you know? That just makes us even. It's probably normal. I'll bet Harry still thinks about Cho sometimes."

Lavender Brown. It had to be her that he'd turned to. That would be why McGonagall knew about it, aside from Harry. She thought back to their sixth year when Lavender and Ron had always been attached at the hip...er, at the lips rather. A small pang of jealousy invaded her mind. How dare he go to *her*?

*Severus...* a voice whispered.

Hermione pushed the thought away. He wouldn't want her now...not now that he had a real choice, would he?

*Perhaps you should find out.*

Opening her eyes, Hermione decided she'd had enough of feigning sleep. "Is she the one you turned to for sex when you thought I'd made love to Severus?"

Ron spun around to face her, mouth agape and eyes wide with horror. "Er... you're awake?"

"I am." She felt proud that her voice was steady, but without something to drink, she wouldn't be able to say much more. "Water please."

"Sure." He quickly went to the table beside her bed and promptly dropped the glass, his hands shaking terribly. "Sorry. A little nervous."

"About Lavender?"

"No," he said, surprisingly firm. "Just wanting to do this right." He poured water from a tall pitcher into another glass and hurried to help her drink from it.

"S all right. I can hold it. Help me sit up a little."

He quickly did her bidding and gave her the glass while he repaired the other one. Without looking at her, he resumed his pacing and started talking. "Guess I'm glad you heard that. We can get things out in the open." He faced her then, a look of determination on his face. "I love you. You love me. We both want to get things back to normal. We'll do that. You and Snape, you might have been pretending, but it was still another man all over you. You even said you care about him. Well, that makes us even. All right?"

Angry, she said, "I wouldn't have ever gone to him for any of that. I had no choice!"

"I know that, love. I know that. I'm not holding it against you." He smiled shakily. "It's like I told that git when I woke up and saw him in here..."

"You told him something for being here? At Hogwarts? You have no right!"

"Damn right I did. Our future has no place for him in it."

"Ron, he's helped us win this war! He saved my life. How dare you speak for me!"

"I don't need him sniffing around and confusing you, do I? You don't have to feel sorry for him! The git's getting an Order of Merlin just like us. He'll go on with his life, and we'll go on with ours."

"What did you tell him?"

"Told him thanks for his potions, but he had no reason to hang around here, seeing as you're my girl and you told me you still wanted me."

"And... and what did he say?"

"Said he was only here to help because he'd been asked and didn't care what we did with our lives. I expect McGonagall paid him for all that he did." He smirked. "Harry ran after him, came back madder than a plucked owl, he did. Just said he was glad to see the arse go."

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to turn over, though her body ached immensely, causing her to moan. "Leave me be," she said through tears.

"Hermione... all right?"

"No, just leave." She began sobbing loudly, unable to stop, and again she felt as though her throat wanted to close up and as if her lungs had expelled the last of its breath and refused to expand again.

"Mr. Weasley! What have you done to her?" McGonagall demanded. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long at all. We were just talking, and she turned over. Sounded like it hurt, and she started crying."

Hermione gasped for air as more sobs wracked her body. Her hands clutched her chest tightly as she struggled to breathe. She desperately wanted the release tears would bring her, but it seemed her body wouldn't allow it.

"Good Lord, I think she's having a stress attack!"

"What's she stressed for? It's over."

"Are you daft? Hand me that phial." She leaned over and helped Hermione sit up, embracing her and rocking slightly. "There, there. Take your time, breathe and let it out."

"So tight... my chest." Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she'd never felt more bereft in her life. "Hurts so much." And she knew deep down that she was referring to more than her physical pains.

"Mr. Weasley, you should leave for now. I'll see to Miss Granger."

"Right then. If you need anything..."

"I won't hesitate to ask Poppy if I need anything," she said curtly.

"What did that inconsiderate boy say to make you so upset?" she asked, her voice kinder than Hermione had ever heard.

There was no honest answer she could give the woman, though, not without admitting her feelings out loud, and that simply wouldn't do. "The potion."

"Yes, it will make you sleep some more, and it's well past your dose time anyway." She gave Hermione the phial. "There's only one dose left. Take all of it." After Hermione gave the empty phial back to her, she added, "When you next wake, either Poppy or I will help you up and get you on your feet."

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"Harry! What took you so long? Professor McGonagall said you'd be here an hour ago!"

"Ah, you know how Mrs. Weasley is, always trying to make me eat and then asking loads of questions."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I had to pretend that I was tired last night just to get her to leave." She smiled at Harry. "I'm so happy for you and for Ginny."

"Eh?"

"Ah, to hear Mrs. Weasley tell it, there's going to be a wedding soon." She snickered as Harry's face paled. "Right proud to have Harry Potter as her son-in-law, I'd say."

Harry laughed. "Ginny and I decided it was time to resume our relationship, that's all." He shook his head. "What of you and Ron? She's not planning a double wedding for us all then?"

This caused Hermione to frown. "No."

"What's wrong?"

She turned away from his questioning eyes. "Things are different now, aren't they?"

Harry moved around the bed into her line of vision. Looking uncomfortable, he asked, "Do you love Snape?"

Her eyes widened for a moment. "H-Harry, why are you asking me that?"

"I saw some memories, Snape and my mum. He used to love her, did all this all these years because of that. The way he was with her..." Harry nodded towards her. "Those memories that Voldemort sent, I saw him with you that way."

"He was only acting, Harry. It was all an act."

"Do you love him?"

Tears came to her eyes. Hermione slid her legs over the side of her bed and put her bare feet on the cold stones of the floor. "I want to look out the window. It's nearly sunset."

Harry was at her side instantly to help her. "I... I talked to Snape after he left."

"Ron told me," she said, leaning against the windowsill with his support. "Did you tell him, too, that he wasn't welcome?"

"I... I asked him if he loved you."

Hermione snapped her head towards him so fast her neck cracked. "What? Why?"

"I had to know. I walked in while he and Ron were at it, and I just had to know."

"What did he say?" she blurted before she could help herself.

"He said no."

"Well, of course, he said no. I told you it was a farce."

"He's lying."

"Enough, Harry. I don't want to hear any more."

"He did the same thing to my mum. I saw it."

"And I don't want to hear about that either."

"He turned her away because he thought it was best, and that's what he's doing now."

"I thought you hated Snape?"

"That was before."

"Before what?"

"Before I knew there was so much more to him."

"Yes, well, it's done then."

"Hermione, you and Ron, you're my family, and I want you to be happy, but I have a feeling that... that maybe you won't be."

"This will all pass, Harry, and really, it's nothing like you think. Just don't worry about it, okay?"

"How can I not?"

"I... Ron mentioned that he'd gone to Lavender. He said you knew."

"He told you about that!"

"How did it happen? When?"

"I went to Hogwarts, left out the Pensieve I'd viewed some of Voldemort's memories in. Ron was at his parents' and supposed to be gone for a bit. When I came back, though, he'd seen them, and I went to Hogwarts to talk to McGonagall. I just had the idea to talk to Lavender, and I was right."

Hermione gazed at him steadily. "Why did you just happen to get that idea? Has he been talking to her while I've been gone?"

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and looked towards the door, a guilty expression on his face.

"Harry?"

"There have been owls, but I swear that he's not come here to see her. Not that I know of. And the only reason he went there and... did that...if anything more...is because he was hurt, had seen what he thought to be you and Snape together." He shrugged. "It's no excuse, but I don't think he'd have done it otherwise."

"It's something we'll have to work through," she said a little bitterly, though her mind was not on Ron or Lavender.

*"What did he say?"*

*"He said no."*

"All right? You just swayed on your feet."

"Harry, I want to talk to you about Rabastan Lestranger."

His brow furrowed. "What about him?"

"He isn't like the other Death Eaters. He took care of me, too, after we got to know each other. When I asked him to leave Ron alone, he did it for me. He is the reason we had the last Horcrux."

"There's something else."

"What?"



"Kingsley told me that last month he met with Rabastan Lestrangle."

"Oh?"

"He was going to try to get you out of there in exchange for amnesty."

Hermione leaned heavily against the wall, her mouth hanging open slightly. "I... what?"

"He told Kingsley he wanted to help you and could deliver you safely if the Ministry promised to be lenient with him and gave him protection until the Dark Lord was defeated."

"Why, then, is he in Azkaban?"

"I guess it's because he didn't bring you like he said."

"Harry, talk for him. Please."

"All right. I'll see what I can do. Things are crazy at the Ministry right now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, people are calling for Scrimgeour to resign, saying he did a rotten job of it, cocked things up as badly as Fudge." Harry smirked. "I wouldn't even go that far, but I think there'd be a better choice."

"Who?"

"Kingsley. He's fair, knows what he's doing, and is respected. People like him."

Hermione nodded, mind still awl at what she'd learned about Rabastan. He would have betrayed Severus for her! Or had that been something they'd planned together? She would have to ask Severus when he... *I won't get the chance to ask him, will I? He won't be around anymore.*

"Oh, I brought you some copies of the *Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler's* last issue. We're in there a good bit. So's Snape."

"Thanks, Harry. I think I'll lie down for a while, but would it be all right if I borrowed Hedwig?"

"She's at the Burrow."

"Where are you staying for now?"

"Grimmauld Place, but I let her stay there with Pig. She deserves the rest."

"I'll just get a school owl."

"Is it odd staying here? At Hogwarts?"

"I... I rather like it. I have peace here."

"Mrs. Weasley would like to have you at the Burrow, and you're welcome back at Grimmauld Place."

"I think when I leave here, Harry, I'm going to go home for a while. I miss my mum and dad."

"Oh, right. I'm sorry. Should we tell them?"

"No, I told McGonagall that I'd rather not."

"I never thought about them at all. Some mate I am, eh?"

"No, it's all right. I try to keep them in the dark about things sometimes."

He nodded. "Come on then. Let me help you back to bed. I'll unshrink these and leave them by your bedside. You can look them over whenever. I expect it's time for your lunch anyway."

"Harry, thank you. For everything. You're a good friend to me."

"I just want you to be happy, Hermione."

"I will be."

He turned to leave, but he added, "Check out what Luna's dad wrote, all right?"

"Okay."

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Hermione smirked as she read over some of Rita Skeeter's comments about the war.

*...and Severus Snape still won't return my owls for a meeting. The man has declined everyone, so I suppose I shouldn't be offended. Can you imagine being a ghastly professor and then thought of as a murderer only to suddenly be hailed a hero after the Boy Who Lived vouches for you? That's what this poor sod has endured. Albus Dumbledore knew what he was doing when he approached sly Snape for help, didn't he? For comments about Dumbledore and his sketchy past, please tune in to the wireless tonight at nine for an exclusive interview with me.*

She'd have to see if there was a radio in the staff room that she could possibly listen to. Hermione was quite tired of lying about in the hospital wing. In fact, since Harry had visited her earlier in the day, she felt much better...physically anyway.

*The Quibbler* caught Hermione's attention, as there was a picture of Fawkes on the front page, his colorful wings flying as he moved towards a set of mountains. "This is what Harry wanted me to see." She flipped to the next page and began reading.

*Fawkes the phoenix was the familiar of the late headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. The last anyone had seen of him was the night that the headmaster had been killed by Severus Snape, which we now know was part of an elaborate plot. The late headmaster had been dying already from a curse he'd endured the year before. If you would recall the state of his hand, you'll know this to be true. Severus Snape saved his life at that time and enabled him to live longer. The night Dumbledore died, however, he'd drank a poisonous potion, and witnesses now say that he'd been nearly at his last breath when Severus Snape used the Killing Curse on him.*

*Regardless, I don't think anyone can argue the fact that this would-be killer was truly Dumbledore's man when the phoenix song sounded just after Voldemort's death. Fawkes didn't fly to Potter's side. He went to Severus Snape's aid. It seemed that the man had taken heavy injuries during the battle, breaking bones for one thing, but he'd also had a nasty slicing hex sent his way, which nobody had noticed right away, what with all the confusion of the battle. The phoenix, however, knew and shed a few tears to heal the man's gaping, bleeding wound. After it was healed, he then flew to Potter, landed on his shoulder, and continued his song before flying off, which is the picture...taken by Colin Creevey...on the cover.*

*Phoenixes are very loyal animals. There is no way this one would have helped to save the man who'd killed his former owner if Potter's story wasn't the truth. Dumbledore's portrait has been questioned and has verified this new information. Other documentation has also been found. Hero Severus Snape will face no charges and will likely receive an Order of Merlin for his work in bettering our world. Earlier reports that he'd been sent to Azkaban were false.*

Hermione couldn't stop the broad smile on her lips. This was very good news. She wished that Harry had simply told her though. That way she could have had a first account of exactly what had happened. There were so many questions she wanted to ask. So much she didn't know. There would be time to find out of course. Her thoughts drifted back to her dark-haired hero. *Now everyone will appreciate you for the good you've done, Severus, and they won't dwell on the past. Hopefully, you won't either.*

"Hello, Hermione," Madam Pomfrey greeted as she entered the curtained area around Hermione's bed. "You look happy this evening. I want to give you a check over. All right?"

"Sure." She folded the paper and tossed it on the chair next to her.

The woman used her wand and hands, muttering to herself the entire time as her wand's tip glowed this color and that. "Excellent. Severus really did a good job with things."

"I'll have to thank him for the potions," she said quietly.

"He was so worried. We had a makeshift hospital here for those at the battle...well, the less serious injuries anyway. I wanted to send you to St. Mungo's, but Severus came limping over and demanded that he be allowed to go to his old quarters to whip up what you needed." She smiled fondly. "I'd only just healed his ribs, and I know he had to have been in pain."

"That was really good of him."

"I doubt St. Mungo's would have known what Severus knows." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "He's very good in treating dark magic maladies. Why, look how long he was able to keep poor Albus alive before he... you know."

"Where does he live?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not certain of his exact address, but he lives in the North of England. Why?"

"I'd like to thank him."

"Shall I have an owl pop round?"

"Well, I thought maybe I might go in person. Do you know if he has an open Floo?"

"Maybe you should ask Minerva about that."

"When can I leave?"

"Physically, you are all right. I just think you need some rest." Someone across the room began moaning. "Oh, do excuse me."

"I think I'll just do that," Hermione mumbled after the matron had left. "McGonagall would know."

Bored, Hermione pulled another edition of the paper over to skim through. Both Carrows had been killed along with Dolohov, Bellatrix, Yaxley, and a number of other Death Eaters or supporters Hermione didn't know...including one she did: Fenrir Greyback. Lupin had done that himself. She was quite pleased to see that the Order had suffered much less devastation, losing Hestia Jones and Mundungus Fletcher (a sad accident) to death, and only a handful had suffered serious injuries (she and Ron were mentioned). Her eyes widened as she read a quote from Lucius Malfoy:

*My family has been working with Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix for a while now, and it was our information that helped things along, enabling Potter to kill the man who's been blackmailing many of us to do his bidding. Yes, we've lost some friends, but we've gained many more. My son was nearly killed the day of the battle (Hermione smirked when she noticed he'd left out that Draco had been out of the entire thing altogether.), and my wife was attacked viciously by her own brother-in-law, Rodolphus Lestranger. I saw to it...with the help of Potter's friend, Hermione Granger...that Rodolphus was captured. (She made a scoffing noise that he would use her name to make himself look more credible...she'd been the one to handle Rodolphus!) So, yes, you ask if my family is happy with the outcome. I say, indeed, woman, what else would you have me say? Now if you'll excuse me, I've important business to attend to... with the Ministry.*

"Unbelievable," she muttered, tossing that one aside and snatching up another. On the first page, she read about some of the Ministry problems Harry had alluded to. It seemed most of the people were angry that the Ministry didn't do more to help Harry, and the lot were outraged that Hermione's kidnapping had been covered up. Apparently, the Ministry had had information about certain things and had opted to keep it to themselves and not do anything about it.

"I hope they do sack his sorry arse," Hermione said, sneering at the picture of a flustered Scrimgeour as he spoke to a few reporters.

"So do I."

"Hello, Professor McGonagall, I'm glad you came back."

"Poppy tells me that you can leave whenever you'd like... so long as you rest a lot."

"Well, she certainly didn't outright tell me that. Likely hoping I'd stay a little longer."

"Likely."

"Professor, would you know where Severus' house is located?"

"Are you thinking of visiting him?" she asked quietly, pulling a chair closer to Hermione's bed.

"I want to... thank him for helping me."

"I see." She pursed her lips for a brief moment. "Hermione, if you intend to have a relationship with Mr. Weasley, which is what he claims you told him, I would suggest that you not visit Severus."

"What's that to do with thanking someone for helping me?" she snapped before blushing. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to sound so horrid."

"Severus is a man, Hermione, and he has feelings. I don't think you should go there just for the sake of going."

"You sound as if he has feelings for me," Hermione said, fishing for more.

"I think you and I both know that he does."

"He told Harry that he doesn't."

"As if he would tell him what he feels. Do you not know how much Severus loathed Harry's father? How much that has biased him against the boy?"

Hermione nodded, and to her horror, she felt her eyes mist up. "I'm so confused. I don't know what to do or what to think."

McGonagall leaned forward. "What does your heart tell you?"

"It tells me two different things."

"Then, Hermione, don't go see Severus until you're sure. I fear he wouldn't be able to..." She shook her head. "Shall I make a room for you here at the castle, or were you planning to go elsewhere? You're more than welcome to stay here for now."

"I want to go home."

"I would be happy to Apparate you there."

"First, I'd like it very much if I could use one of the school's owls."

"Of course. I'll send one here."

"Thank you. May I borrow a parchment, quill, and some ink?"

"Elsa, come."

A small house-elf popped into the room and bowed. "Yes, miss?"

"Could you please help Miss Granger here? She has a few things that needs packing, not much, mind, but after that, would you fetch her something to write with and some parchment?"

"I is happy to help."

"Thank you, Elsa," McGonagall said kindly. "I'll have an owl come along shortly."

"I appreciate this. Truly."

~~~~~

*Ron,*

*I've decided to leave Hogwarts and am going home to my mum and dad's. I miss them terribly, and after all that's happened, it's where I want to be. Sometimes a girl just wants her mum, you know? We'll talk soon. I just need some time to adjust, and Madam Pomfrey suggests that I get a great deal of rest, so I will let you know when I can accept visitors. Tell Harry for me.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione*

Hermione folded the letter and gave it to the owl. "Ron Weasley." Just before it took off out the window, she called out, "Wait!"

It hooted, circled around her small room, and landed back on the table next to her bed.

"I have another one." Quickly taking another parchment, she began a second letter.

*Severus,*

*Thank you so much for all that you've done for me. It's odd for me now, being here at Hogwarts without my friends. Not being with you. So much has happened, hasn't it?*

*I would like to talk to you. I'm going home to my parents' house. You would be welcome there, Severus. Anytime. Or if you'd like, you could let me know where you are so that I can come to you. That might be easier. Looking forward to hearing from you.*

*Love from always,*

*Hermione*

"Severus Snape," she said softly, giving the second parchment to the owl. "Deliver his first please if it is easier for you, all right?"

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**SW69's Notes:** Yes, Snape will be back in the next chapter. Of course I had to let the girl heal a bit first.

## Chapter 22

*Chapter 22 of 30*

Although on different sides of the war, Severus and Hermione work together, each for their own reasons. This is my take on the events following HBP and will lead up to the Dark Lord's demise.

**Disclaimer:** I'm still not making money for my writing and usage of Rowling's characters. Ah, well... just borrowing them anyway.

*Thanks go to my lovely and patient beta, Charmed\_Nay!*

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Three days.

It had been three days since she'd left Hogwarts, since she'd sent an owl to Severus, since she'd returned to her parents' home. Hearing nothing from Severus was the only mar on her peaceful retreat. She anxiously awaited some word from him, and with each passing day, her hope dwindled. Maybe he'd told Harry the truth when she'd said he didn't care for her.

Frowning, she slipped beneath the duvet and closed her eyes. Sleep wouldn't come to her, however, as she kept thinking of too many things...her brain replaying recent events over and over. The worst memory was the flash of her mother's horrified expression and tears as she listened to Hermione's tale. Part of her wished she'd never confided the entire truth to her parents, as she hated hurting them and giving them cause to worry. However, another part of her knew that she had to tell them...had to relieve herself of the burden, needed them to understand.

Ron had sent Pig over each day with letters, though short ones, asking her to let him visit soon. She supposed she'd have to take him up on it sooner or later, but the truth was that she was quite enjoying her peace and time away from everything.

"Odd," she muttered, "I spent months away from everything in a bloody tent. Here I am again, spending time away from it all."

With a sigh, Hermione turned off the lamp at her bedside, turned over, and thought on an idea that had struck her earlier. Rita Skeeter would no doubt try to profit off the war as she'd tried to profit off of Dumbledore's death, but her accounts would be biased and largely untruthful. Hermione knew she could do better. In fact, she would send letters to publishers to see if any were interested in a truthful version of what had really happened. The world deserved to know the truth about everyone involved in the war and all the losses and hardships that were endured.

Being a published writer wouldn't be a bad thing. After that, there was always the possibility of being allowed to add on to Hogwarts: A History or the history texts at Hogwarts. It was high time that Binns began to lecture on something recent, wasn't it? There was so much she could do with the power of the written word. Her only hope was that Severus wanted to be a part of her future.

At that moment, a small silvery shape made its way through her window and seemed to swim toward her in the air lazily. Stunned, she realized that it was an otter...larger than the one she was able to conjure. Who could have sent this?

Her heart began thumping wildly when it gazed at her and delivered the message from its owner...a rich, silky voice whispered, "Sleep well, Hermione."

"Severus!" she exclaimed, bolting up from the bed and making her way to the window. She saw nothing in the dark shadows surrounding her home. Surely he was nearby!

Without tossing a robe on over her nightgown, she quickly left her room, ran down the stairs, and sprinted for the back door of her family's home. Throwing the door open, she sped out into the darkness, calling his name.

And then he was there, a shadow detaching itself from the darkness and making his way towards her. He stopped a couple of feet away from her and simply stared into her eyes, the sliver of moonlight shining through the overhead tree branches their only light. There was so much she wanted to say, so much emotion welled up inside of her, but words were lost to her. She needed to feel him and took a step closer. He responded by doing the same, and then they were suddenly wrapped in each other's embrace, squeezing tightly as if afraid to let go.

"You're so cold," she mumbled minutes later. "How long have you been out here?"

"Just after dark."

"So long? By why did you only send a message now?"

"I hadn't intended on sending it. I just wanted to see that you were all right, and when your light went out, I made a hasty decision." He stepped back, though he still held onto her. "You need to get back inside...bare feet, no robes? Where's your head?"

"I had to find you," she whispered, pulling him to her again. This time, she didn't bury her head against his chest; she boldly brought her lips up to meet his in a soft, chaste kiss. "Kiss me," she commanded softly.

His lips were soft and firm against hers, his tongue first tentative and then at once demanding. This was what she'd wanted, needed. She moaned and pressed herself against him, trying to become part of him.

"Severus," she whispered when they broke for air. "Please come in with me."

"Your parents..."

"Are asleep. We need to talk, and it's a bit cool out here tonight." She stepped back and took a hand into hers to guide him inside. "Come with me."

He followed her silently into her home, up the stairs, and into her bedroom and said nothing as she locked her door and warded the room so that her family wouldn't hear them. "I shouldn't be here," he said once she gazed at him.

Hermione sat down on the bed and patted the spot beside her. "Please..." Slowly, he moved to sit stiffly next to her, not removing his cloak. "Severus, get comfortable. I don't want you to leave yet. There is so much to say."

Severus stood and took off his cloak, kicking his boots off as an afterthought before again sitting next to her. "I have things I would like to say as well."

She immediately didn't like his tone and knew his words would be what she didn't want to hear. "You told Harry that you don't love me," she blurted.

After blinking in surprise, he quietly said, "Yes, I told Potter that."

"But I thought that you felt something for me. You do, don't you? Even Rabastan said that it wasn't only a pretense." When he said nothing, she added, "Please be honest with me...either way. You owe me that much."

"I do have feelings for you," he said after a moment. "However, I won't act on them. I can't do that."

"Why not? You're what I want!"

"Weasley told me that you uttered those same words to him."

"No... I mean, yes, but I..."

"So you do want him then?"

"I was just trying to get him to... leave Rabastan alone. I mean, my feelings were jumbled up. I didn't know what I wanted."

His lips curved down into a slight sneer. "And you suddenly do? I can't...won't...be made a fool of, Hermione."

"What do you mean by that? I'm not playing any games here, Severus. Do you know how hard it's been for me to be without you this past week?"

"That's just it, Hermione. Don't you see? You've been living with me for many months. It's something you've come accustomed to. What if your feelings aren't truly genuine? What if you simply became attached to me because I was there with you, protecting you, getting closer to you?"

"Oh my God! You think I'm suffering from some version of Stockholm Syndrome! That's the absurd!"

"How do you know?"

"Because," she placed his hand over her heart, "I know in here that I... I love you and want to be with you."

At this, he closed his eyes and didn't remove his hand from her chest. His fingers twitched and then softly caressed her breast. "I want you so badly it hurts."

"I'm yours. Don't you know that?"

His eyes opened, and he quickly retracted his hand from her body. "No." He stood and shook his head. "Before I took you, Hermione, you had a life planned with Weasley. He's your age and has been in your life for a long time. Things can go back to what they were in time." He smiled sadly. "I fear I cannot give you what you deserve."

"No self-deprecation please! It doesn't suit you, Severus," she said hotly. "There is nothing that Ron could give me that you couldn't unless..." Her voice faltered. "Unless it's your heart."

"You have it," he whispered. "My Patronus should have told you that much."

"Oh!" *The Patronus! Yes. I was too happy that it was his, and I never stopped to think of what that meant...that his Patronus had changed to resemble mine.*

"But I refuse to let you walk into this with your eyes wide shut. No matter what you may think you feel, I would rather you be certain."

"How can I prove to you that I am?"

"At least give Weasley a try."

"No," she said firmly. "Why do that? It would only hurt him in the long run. I won't do it."

"Then take some time to yourself, let your mind clear, and then decide what you truly want. There's no rush. I will not be going anyplace, Hermione. Take this time for you. Otherwise, I will always be wondering if you made the right decision."

She could understand his point, and as much as she wanted to argue with him, she knew that he would never truly be confident that she wanted to be with him because she did love him and not out of some misguided sense of loyalty.

"All right," she agreed. "I'll take some time to myself."

He gave her a nod and a small smile. "For what it's worth, I have missed you."

Hermione went to him and put her arms around him. "I don't know how to not be with you, Severus. I hate this. It takes too long to fall asleep without you at my side."

Severus led her to the bed, lay down, pulled her next to him, and then covered them with her duvet. "Sleep. I'm here."

Thinking she could continue the conversation when they woke, she allowed his even breathing to lull her into a deep sleep. He was gone when she woke the next morning, only a note and missing bottle of her perfume...the scent he loved...were evidence that someone had been there.

*Hermione,*

*I will be returning to my family home on Spinner's End should you eventually decide to come to me. Please remember what I've asked of you and respect my wishes.*

*Always,*

*Severus*

She kissed the paper softly and slid it beneath her pillow, treasuring it. Inside, Hermione felt like a new woman. He'd come to her. He loved her. She would take some time to make certain she wanted a life with him, just as he'd asked of her, and when the time was right, she'd go to him, as she had no doubt what she wanted.

The problem she needed to deal with now was Ron. She would have to make certain that he understood things were over between them. Besides, he'd gone to Lavender while supposedly still loving her. What sort of person did that? She'd only been with Severus in the beginning because she had no choice to play Voldemort's game, but eventually, she wanted to be with him. That could only mean her heart wasn't with Ron any longer. And whether he'd admit it or not, his going to Lavender proved the same thing.

Hermione dressed, brushed her teeth, and made her way down to the kitchen to see what her mum had made for breakfast. When she found her father reading at the table and her mother drinking some juice, she smiled happily. Her parents had been in love for many years and were perfectly suited for each other. She hoped that she and Severus would have the same companionship. Actually, from experience, she already knew that they did.

"You look radiant this morning, my love. What brought this about?" her mum asked, indicating for her to take a seat. "Toast?"

"Looks good."

"Well?" her mother prompted.

"Good morning, poppet," her father said, peeking from behind his paper long enough to smile at her.

"It is indeed," she said with a contented sigh. "I've talked to Severus." At this, her father lowered his paper and her mother stilled. "Something wrong?" Hermione asked.

"He was here?"

"Last night, yes."

"What did you talk about?" Jane Granger asked.

Hermione munched on a bite of toast before launching into their talk, ending it by saying, "So that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to take a little time to make certain it's what I want."

"You sound as though your mind is made up already," John Granger said.

"Honestly? It is," Hermione admitted. "I'm only doing this for his peace of mind, Dad."

"I should like to meet this fellow," he said.

"I think you would like him."

Her mother asked, "What will you tell Ronald?"

"I will tell him the truth...too much time has passed, we've grown apart, I don't know that I could trust him to not run off to his ex-girlfriend each time he feels insecure, and my feelings have changed. I'd rather have him as a friend, nothing more."

"I still can't believe he went to that girl!" her mother said hotly.

"Well, it's done," Hermione said, not wanting them to be angry with Ron. "And to be honest, I'm not all that miffed about it. If he can find happiness, then that's great."

A little later, Hedwig pecked at the window, demanding to be let in. "Hello, girl," Hermione greeted, taking the letter from her. "I have some toast crumbs if you'd like?" She indicated to the saucer in front of her before opening the letter.

*Hermione,*

*I wanted to let you know that Rabastan has been released from Azkaban into Kingsley's custody. He's going to be given probation and will have to check in weekly, but that's better than prison, I'd say. He knows you spoke up for him as well, and he told me to send his thanks to you.*

*There's something else. Lavender was here last night. I know I shouldn't say anything, but I thought you might want to know. She and Ron had a row. I'm not sure what it was about, but she left crying. I guess Ron told her not to expect a repeat of what happened; he's been right moody and quiet since then. Mrs. Weasley has been trying to get him to tell her what went on, but he's not saying anything. I think she's suspicious though. Keeps asking why you aren't here and if there's something she should know.*

*Anyway, it's so good to be free finally, isn't it? I keep expecting a Death Eater or Voldemort to pop out and try to kill me, but that won't happen. All I know is that I'm going to enjoy this. Being with Ginny again is a great thing in itself. I had no idea how much I truly missed her.*

*Hermione, good luck in whatever you decide. When you're ready for us to visit or to come here, just let me know.*

*Your friend,*

*Harry*

She hated that Ron seemed to be suffering and knew that she'd have to speak to him right away. After putting away the breakfast dishes and tidying up, she went outside and Disapparated.

The Burrow was very quiet, so she expected that most of the household still slumbered, but as she made her way towards the door, she noticed Ron walking towards a copse of trees near the end of their property. Deciding to speak to him while he was alone, she quickly followed him.

"Hello, Ron," she said when she got in range.

He spun around, smiled, and approached her, arms open. She allowed him to embrace her for a moment and then pulled away.

"We should talk," she said quietly.

His blue eyes darkened slightly, and he said, "I won't like this, will I?"

"I don't know."

Ron took her hand and led her to the thick trunk of a fallen tree. "This looks all right."

Once seated, she said, "So much time has passed since we were together."

"That doesn't matter to me."

"Yes, it does, Ron, and you know it." She looked away from his confused expression. "I think we're better off as friends."

"It's Snape, isn't it?"

"It's me. I just don't think that I could honestly go back to being the same girl that I was all those months ago. I've changed. You've changed." She shrugged and looked back at him with tears in her eyes. "I don't want to hurt you, I swear it."

"Then don't do this. We can make this work. Everyone is expecting us to be together. It's what I always knew...hoped...would happen."

"Do you want me simply because your family and others assume we'll be together? We should decide our future because of what's in our hearts, not what they want."

"Hermione, I love you. I would have died for you. Don't sit there and tell me you think I only want this because of some force of habit!"

"You would have died for Harry, too, Ron, and I think you are confusing loyalty, friendship, and a whole other kind of love with the real thing." She reached out to touch his face. "I'll always want to be a part of your life...as we were before, friends."

He said nothing for a long while, simply stared straight ahead as if lost in thought. When he finally spoke, his voice was calm. "I should never have gone to Lavender."

"You weren't thinking. You..."

"I fucked up."

"It's not that, Ron. I swear it."

"I used her. I don't care for her that way."

"Then, yes, it is wrong."

"Hermione, are you planning on going to Snape?" When she blushed and said nothing, he added, "Be honest with me. I deserve it."

And she remembered telling Severus nearly those same words. Ron did deserve to know. "He's told me to move on with my life, but eventually, I do think I'd like to maybe see where he and I could take a relationship."

"I just don't understand how you could feel that way about that*git*."

"If someone had told me this last year, I'd have thought they were mental, but now that I know him, I can't help but to feel this way. I'm sorry, Ron."

"I'm sorry, too, and this hurts, Hermione. I don't like it. Some of what you're saying makes sense, but I do love you. I won't pressure you into anything. Take your time to do what you need to do, all right?"

"I think you should talk to Lavender."

"What for?"

"Well, you need to apologize for using her for one, and if you don't want anything with her, you need to make that plain."

"I told her that last night." His cheeks reddened. "She came round wanting to talk. I told her that I wanted you."

"But now that you know you and I will likely never be a possibility, does it not change how you see Lavender? Maybe there would be a chance."

He shook his head. "I don't know, but I can at least explain to her that it's not just you that I don't go back to her, eh? That might make her feel better. I can just let her know it's me, and I need some time."

Hermione nodded her agreement and leaned in to hug him. "I'll always treasure what we had. I promise."

"Me too."

"Well, shall we go up and tell the family the news together then?"

He stood and pulled her up with him. "Yeah. I'd like that." His stomach growled. "Wonder if mum is done with the bangers. I'm hungry."

"As you always are!" Hermione said, laughing at his expression. She knew then that things would work out for them all.

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"Mum! Look!" Hermione exclaimed, waving a parchment in the air. "I got it! The contract with the publishing company!"

"Oh, how exciting! I knew they would accept after reading a sample of your work."

"Well, it took them long enough to decide. They told me they'd respond within four weeks, not six!"

"Congratulations, love. I look forward to helping with your editing if you need it."

"Thanks, Mum. I may indeed."

"I expect there's someone else you'd like to share this news with?"

Hermione smiled and nodded. "Do you think I should go to him?"

"You've not seen him in so long."

"We exchange owls every few days, Mum."

"Do you feel it's time to go to him?"

Hermione thought this over for a moment, glad she'd confided everything to her parents. "Yes."

"Then go to him."

"What about tonight? Dad wanted us to all go out to eat."

"Perhaps your friend would join us in celebrating? It would be a way of meeting him finally."

"And what a clever reason for me to pop over. Thanks, Mum." She hugged her mother and Disapparated away with a small pop.

Hermione had already been to Spinner's End, just to see where it was that Severus lived, though she hadn't let him know she'd been there. So Apparating to the cobblestone street wasn't a problem for her, even if the distance was a bit longer. On her last visit, a neat pointing spell had located his home for her, and she took the path that it had showed her last time, passing by many neglected and seemingly abandoned homes before getting to the very last home on the street.

Purposefully, if a bit nervously, she made her way to his front door and knocked lightly. What would she find in his expression when he opened the door? Would he be glad to see her? Would he realize exactly what it meant...her visit?

The door opened slightly, only a small crack allowed her to see a sliver of his face, dark hair covering the eye that stared out at her. It immediately widened. "Hermione," he said in greeting.

"Hi."

"Come in."

She walked in and waited while he closed and locked the door behind him. "This way," he said, pointing to a small sitting room on their right.

"Oh, look at all the books!" she murmured.

"That would be the first thing you'd notice," he said dryly.

"How can I not? The walls are lined with them!"

He gave her a small smile and nodded towards the couch. "Would you like something to drink?"

"In a moment," she said, waving his question away, "something wonderful has happened."

"Oh?" He sat across from her in a rickety chair. "Do tell."

Instead of saying anything, she gave him the crumpled parchment she still held in her hand and watched as his expression brightened.

"Congratulations, Hermione, they've answered finally!"

"Yes, finally!" She grinned. "My parents and I planned on dining out tonight. Now we'll have something to celebrate."

"You could have just... owed this to me," he said softly.

"I could have, but I wanted to personally invite you to dine with us. I wouldn't want to celebrate without you."

"I..."

"My parents would love to meet you finally," she urged when his voice trailed away.

"Indeed? What do they know about me?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, I left nothing out." She blushed suddenly. "Well, some things... you know."

This made him chuckle deeply for a moment before his gaze turned serious. "Why are you really here?"

"I've just told you."

"No other reason?"

She didn't know how to word what she wanted to say, so she simply said, "For you, of course."

"After all this time, you still choose me? Am I truly what you want?"

There was a hint of surprise in his voice, and it made her heart respond to him so much more. "Yes, still. I thought you knew."

He went to her then and leaned down to capture her lips with his. He felt so good to her...warm and soft. How she'd longed to have his kiss again! Bringing her arms up around his neck, she tried to pull him down onto the couch with her, but he resisted.

"Would you like to stay a while before going back to get ready for dinner?"

She nodded. "I want you to hold me... want to make love with you."

He pulled her up and held her as he Apparated them to his bedroom. She looked around for a moment and noticed that it was sparsely furnished and definitely had not seen a woman's touch in a long time. However, she appreciated that the bed looked comfortable and inviting.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

In answer, she shakily pulled her blouse up over her head, revealing her silk-clad breasts to him. He stepped forward and placed kisses along her throat while he unfastened her jeans. She made quick work of the buttons on his grey shirt. When his lips again met hers, she wriggled out of her jeans as he peeled his shirt away, leaving him in only his trousers, on which her fingers began to fumble with his fly.

"Damn it," she muttered in frustration when she couldn't unfasten them.

He smirked and said, "Allow me." In an instant, they were pushed down and kicked away with her clothes, leaving them both in only their underclothing.

Hermione sat on the bed and scooted towards the middle, crooking her finger at him. He followed eagerly and kissed his way up her body until his eyes met hers. "I do love you," he said.

"I know," she replied happily, "and I love you."

Hands roamed, tongues tangled, and bodies moved together. Hermione's bra and knickers were tossed to the floor, and Severus slid out of his underpants. Feeling his skin against hers once again made her feel like she was home. There would be no pretense this time, no faking.

As one of his fingers slid into her wet heat and his mouth nibbled the underside of her breast, she moaned and reached down to stroke his hardness. "I want you," she murmured.

And then he was pushing into her slowly, filling her with the sensation of pleasurable friction. "My God, you're so hot... wet... tight."

Instead of keeping her hands on his shoulders, she slid them down his back and gripped his arse while wrapping her legs around his thighs. Accidentally, she forced him to slide all the way in, deeply and quickly.

"Anh!"

"All right?" he asked worriedly.

"It... feels good. Do it again." Together they began to move, each relishing the feel of the other, taking the time to explore the other's body, mouths nipping, kissing, and laving anything within its reach.

Hermione had never felt anything so pleasant in all her explorations of her body or past experiences combined. The pressure his steady strokes filled her with made her feel like soaring. A feeling that made her giddy and tingly all over began to come to her, making her move quickly along with him, wanting to feel his pelvis grind against hers, wanting to take him inside her so deeply that two became one.

"Severus!" she said, suddenly exploding with feeling. "OH GOD!" Behind her closed eyelids, she thought she could see flashes of white stars as the feeling intensified and then slowly ebbed away, leaving her feeling limp and pliant.

A whisper: "Hermione," and he followed her into bliss, reaching his own culmination. Panting, they both lay there, simply enjoying the feeling of being joined and being together.

"I'd like just a small nap, I think," Hermione finally said when he moved to lie on his back next to her.



"All right, but I do want to meet your parents, so we'll have to try not to get tangled up in anything else," he admitted. "I hope that we can all get on well."

"I've no doubt that you will." She grinned and looked over at him. "There's no more running, my Prince. Your flight is over."

He simply smiled, turned to face her, and placed his head on her chest and held her while she toyed with his hair. Before long, he drifted into a soft slumber, followed by his lover.

*Finis*

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**Southern's Notes:** I hadn't planned on ending it just yet, but once I started writing this chapter, I decided to do so. I'd had a little bit of angst planned...her spending time away, etc., but I feel that's unnecessary. This is how I like it, and I hope you do as well. Thank you so much for following this story and for all of the feedback given. I truly appreciate it.

I may add an epilogue at some point, but I sort of like it like this, so I'm not certain.

## Программы и игры для Андроид телефона

*Chapter 23 of 30*

скачать ретурн ту кастл вольфенштайн на андроид <https://apk-smart.com/igry/strelyalki/861-return-to-castle-wolfenstein-vzломannyj.html> скачать ретурн ту кастл вольфенштайн на андроид

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## Программы и игры для Андроид телефона

*Chapter 24 of 30*

приложение для искажения лица <https://apk-smart.com/programmy/827-programma-dlja-iskazhenija-lica.html>  
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## Программы и игры для Андроид телефона

*Chapter 25 of 30*

скачать взломанную игру филворды <https://apk-smart.com/igry/logicheskie/363-filvordy-chity-polnaja-versija.html>  
скачать взломанную игру филворды

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## Программы и игры для Андроид телефона

*Chapter 26 of 30*

скачать weaphones полную версию со всеми оружием <https://apk-smart.com/igry/simulyatory/1576-weaphones-firearms-sim-vol-1-polnaja-versija.html> скачать weaphones полную версию со всеми оружием

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*Chapter 28 of 30*

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