

# The Plight-Trothed Bride

*by beaweasley2*

Hermione, Ginny and Luna, sharing a girl moment, decide to cast a Pairing-Plight Troth Charm on themselves for fun. Each placed in the cauldron one yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flower with sugar and spice and everything nice, and a snip, a snail and puppy-dog tail as they each said the rhyme. For Ginny, the results are exactly what she expected, and for Luna, she was only mildly surprised. However, for Hermione, the results were disastrous! She thought she'd be paired to Ron and live happily ever after. So what happened and why is she seeing Professor Snape in her dreams? He's dead – isn't he?

## The Moon-Song Rhythm

*Chapter 1 of 63*

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A huge thank you and hugs to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69 for all her help, suggestions and clean-up work. I appreciate it very much, who without her help this story would never get validated on this site!

\*Warning this story is explicit this story's mostly graphic sexual situations.\*

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### The Moon-Song Rhythm

It was a quiet night at the Burrow, and while the world outside still celebrated the second and final fall of Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle, the six young people that had lived and fought throughout the war, fought in each big battle, sought out only peace and quiet with each other's company instead. For them the fall of Voldemort would mean peace, blissful peace. Mrs. and Mr. Weasley were currently at a meeting at Hogwarts. Molly had started volunteering at St. Mungo's lately to help with the large surge of wounded and cursed patients, victims of the last battle, and Mr. Weasley was busy at the Ministry, trying to help with the chaos of the aftermath.

Hermione was glad to be sitting in her pajamas, sipping hot chocolate and staring at a circle of tired but friendly faces. Ginny rested her head on Harry's shoulder while Neville sat on the floor in front of Luna, who was sitting crossed-legged in a large chair. She and Neville had already finished their accounting of the previous year. Hermione, returning from the kitchen with fresh pitcher of hot chocolate to refresh everyone's cups, had opted for the floor near Ron's feet while Harry finished sharing his story of what had happened in the Forbidden Forest and the memories he'd seen in the Pensieve.

They had been taking turns, filling in the gaps of what they each knew, giving the six friends a full understanding of all that had happened, in a sense giving closure to years of knowing, anticipating and finally taking on the darkest of wizards and, in Hermione's humble opinion, the cruelest. With all they had been through together, stood by each

other, this was the only way Hermione wanted it to be. It sure beat crying over the losses, which still weighed heavily on her heart.

"Well, that's about all I remember," Harry said, the last to speak.

Neville looked at Ron, then at Harry, in awe. "Who would have thought, Harry, that you had a piece of him in you? Wow. And the what did you call them Horcruxes! That must have been a task. And you, Ron, you you pulled out Gryffindor's sword from the pond and saved Harry's life, rode a dragon and fought those Death Eaters off after saying his name. And to think all I was worried about was getting food and keeping the Room of Requirement open."

"Don't sell yourself short, Neville," Harry said, smiling at his friend. "You also kept Dumbledore's Army going, caused havoc and mayhem for the Death Eaters at the school. You also summoned everyone to the castle in time to fight Riddle *and* killed Riddle's snake. *That* was a big thing, too. That snake was a Horcrux, Neville. Without her dead, Riddle would have won."

Neville looked at Harry, gobsmacked.

"I'm just glad to be here together," Luna said. "It's nice, this quiet recounting between friends."

"I couldn't agree more, Luna," Hermione and Ginny stated softly, then smiled at each other.

Harry placed his hand on Ginny's head, slowly stroking her hair. "Yes, this just feels right. The six of us... my closest friends."

Neville looked at Harry, extremely pleased, while Luna simply stared into the fire, a big, warm smile on her face.

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Upstairs in Ginny's room, Luna looked out the window, gazing at the moon. "Moon bright, moonlight, make my wish come true this night. Wish I may, wish I might, know my true love's heart tonight.

"Moon bright, moonlight, make my wish come true this night. Wish I may, wish I might, have my true love's troth tonight," Ginny said, mimicking Luna, and laughing softly.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked. "I've heard of star light, star bright, first star I see tonight before, but I've never heard of anyone that wished on the moon before."

"Try it," Luna said dreamily.

"Moon bright, moonlight," Hermione said, feeling foolish. "Wish I may, wish I might, know my true heart's love tonight." She turned from the window and looked at her friends in bewilderment. "Okay, now I really feel foolish."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"What does that do?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing really," Ginny answered.

"Unless you drink the potion on the night of a full moon when you say it, then it comes true." Both girls looked at Luna. "No, really, it works. But you have to really want to know, and it's magic so you have to *really* want it."

"Oh, do you know the potion?" Ginny asked Luna.

"Yes. I have it in my diary..." She dug out a diary from her bag that looked like a magical Bedazzler had attacked it. "Here it is: rain water, a unicorn horn and mooncolt tears... hawthorn, asparagus root, lavender, quince, honey, horny goat weed, maiden's root and damiana... Coat yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flowers with cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, ginger, raw sugar, stevia and drop them in the potion with a snip, a snail and puppy dogtail."

"I have most of that!" Ginny exclaimed. "Does it work?"

"Oh, yes, although, it's permanent magically binding. My mum did it and married my dad. They were very much in love."

"What's a snip?" Hermione asked, confused.

"Hermione, it's something wizard boys get into trouble doing," Ginny started to explain, giggling.

Luna smiled at Hermione, interjecting, "Course, girls get scolded for it, too, but not as often." Luna tilted her head at Hermione's perplexed look. "Your mum never scolded you for taking snips?"

Hermione shrugged and Ginny laughed at her. "Taking twigs from a wand tree you know one that has Bowtruckles in it." Ginny turned to Luna. "She grew up in a Muggle home; her mum never scolded her for taking snips."

Luna blushed. "Oh, I'm sorry. It just seems... That should have come up when we read about Bowtruckles in school. They get really angry when little boys, or girls, break off twigs from their trees."

"Kids break off the twigs to make pretend wands, but you can get attacked by the Bowtruckles for doing it and get hurt," Ginny said, clarifying it for Hermione. "I remember Mum yelling at Fred and George for doing it loads of times. Ron too."

Hermione nodded in understanding as Luna looked down at her diary, her finger skimming the page as she read. "A snip, a snail and a puppy dogtail... that's added at the end."

"We have yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flowers next to the house, there is a rain catch in the by the back stoop, and we have puppy dogtails growing down by the pond! I have mooncolt hair and tears as well as a unicorn horn that I collected with Fred and George before they left school! Mum uses cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, ginger, raw sugar and stevia in her tarts all the time so what else do we need?"

"We have a large beech tree next the stream by our house there are Bowtruckles that live in it... So that leaves... Hawthorn, asparagus root, lavender, quince, honey, horny goat weed, maiden's root, damiana and a snail," Luna said idly. "And we each need a teacup in our favorite color... a deep pool of water... and a full moon."

"So, why don't we try it?" Ginny asked, smiling.

"You've got to be kidding?" Hermione gasped.

"Why ever not?" Ginny asked in reply. "You know you love Ron. I love Harry... no problem there. Luna?"

Luna closed her diary and stared dreamily out the window. "It would be nice to know..."

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Two weeks later on a warm June night, Luna, Ginny and Hermione sat clustered around Hermione's cauldron on the bank of a deep pool in the stream near Luna's home,

waiting for the full moon to rise. Steam rose from the pool from the Warming Charm Hermione had had Ginny cast while she and Luna brewed the potion, giving the area around them a surreal feeling. Each girl held a stem of a small cluster of flowers in purple, lavender and white, the yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flowers, coated heavily in the sugar and spice ingredients of the potion. They also held a small snail, a snip from the Bowtruckle tree and a puppy dogtail, careful not to allow them to touch the flowers too early.

Hermione couldn't believe she was actually going through with this. *I mean, I'm in love with Ron, right? This is only to confirm that... I hope*

The moon broke through the clouds, and each girl dropped her flowers in the cauldron saying the Moon-Song Incantation. "Moon bright, moonlight, make my wish come true this night." Each girl dropped in the rest of the spices and sugar from her small dish.

"Wish I may, wish I might," they each continued in unison.

"Know my true love's heart tonight," Luna said, adding in her snip, snail and puppy dogtail.

Ginny quickly added in her puppy dogtail, snip and her snail. "Have my true love's troth tonight," Ginny said, crossing her fingers.

"Know my true heart's true love tonight," Hermione said, her mind warring with good common sense as she let the snip, snail and puppy dogtail fall into the potion.

Iridescent steam began rise and curl from the potion, and it emitted thousands of tiny sparkles that flew up into the night sky. Each girl put in her stirring rod, stirring three times in synchronization. Luna quickly lifted the cauldron and poured the liquid into the large pitcher, covered with a cheesecloth, allowing the sweet smelling potion to separate. She placed the remnants of the potion, rolled up carefully in the cheesecloth, back into the cauldron and then poured each girl a cup of the liquid. Luna then held up her diary so that they could read the next line of the spell.

"I drink to know my true heart's intended, my wand mate, my match," Ginny and Luna said, lifting their cups to the moon and drank the tea.

Hermione lifted her cup. "I drink to know my true love... Oh, I drink to know my heart's intended, my wand mate, my true match." She drank the tea, surprised at how good the tea tasted.

"All right, now we take a bath," Luna said, rising and removing her robe. "We get in the water... It will be big enough for all three of us."

"But then won't our intended see all three of us?" Ginny asked, nervously removing her robe and quickly following Luna into the water.

"No, only the one girl he's destined to be for," Luna said, smiling, easing down up to her neck. "He'll only have eyes for her, be drawn to her, and by the next new moon, he will come to her and claim her."

"Well, can't hurt to have this confirmed," Hermione said, quickly dropping her robe and climbing in. Luna pulled out remnants in the cheesecloth from Hermione's cauldron, releasing the crystals and herbs into the warm water. The water swirled, bubbled, the steam rising off the warm water turning iridescent, and the aroma filled the air. Within minutes, Hermione found herself relaxing, floating, her mind drifting...

*She could feel a soft movement in the water, and she reached out, her fingers touching skin, firm, solid and the slight whisper of hair on a man's chest. Something or someone reached out tentatively, touching her, long strong fingers gently exploring her. She felt a hand cup her breast as another caressed her arm, sliding down to her shoulder and around to her back, drawing her to him. His strong arm wrapped around her, holding her body to his. Hermione kept her eyes closed, engrossed in the sensations of this dream. A mouth touched her cheek, her lips as his fingers flicked at her nipple, his other hand cupping her hips and supporting her. Hermione, emboldened by the dream, explored his body recklessly with her hands, tracing hard muscle and well-defined pectorals, his firm rippled abdomen, and as far down as her fingers could touch, then wound her arms around his body, luxuriating in the feel of his skin against her naked body.*

*He held her, one arm keeping her groin tightly against his. She could feel his penis slide along her thigh and between them. His fingers slid down to touch her, stroking her between her folds. Twice a jolt of sensation shot through her, and she gasped each time, eliciting the sensation of a low rumbling laugh from him against her skin. His tongue licked her nipple, and he suckled on her breast as his hand created sensations she'd never felt before. His long finger slipped inside her as his thumb continued to stimulate her. Hermione ran her hands on his skin, trying to kiss him. The build of a pressure sensation intensified in her groin, rolling out in waves, and her head fell back. She arched her back, pushing her body down on his hand, wanting more. Her mind cried out as the sensation erased all thought, and she tightened and relaxed her body as the pressure released, making her feel feather light and as liquid as water.*

*For the second time, he began to move, exploring her, and she opened her eyes slowly. He had come level with her, his face nestled against her neck as his hands opened her, allowing him to press at her entrance. He nibbled and licked at the sensitive skin under her ear as his hand played with her, his penis sliding on her crotch. In one swift move, he was at her entrance, his teeth nibbling on her ear lobe, and he pushed slightly. She moaned as the feeling of him entering her mixed with the teasing pleasure of his mouth. He moved to kiss her, his tongue teasing her as he drew his body away slightly, then pushed into her some more. Hermione moaned again, his mouth on hers swallowing her protest as his finger found that sensitive spot again and flicked it. The jolt of sensation distracted her as he pushed in further, then further, burying himself in her. His kisses and his fingers distracted her each time before he pushed, befuddling her mind, until he was fully within her.*

*He held her firmly against him, as if waiting. His eyes roamed down her body, drinking in her nakedness with his gaze, the water making his hair dark and limp as it hung down heavily, obscuring his face from her. He drew out slowly, then pushed back in equally slow movements until she felt his groin meet hers. In long, deliberately slow strokes, he pulled out, then eased back into her. His mouth closed over her other breast, his tongue flicking her nipple in contrast to his slow movements. Hermione closed her eyes, floating in his arms, holding onto him and trying to move with him.*

*He pushed in, holding her firmly, and then rolled them over, making her straddle his hips. His hands on her hips lifted her away from him, and she pushed herself back down, rocking her hips as if riding a horse. His fingers glided slowly across to her groin, his thumb pressing against her sensitive spot as his other hand gripped her hips, helping her lift and plunge on his shaft. Her breathing became hard, panting, as she took pleasure in riding him. She placed her hands on her thighs, her head down, her mind on nothing but the feel of his penis as it moved in and out of her and the building sensation deep in her groin. He moved with her, and she leaned back, her center throbbing, sensitized beyond endurance as she slid along him.*

*He grasped her hips, his need growing as he began to thrust in and withdraw out of her with more urgency. Hermione's head fell back, her mind focused only on the sensations within her own body. She cried as she came again, crashing waves rippling through her as her body melted, her every muscle giving in and letting go, supported only by his fierce driving need as he expelled in her. Hermione lifted her head and looked at her lover's face in post climatic bliss. He cupped her face, her soft brown eyes meeting fathomless dark ones, fringed by long, black lashes, a hooked nose and the black hair of Severus Snape!*

~Kilometers away in Wiltshire~

She appeared before him like an apparition, floating just in front of him within easy reach. Her naked body was perfect, exactly how he imagined she'd be, how he remembered her, although her wet hair obscured her face. She reached out and touched him, her delicate fingertips caressed his skin, fingering his chest hairs and tracing the curve of his chest. He reached out to touch her, his fingers meeting warm, supple flesh, and he cupped her breast as he pulled her to him. His mouth found her cheek first, then her lips as he fondled her breast, grasping her hip to pull her to him and not let her slip away. Her touch became more daring as it moved over his body, even though she was inexperienced and naïve, which pleased him.

He held her, his penis growing stiff against her soft skin. 'I can't rush this or I'll hurt her.' He glided his hand down, and she didn't push him away not this time. His fingers found her heat, the soft lips, and he slid his fingers through them, exploring her. He smiled as he leaned down to capture her breast with his mouth, licking and suckling her

perfect, pert nipple. She jerked as his fingers found her spot, and he laughed softly against her skin. His slipped a finger inside her as his thumb continued to stimulate her. She ran her hands on his skin, kissing the top of his head. 'I'm going to have her; she's going to finally be mine my intended.'

Her head fell back, and she arched her back, pushing her body down on his hand, wanting more. Her mouth opened as if gasping silently as she tightened and then relaxed her hips, and he knew that she'd come. 'Now my turn...'

He cupped her face as he trailed kisses along her neck and shoulders, suckling her breast. He used his hand to touch every sensitive spot he knew of with gentle caresses and buried his face against her neck as his hands opened her, allowing him to press his stiff penis at her entrance. He nibbled and licked at the sensitive skin under her ear as his hand played with her, positioning himself at her entrance. His teeth nibbled on her ear lobe, and he pushed slightly. Her mouth opened, but she didn't cry out, and he covered her mouth with his, kissing her as he pushed in again, and he felt the vibration of her moan. He slid his hand down, finding her sensitive spot, and flicked it as he pushed in again, her squeezing down on his shaft with each thrust, driving him to want more, each time slipping in deeper into her moist, warm, sheath.

He held her firmly against him, keeping himself fully nestled inside her, waiting. He cupped her face, his dark eyes roamed down her throat, drinking in the perfect form of her body. She relaxed. 'Good. Slow, move slow.' He drew out and eased back into her. He suckled her breast, his tongue flicking her nipple as felt her gasp. 'Good, so you like this...' Keeping himself still sheathed inside her warmth, desperately clinging to her and not wanting the contact to end. He rolled them over, making her straddle his hips, surprised at how easily he managed this. 'All right, witch, ride me. I want to feel you slide down on me...'

He gripped her hips, guiding her to move her body on his penis, enjoying the gliding sensation, the slick, smooth feel of her, letting her body weight push herself down onto him. She was so wet, her sheath almost dripping wet, and form fitting to him. Her head hung down, her hair falling forward, and she slid her hands on her legs as she moved. Each of her lifting movements threatened to dislodge him, sliding all the way to his tip, before she plunged down. 'Gods, yes, take me in... squeeze down as you move... That's right.' He pulled her tighter, pressing his groin against hers with each downward stroke. 'She is mine. I'm not letting you go...' She squeezed with each plunge, giving him extra stimulation with each stroke. 'Yes... Oh, you're a goddess...'

He slid his hand down, pressing his thumb against her sensitive spot as his other hand grasped her hips, urging her to move faster. She leaned back, her hips shifting slightly, and he smiled as her head fell back in ecstasy. Her breathing became hard panting. He moved with her, his need growing as he began to thrust in and withdraw out of her with more urgency. He couldn't believe he was encased in her warm, moist sleeve, her pliable flesh accepting his rock hard shaft, her moisture dripping down on his groin.

Her head rolled slightly as she squeezed down on him, her legs tightening on his hips. He felt himself jerk, growing even harder inside her, and began to move within her with more urgency. He felt the tightening of his core, his balls squeezing, the sensation building at the base of penis and growing, then channeling down to his tip. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as she came again, his fierce driving need bursting finally as he expelled in her in hot, jetting spurts... the mind-blowing spasm in his penis shaft, his essence jetting out in cataclysmic bliss.

She lifted her head and looked at her lover's face in post climatic bliss. Severus looked up at her, her rose-colored lips swollen from his kisses, the long strands of hair framing her face, her dark lashes framing her soft brown eyes, which were gazing into his dark ones with a satisfied smile. She was not who he'd thought it was. The witch above him was none other than Hermione Granger!

'This cannot be real! She cannot be... I'd never... She's a child!' His penis twitched belying his denial. 'It's a dream... It's only a dream... But why in Hades would I dream of making love to Hermione Granger of all witches?'

He opened his eyes to see Narcissa leaning over him. "Well, welcome back from the dead," she said, smiling down at him.

~H~

"Hermione, are you okay?" Ginny was standing next to Hermione looking at her worriedly.

Hermione was still floating in the water, although she felt like she'd just made love to Severus Snape! It was the most vivid, dramatic experience of her life, and it wasn't real. *Nevertheless, it felt real.* Her body still tingled from his touch, her groin still throbbed from the intercourse of the phantom lovemaking, and her lips felt swollen and bruised from his passionate kisses. Her heart rate was slowly decreasing, but Hermione could still feel her heart pound in her chest, and her breathing was erratic and deep.

"Hermione, answer me," Ginny said, alarmed.

"She's all right. She's just post climatic right now. It'll pass," Luna said, sitting on a rock, kicking her toes in the water. "So, who did you see?"

Ginny looked up at Luna. "I saw Harry," she said, blushing.

"And how was he?" Luna asked, letting water drip from foot, her leg outstretched as she examined her toes.

"Kind of klutzy and awkward..." Ginny said, blushing a deeper pink.

"I saw Neville. I'd never have guessed him," she stated, lifting her foot again to watch the water drip from her toes and heel. "He likes my toes and my ears. I'll have to get used to that."

"Was it real?" Hermione asked, suddenly wanting to be told it was just a dream and nothing more.

"No, but it will be," Luna said.

Hermione gasped. "It will be? How can it?" *There has to be some mistake! I love Ron! I do really! Not Severus Snape!*

"He will be drawn to you before the next new moon," Luna said, watching the water run off her foot again.

Hermione sat bolt upright, completely forgetting she was nude. "But he's dead!" she cried out.

"Ron's alive, Hermione," Ginny assured her, confused.

"I didn't see Ron," Hermione blurted out, then turned to look up at the full moon. "It wasn't him. I saw... Snape," she admitted in a hushed voice.

"You didn't?!" Ginny asked, gobsmacked as Luna said, "He can't be dead then."

Hermione sat up in the water. "But I saw him die!"

"He can't be dead, or you two wouldn't have connected," Luna said, slipping into the water again. "You'll see."

~MoM~

The next morning in the Ministry of Magic, in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department, Maggie Whitmire noticed that there were three new entries in her ledger from the magical quill. She pulled out her spectacles to read the names of the new couples. *Luna Leanne Lovegood and Neville Wilton Gerald Longbottom pending... Oh, how lovely. Ginevra Molly Weasley and Harry James Potter pending... But still this means that they are either considering the union or have performed a Magical Pairing-Plight Charm, and according to the old traditions, are for all intents and purposes engaged. Oh, that's delightful!*

And so was Hermione Jane Granger and... No! It can't be Severus Sean Snape? Pending, as well. Oh, my goodness!

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Author's notes:

What are little boys made of?

Snips and snails, and puppy dogs tails that's what little boys are made of!

What are little girls made of?

Sugar and spice and all things nice that's what little girls are made of!

For purposes of this story, think of a puppy dogtail as a type of cattail, only shorter and curved like a puppy dog's tail; a shorter version of the rush like plant that likes to live in clean moving water such as streams and clear lakes, as opposed to cattails that like murky ponds, streams and swamp water. Hence, that is why I have them spelled the way I do.

Yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flowers are real. The simple flowers of yesterday-today-and-tomorrow go through a metamorphosis that has earned it its common name. The delicate, two-inch, five-petal blooms open up with a deep violet blue color with a white eye. Within a day or so, the petal color changes to pale violet. By the third or fourth day, the color fades again to nearly white, and in four days after that, the flower wilts and falls off. The flowers emit a sweet, sugary, candy-like fragrance from the time the flowers are still in budding, which lasts until the flower wilts and the scent doesn't fade or change along with the color.

The Original Prompt read:

#7. Hermione, Ginny and Luna, sharing a girl moment, decide to cast a Pairing-Plight Troth Charm on themselves. {Each places in a cauldron one flower with sugar and spice and everything nice, and a snip, a snail and puppy-dog tail (could be a magical plant), and they each have to say a rhyme. Make it up; be silly and original to fit the girl that says it. Only the results don't come out as the girls expected. Who is now betrothed magically to whom? How do the men react, especially since it's a MAGICAL BINDING? And just why is the Ministry so pleased?

## Burgeoning Consequence

Chapter 2 of 63

As if caught in a web she never meant to weave, Hermione is plagued by the vivid and seductive dreams she's having. Even Ginny is having the same type of dreams, but Hermione can hardly believe it's for real.

Severus, acutely aware of what has happened to him, decides not only to take control of his dreams but to also find out exactly which spell he is under.

\*Warning this story is explicit this story is mostly graphic sexual situations.\*

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Burgeoning Consequence

~H~

Stiff and sore from attending the Chudley Cannons home game, Hermione decided to slip away after dinner and have a bath. All through dinner Harry had been literally staring at Ginny with big dopey eyes and developed a problem getting his food into his mouth each time Ginny pulled her fork slowly out of hers. Thrice during pudding, Ginny licked some of her pudding from the spoon before putting it in her mouth, and Harry had literally squirmed. It'd been comical to watch.

Ron was shoveling in his food, talking about the latest miracle win that the Chudley Cannons somehow managed to pull off, giving a full accounting *again*, for the fifth time. He had recounted, *repeatedly*, on how Saunders and Spudmore had made nine scores, how Saunders had intercepted the Quaffle from the Pride of Portree Keeper, Meghan McCormick, three times, and how Jenkins had knocked the Bludger into Catriona McCormack, knocking her out. Still, the Pride of Portree had lost when Galvin Gudgeon caught the Snitch, ending the match at two hundred and eighty to two hundred and seventy. But to hear Ron tell it, the game had been a sweep!

Hermione washed her hair and worked her deep conditioner in through the ends, twisting her hair in a loose knot on her head, and settled in for a soak, letting the warm water and bubble bath ease her mind and tension. She closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of the Burrow, so different from the quiet of her parents' house. There was thumping on the stairs, doors opening and closing, Mrs. Weasley warning Ron to put down the Quaffle Harry had bought him. Ginny laughing. A crash, Hermione supposed was caused by Ron tossing the Quaffle, probably to Harry, and Mrs. Weasley shrieking at him...

She closed her eyes, smiling.

*Almost immediately Hermione felt like she was floating as if suspended, lying next to a warm body before she realized that she was lying in silky sheets. He turned, rolling over, and propped himself up on one elbow to look at her lying there. His face was partially hidden by his black hair, but there was no mistaking his hand as it reached out and touched her, grasping her breast and pinching her nipple. She reached out and grabbed his hand, and he turned to look at her, his dark eyes questioning. Slowly, she traced a finger of his hand that lay on her breast, outlining each finger until he moved it, sliding his hand down her stomach to her side of her waist. He leaned down to kiss her as he pulled her to him. He teased her with his tongue, sucking on her lower lip, and kissed her passionately. Hermione tried to kiss him back, sliding her hand into his soft, silky hair, but he pulled away, staring at her. He slowly kicked the covers away that covered them, and she looked down, watching as his body became exposed. He was thin, but his body was mostly lean muscle. His abdomen was rippled like the models in magazines, and the hair on his chest made a line that trailed down his stomach and widened as he kicked the covers down further, exposing his pubic hair. Hermione's eyes widened as she saw his penis, soft and floppy at first, jerk and twitch, slowly growing stiffer as she stared at it.*

*He cupped her face and turned her toward him, his mouth connecting to hers hungrily. He shifted his body, partially covering hers as he leaned over her. His hand trailed down her body, caressing her breast, then glided lazily down to her groin. It wasn't long before he had her pinned under him, panting with desire and pleading for him to touch her. With one easy move, he separated her legs and settled between them, his penis prodding for entry. She groaned as his fingers opened her, guiding himself into her. She inhaled sharply as he filled her. He moved within her slowly with long, languid movements as he kissed her savagely. She glided her hands over his body, exploring every lean muscle: his arms, shoulders, his back, down to his hips, cupping his buttocks, and back to his lower back, feeling him flex and move as he moved within her.*

*After a while, he pulled one of her legs up, then rolled with her until she was lying on top of him. He grasped her knee to prevent her from straightening it and pushed her to sit up. Like before, she straddled him, allowing him to position himself, and she sunk down on him. His lips curled into a smile as she lifted and lowered again, and began to move, riding him. Her head dropped forward as she lost herself in the feeling she was controlling, her hands pressing down on his firm stomach, feeling his abdominal muscles clench each time he thrust up into her, meeting her downward strokes. His hand slipped between them, his fingers warm against her groin as his thumb caressed her in little circles, and the sensations of erotic pressure began to build in her. Lost in the feelings inside her, the fullness of him, she leaned back, her head tilting backwards, and groaned in pleasure. He continued to fondle her. Hermione moved her arms around behind her, grasping his legs. As the feelings intensified, she sat up, unable to keep moving as well, unable to concentrate on both moving and the sensations she felt. He smiled as he pulled her down, grasped her to him tightly, and flipped her onto her back, thrusting into her with urging need. Hermione screamed as she felt her release flood through her, her body shivering. His eyes were watching her, his mouth a snarl as he increased his tempo, driving into her. His release was hard and almost looked painful as his eyes closed and his head jerked up, his mouth slightly open as if growling.*

*He stayed firmly inside her as his face relaxed, and slowly, his gaze returned to hers, dark eyes staring at her with a smug look of accomplishment*

Hermione gasped, and she sat up, her breathing hard, her heart pounding in her ears... Gradually, she became aware of a gentle knocking on the loo door.

"Oi! Hermione, you okay in there?" Ron asked, sounding worried. "You're not drowning are you?"

*Yes, Ron, I'm drowning! I'm falling, and sinking, and losing my mind!* "No, I'm fine, really! I'll be out in a minute," she called out, pulling herself up into a sitting position. Her body was still shaking, her breathing still harsh, and her heart was pounding erratically. *Oh, please help me...! This cannot be real it just cannot be real!*

"Hermione?" Ron asked through the door. "Do you need help?"

*No, Ron, you cannot help me...* "No, I'm fine. I ah just dosed off to sleep I think," she lied *And made love to Severus Snape again in his bed! His bed if that was his bed and I wanted him! Circe! I really wanted to... with him!* Her breathing was returning to normal, but her heart still raced.

"Hermione?" Ron asked again. "Do you want me to get Mum?"

"No, Ron! I'm Fine," she yelled at him. "Please, just go. I'll be out shortly."

\*

The moon reflected on the water around her as the current swept around her legs. Hermione slipped into the deep pool of water and sank down to her chin, watching the water ripple away from her. She laid her head back and lifted her legs, floating lazily in the center of the pool, moving her arms on the surface. The current of the stream passed around her as if she were immobile as a rock, gently caressing her skin. Her body glowed smooth and creamy in the soft moonlight in contrast to the silver-flecked, dark water around her. Hands, warm and firm, glided up her legs to her hips, pulling her against a warm solid body. She knew he was already aroused the moment their bodies connected. Her arms immediately wrapped around his neck, and she rubbed her body against him, luxuriating in the feel of wet skin on skin. He was standing, the water to his shoulders, his dark hair shielding his face from her. His mouth found her neck, trailing kisses up to her chin as his hands caressed and explored her body, one moving to cup her hips, the other gliding down to touch her sensitive spot.

She wanted to pull away, make him slow down, but his need drove her to need him with nearly matching urgency. Their mouths met in a deep passionate kiss as his thumb flicked her nub and a finger slid inside her. He was making her feel again, warm and breathless, wanton and free. She leaned back in the water giving him her body. His mouth covered a breast, his tongue rolling around her nipple as his fingers stimulated her below. Jolts of pleasure radiated out from her core, and she moaned. He laughed against her breast, and the vibration felt good on her skin. She felt him separate her legs, and she wrapped them around his hips, feeling his penis poke at her entrance, sliding up and down to separate her moist lips and enter her. She whimpered as the sensation of being filled erased all coherent thought.

She looked up to see his face, and the dark penetrating gaze of Severus Snape looked back at her with desire and lust. Hermione let out a gasp, struggling to sit up, but he held her, his penis deep inside her, his eyes possessive. The fingers of one of his hands slid down to touch where the base of his penis met her groin, and he stroked her skin along where they were joined, fondling and rubbing.

She whimpered again as the spontaneous jolts of pleasure shot through her, and he pulled out slightly, the tip of his penis teasing at her entrance again, then plunged in, and the sensation of being filled consumed her, erasing all her protests. He pulled out of her slowly and reentered her with a thrust. With each plunge, he flicked her sensitive spot, making the drive more intense. Her arms flailed out in the water, grasping for him as he repeatedly made his slow withdrawal and deep thrusts, emphasizing each move with a flick of his finger. Her body was tensing, her muscles tightening on him as the growing pressure built within her. She tried to sit up, but he pulled her forcefully against him, and she fell back, her mouth open. "Oh, my... gods! Yes, Ssseveruss," she cried out, nearly screaming as her release broke. He was thrusting harder now. She could feel him as his own release came, and he clutched her body to him, holding them locked together. "Please," she whimpered as his mouth found her breast again and his teeth nipped at her nipple, making Hermione wake up gasping in confusion, pain and post climatic bliss.

"Ouch! How dare you...?" Her groin still throbbed from his intrusion, her nipple hurt from being bitten, and she was breathless, her heart racing erratically as she gasped for air.

"Uh... huh?" Ginny asked from across the room. "What...? Are you...? What's happened?"

Hermione looked around wildly. *It was a dream again! I was shagging Severus Snape in my dreams again!* "Ginny, I'm sorry. Go back to sleep." *Merlin's balls! Why him?* She picked up the flannel she'd tucked under her pillow to wipe away the wetness between her legs.

"Hermione, are you okay," Ginny asked, sitting up. "It's the dream again, isn't it? Is he rough? Did he hurt you? It sounded like he hurt you?"

"He bit me," Hermione said, sitting up to face Ginny. She pulled her pillow onto her lap, hugging it.

"He bit you? No!" Ginny said, worried. "Is he rough with you?"

Oh Circe! Ginny, he's he's so good! Hermione blushed. He's erotic... "No... not usually not most of the time..." He's so passionate and makes me feel and do things... The way he makes me feel...

Ginny got up and walked over to Hermione's cot. "Hermione, what I mean is is it okay? Are you okay with this?"

"Ginny, I don't know what to think. It's Snape. Professor Snape. I've never thought of him in any other way than as my teacher." Hermione pulled at the corner of her pillow. "I mean he can hardly stand me. He's called me silly girl and insufferable more times than I can count... know-it-all and intolerable and he's my my true heart's intended? My wand mate? My match? It has to be a mistake!"

"I don't know," Ginny said reluctantly. "I mean the spell worked. All three of us connected and experienced our first time with well, for me Harry. Even Luna was surprised with who came to her. I really thought it would be Ron, but you've been having recurring dreams right?"

"Yes, every night, the same dream only different; like we are actually coming together and shagging each night." She looked at the door and back to Ginny. "Ginny, he's not Ron it's Snape. What happened?"

"I wish I could tell you," Ginny said, shrugging. "I'm as surprised as you are." Ginny tilted her head, watching Hermione pick at her pillow. "But I hear you. I hear you moaning and watch you tossing. The sounds you make it sounds like he's like you're really into it and like what he's doing."

Hermione blushed and buried her face into the pillow. After several seconds, she nodded. "He's amazing... What he can do what he does do... it's he... Oh, gods, Ginny! If it's anything like in the dreams..."

"Then I'm in for a rough night," Ginny said, giggling. "Think you can give me some pointers?"

~S~

The good thing about being at Malfoy Manor was that the food was good. Breakfast, lunch and dinner arrived like clockwork, sometimes accompanied by either Lucius or Narcissa, usually Lucius. The other thing, which had become important lately, was that the bedding was changed each night when he summoned the house-elves, and they brought freshly cleaned pajama bottoms for him as well. Severus was hoping that the bloody elves who changed his sheets and pajamas were not telling his hosts that he was having wet dreams. *Wet dreams at my age. Realistic and physical wet dreams.* He'd never heard about such a thing. *Except from spells or curses... I'm going to have to start searching the library for books on dreams without rousing Lucius's curiosity or suspicions. There has to be a book any book in that huge library of his that describes these lucid and realistic dreams.* As it was, these dreams were actually helping him recover. *No, that's bloody ridiculous they are just wet dreams... Bloody wet dreams with Hermione Granger! Gods, how I want to throttle her... and feel her writhe under me... gasping for breath, crying out my name, begging me to use her, pleading for my touch....* He mentally shook his head. *Control... nothingness... Get control of your mind... You could do this when it mattered get her out of your head...*

This evening had been normal. Severus had dined on a perfect steak, new potatoes and asparagus and spent an hour or so reading in the library from a very old and rare book while sipping on a very old, fine brandy with Lucius. He'd then had a stroll around the garden and hence returned to bed, exhausted. His book was sitting on the bedside table with a piece of black ribbon marking his page. *House-elves. It must have been... Lucius wouldn't have marked my page, nor known where I'd left off for that matter.*

He closed his eyes for a moment, and she came to him again. *He was walking in the garden, the small fairy lights illuminating the rose bushes, the night jasmine, and the climbing clematis and wisteria vines on the pergola. He'd turned around, and she was standing there, almost floating in front of him in the flimsiest dressing gown he'd ever seen. She shivered in the night air, and instinctively, he pulled her into his arms to warm her. Her arms slid under his cloak, touching bare skin. 'No point in wearing clothes if I'm just going to shag her is there?' He bent down to kiss her, ripping open the gown and drank in her body as he knelt down to kiss her breasts and her stomach. She gripped his shoulders, her head tilting back in enjoyment at the sensation of his tongue on her flesh. He trailed kisses and tender nips up her body as he rose. Her hands roamed over his body, down his hips and cupped his buttocks with a gentle squeeze before gliding up his back as if fascinated by his back muscles. Smiling, he slowly copied her movements as he kissed her and then cupped her buttocks, bringing her tightly against his groin, grinding his penis against her pubic hair. 'Yes, this is what you do to me, Hermione,' he thought, knowing she couldn't hear him. He released her, bringing his hands to her front, sliding up from her waist to her breasts, cupping them, kneading the tender, pert flesh. 'Pert, lovely, nice size... she's mine.' He could feel her moan against his mouth, and he slipped in his tongue deepening the kiss hungrily. 'Merlin's balls, why am I so fascinated by her? Moreover, why does my mind seek her out each night?'*

*He pushed her to step back, leaning her against a vine covered pillar of the pergola, slipping one hand down to her groin and straight to her opening, thrusting a finger inside her. As he knew she would be, she was wet, hot and ready for him. He groaned as he pushed in two fingers, his thumb stroking her nub aggressively. Her knees buckled, and he held her up as she tightened on his hand, her body quaking and her knees weakened. He pulled out and picked her up, pulling her legs to straddle him. He entered her in one swift thrust and pinned her to the pillar, feeling her tighten around him. He ground into her as he moved within her, long forceful strokes. 'Yes, witch, you like me in you, don't you?' he thought, watching her face as she let him use her.*

*He stopped, tugged her hips away from the support of the pillar so that only her back and shoulders supported her, still keeping her legs wrapped tightly around his hips. She grabbed for the vine to keep from falling as he began to thrust into her again, knowing his angle would hit the front wall of her sheath, stroking against her from the inside with each thrust. She gasped as he watched her face. 'Yes, she likes this don't you?' She was squeezing down on his penis with each stroke. Intense pressure built up at his base, his testicles tightened as if restricted by a rubber band. Spasms began to roll from the base of his penis. She stiffened, her legs almost straightened, and he gripped her hard to keep her in position as he pounded into her. The pressure increased painfully in his nads as the spasms at the base increased. 'So close... so close... gods, girl, come for me, Hermione, let yourself go...' Her mouth and eyes opened as a gush of fluid spilled from her, and his testicles relaxed and loosened in response as his own release broke, just suddenly letting go. The rushing release of warm, jetting pulses down his penis shaft, consumed his every thought as he filled her, making one last thrust into her, pinning her roughly to the pillar.*

*She was looking at him with an amazed expression that quickly turned to embarrassment. 'Never knew that you could get so wet did you? Or do you think you urinated on me, Hermione?' He chuckled to himself at her confused expression, which didn't conceal the blissful glow of her post-climatic euphoria. He held still for a short while, then starting to move in her again and stopped. She looked back at him, her eyes wide, and he laughed. 'No, my dear, I'm not through with you...'*

*Lifting her up in his arms, he carried her to the bench just a few steps away. She looked at him, baffled, as he set her down on her feet and turned her away from him. He bent her over, stroking himself before placing his shaft to enter her from behind. She tried to straighten up, but he pulled her against him, unbalancing her, and she grabbed for the bench. He spread her legs, sliding his penis against her opening, and plunged into her, pumping into her. He reached for one of her arms, bringing her hand down to touch herself, making her fingers stroke across her nub and feel him as he moved within her. She squirmed, squeezing her buttocks, and the sensation of her sheath molding around him was driving him to want to move harder faster, urging him. Her fingers stopped moving, and he gripped her hips as he bent over her back. He grabbed her hand again, bringing it back over her shoulder to suck on her fingers, disappointed that he couldn't taste her.*

*'Soon. Soon, I'll have you for real, and I'll taste you then. I'll have you, Hermione, and this won't be a dream any longer,' he thought, his testicles tightening at his declaration, and the pressure in the base of his penis intensified again. He guided her hand back down and around to her groin, making her fondle herself. He could feel her fingertips slide on him with each withdrawal and thrust. 'Yes, witch, I am going to have you. I am going to hear you pant, hear you moan, make you scream my name... Make you come so hard you become weak and limp...' His release broke like a dam bursting open, his hot come jetting out into her, and he collapsed on her back, nearly crushing her into the bench before he realized that she'd come again herself. He grabbed her, pulling her up and against his chest, turning with her to hold her on his lap on the bench. She cradled against him, her head resting on his shoulder, her breathing as hard and erratic as his. 'Gods, what am I doing...'*

Severus woke up, sweating, his heart pounding, his breathing heavy, and saw Lucius Malfoy sitting in the armchair by his bed, his elbows resting on the armrests, and his feet stretched out in front of him. *Bloody hell! And the bad thing about staying here no privacy*

"Nice dream, Severus?" Lucius asked drolly. "I was passing by and heard you moaning."

"A bloody nightmare," Severus said with a scowl. *And another bad thing about staying here is that Lucius and Narcissa keep checking up on me...*

"That's not what it sounded like from here. From here it sounded like a rather good dream to me," Lucius said with an inquisitive grin. "Maybe I should get my Pensieve, and

we could watch it together?"

*I'm not showing you my wet dreams!* Severus' scowled deepened. "No, I think not."

"Seriously, it sounded good too good," Lucius replied, his eyebrow cocked up as he regarded Severus with amused interest.

"Personal love life getting a bit droll?" Severus asked languidly. "It was just a dream let it go."

Lucius smiled and laced his fingers together, still sitting comfortably in his armchair. "Do you need anything before I turn in? Fresh pajamas and fresh sheets perhaps?"

*I said 'let it go...'* "Just a book. I think I'll go down and get a new book," Severus stated, his voice bored.

Lucius rolled his eyes to the thick book on Severus's bedside table. "That one's not good enough?"

"Some lighter reading before bed," he replied, rolling his eyes to the door. "I thought that you were going to bed?"

"I am... in good time. Narcissa will wait up. If not I'll wake her. I'm suddenly feeling randy at the moment." Lucius watched Severus's face darken with a smug smile. He rose and walked toward the door, stopping and turning around in the doorway. "If you're looking for books on dreams, try the second shelf from the far corner or the one five over from the Floo."

"I didn't say I wanted a book on dreams," Severus stated, irritated, "just some light reading."

"On dreams or dream inducing spells or potions... If it's the latter, try the bookshelf five over from the Floo. You know how to expose the darker tomes." Lucius smirked from the doorway as he watched Severus's eyes narrow. "I've known you for far too long, old friend. Just ask me tomorrow if you don't find what you are looking for."

"Good night, Lucius."

"Good night, Severus."

Severus quickly cleaned himself off with his wand and called for the house-elf that was tending to him, demanding fresh pajamas and fresh sheets. The elf simply bowed and quickly retrieved another pair of pajamas, this time in deep sapphire blue, and began to change the silk sheets.

The Malfoy library was nearly two stories tall with every wall taken up by bookshelves or by tall windows. The only exception was the double sliding doors and the dark maple and stone Floo that warmed the room efficiently on cold mornings and evenings. The fire in the grate burst into flame upon his entry. The ring of chairs, small sofas and ottomans were plush and comfortable. Ironically, the décor was done entirely in deep burgundy with dark maple wood. Still, few in the Wizarding world could rival Lucius's library. Severus scanned the book titles on the suggested shelf, opting for the books on spells first. *I hardly believe Hermione no, Miss Granger, would've done a spell to connect us together so, someone must have cast something on her.* He read quickly through book after book, placing the discarded ones on the sofa nearest him. *She would not be so foolish to cast a Lust Spell... or gullible enough to try the Sleeping Beauty Curse... Besides she seems alert when she comes to me, and she comes to me. No at first I was drawn to her, but now she comes to me... Well, it's not the Sleeping Beauty Curse, nor the Snow White Sleeping Death; she's most definitely not lifeless and dead...*

His fingers glided over the spines of the books, pulling selected books down, and scanning the pages as he considered each spell.*It's like we connected. Like she is looking for me, seeking me out to make love shag her. She's so willing, desirous, and she's becoming more brazen... It's interactive... The dreams feel real. As if she is actually with me...* He could feel her in the dreams, but not taste her or hear her.*Nevertheless, I will, Hermione, I will. I will taste you... I will hear you panting, moaning as I use you. I will hear you cry and whimper and make you scream out my name. Someday soon, I will have you and you will be mine.* He turned his head, shutting his eyes tightly that dispel that trail of thought. *Merlin's balls! Concentrate.*

He scanned through and discarded several more books.

*Hermione Miss Granger appears when I'm asleep or extremely relaxed... She appears next to me as soon as I close my eyes... or when we are both resting possibly*The spell he'd just read stated that the victim could not control the actions, just respond to them. *And I can control these dreams. I can guide them, turn her and manipulate, so easily. She's so willing... so pliable to what I want to do to her...* He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

The next few books contained spells for creating dreams, including making a fantasy lover. *This is not a delusional fantasy. No. She is eager, ardent, purposeful and ready when she appears.* He was getting hard just thinking about her. He wondered if he sat down and masturbated would he make the connection with her.*No, the connection is from her. Someone did this to her or on her...*

He scanned the pages of another book, shaking his head.*No, the connection is vivid, almost real. I wake up sweating, euphoric, my heart racing and deeply satisfied, and disturbed... but I have control.* He placed another book on the sofa. *So far she has appeared to me in my bed, in the garden here at the Manor... in water... In the first few dreams, we were in water... a potion perhaps...*

He crossed the room to the other section of Lucius had mentioned, and his penis jerked and throbbed as he walked. He pulled several more tomes from the shelves.*Yes, soon, Hermione... soon I will take you and make you mine. I will have you, you sultry witch. I promise you...*

He discarded another book on the growing pile on the floor at his feet.*I am going to severely curse whoever did this to us her! I swear it*

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*A huge thank you and hugs to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69 for all her help, suggestions and clean-up work. I appreciate it very much, and without her help this story would never get validated on this site!*

## Persistent Enchantment



Our actions have consequences. As the night of the new moon approaches, Hermione is becoming very much aware of exactly what is about to happen – for real! The allure of the enchanted dreams is ensnaring Severus, and his growing attraction toward Hermione strengthens; however, he, not she, is now controlling the dreams. Moreover, as the strength of the spell increases, Severus finally makes his decision. Meanwhile, the Ministry announces the newest couple on the Marriage Registration ledger.

\*Warning this is explicit with graphic sexual situations.\*

~~~~~o 3 o~~~~~

Persistent Enchantment

~H~

It had taken a week for Harry, driven by his own lust from the mutual connection in the dreams to begin to slip into Ginny's room and seek out her out, although Ginny later confessed that he was shy and reluctant, nevertheless, things were progressing between them and she was thrilled. For five nights, Ginny had placed wards and silencing spells on her door and walls in anticipation of his visits, and Hermione had brewed a sleeping draught of Deep-Sleep Potion, placing a vial of it under her pillow in anticipation of the visits as well. The fifth night was like any night in which Harry slipped into the room. The magic of the wards immediately activated, and Hermione had quickly, and slyly, taken her potion. Harry had never been the wiser, and Hermione had, *thankfully*, slept through most of the embarrassing moments of Harry's conjugal visit.

~MoM~

Maggie Whitmire entered her office that morning, in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office and noticed a glow coming from the Marriage Registration ledger. She walked over to peer at the large tome and saw immediately that the entry: *Ginevra Molly Weasley and Harry James Potter* had changed. The entry now read: *Bonded*. She smiled warmly and sat down at her desk, pulling out the required Magically Bonded Certificate, and quickly filled in the details as given by the ledger. She enclosed the form letter, instructing the newly magically Bonded couple to sign and wand verify the certificate and return it to her office to be filed. A gilded and embossed certificate would be owled to them upon her receipt, and the union would be official. *As if a magical Bonding Charm can ever be unofficial* she laughed to herself, still delighted over the union of the new couple. *Oh, how I wish I could deliver this in person. Imagine, Harry Potter Bonded to Miss Weasley oops, no, it's Mrs. Potter now, isn't it?* She giggled like a schoolgirl.

She quickly drafted another note.

*I am very pleased to announce that Mr. Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley have officially been magically Bonded, the sixteenth of June, at approximately 11:59 P.M. Signatures and certification are still pending upon registration of the signed and wand verified Magically Bonded Certificate.*

Maggie Whitmire,

Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office

Magical Licenses and Certificates Department

Mrs. Whitmire checked her facts against the ledger carefully, then magically duplicated it several times before sealing it, and carried the notices to the owlery *I think I'll deliver this one in person*, she said, holding up the original. *I can't wait to see the look on Agethia's face!*

~H~

Harry and Ginny's Bonding was announced in the morning edition of the Daily Prophet. Harry's reaction to the article was utter disbelief; however, his reaction to the owl sent from the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department and to the owls that carried congratulatory letters from Shackbolt, McGonagall and Hagrid caused an uproar in the house. At first, Ginny was rather giddy at having received the papers from the Ministry, but she'd broken down into tears when Harry began yelling at her, accusing her of performing Dark Magic to trap him. He was furious at her for what he perceived as a deception, angered at being magically ensnared when he'd had full intention of marrying her anyway after she finished school. Moreover, he couldn't believe he was suddenly Bonded with Ginny simply because they'd shagged.

Oddly enough, it was Ron who was able to calm Harry down enough to talk to his parents and sat with his parents as they tried to explain what the Bonding Charm was and what being Bonded meant while Hermione consoled a distraught Ginny in her room. After finally calming Ginny down, reassuring her that Harry was simply overreacting, as he tended to do, and assuring her that Harry loved her, Ron knocked on the door telling them that Ginny needed to go down and talk to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, too.

When Hermione followed Ginny back downstairs, the look on Mr. and Mrs. Weasleys' expressions told her that she and Ron should dismiss themselves and let them talk privately to Ginny and Harry, so she pulled on Ron's arm to get him to go outside with her. Besides this gives me the perfect opportunity to have Ron alone for a while and possibly, just possibly see if things can work out between us...

Deep in thought, Hermione led Ron into the apple orchard and far enough from the house so that they wouldn't be disturbed. As soon as they sat down, Ron pulled her into his arms and started kissing her. His kisses were firm but wet. Instead of gentle caresses or like the sensual kisses Snape gave her, Ron's were hard and crushing. In addition, Ron had somehow gotten the impression that Hermione had him out here for other reasons and immediately began groping her, squeezing and kneading her breasts roughly.

After a few minutes of groping, slobbering and struggling, Hermione realized that she'd simply had enough. "Ron, I can't! I don't know why but I can't," Hermione said, sitting up, pushing Ron away. *It feels wrong. This he us, feels wrong... like I'm cheating on Severus!*

"Why? I know you love me. Ginny and Harry are doing it," he whined.

*Yeah, whine about it. That will help! Augh. I can't, that's why!* "This has nothing to do with Harry and Ginny and you know that!" she exclaimed, now completely annoyed. "They are engaged now! Everyone knew that they would be someday even you. This we it's different." *But he's right; Harry can hardly keep away from Ginny. At least I have the sleeping potions so I don't have to hear them shagging tonight!*

Ron twirled a finger in her hair, pulling the strand slightly. "But I thought that you wanted me, too? Isn't that why we came out here?"

Hermione looked forward, deeper into the orchard. "No, we came out here to have some time together, alone, just you and me. I thought we'd talk..."

"Talk? You came out here to talk?" Ron looked at her in disbelief. "We could have done that in the house!" He ran his fingers in her hair, snagging them on a knot.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed, grabbing her head.

"Mione, I'm sorry," he said, trying to put his arm around her again. He leaned in and tried to kiss her.

*Augh, this just isn't working!* Hermione turned her head slightly, and his lips landed on her cheek.

He cupped her face, his fingers pressing into her jaw, and turned her, his mouth landing on hers. She let him, trying to caress his lips softly with hers in a seductive kiss the way Severus did in her dreams, and Ron pressed his mouth roughly to hers, their teeth coming into contact painfully.

"Ouch, Ron, you bit me!" she exclaimed, pushing him away again. *Oh, for crying out loud! Doesn't he know how to kiss? When Severus kisses me, it's fantastic! The dream in the dream when I kiss him, it's... Oh bugger! This is real! Ron's not a fantasy he's real.* She looked at Ron, reconsidering.

He looked back at her, confused.

*Okay, try again. You love Ron. That's all there is to it so just kiss him* She placed a hand on his shoulder, gently pulling his shirt as she leaned toward him and cupped his face with her other hand as he met her halfway. Gently, she brushed her lips across his, kissing his lower lip and sensually caressing them with hers. Ron grabbed her, pulling her roughly to him as his mouth crushed hers again. His kiss was wet, sloppy, and hurting her.

"Stop! Stop... Ron, please... No, you're hurting me," she uttered, finally breaking his grip. "No, this is all wrong. I'm sorry, I just can't."

"Mione, tell me what's wrong?" Ron pleaded. "Tell me, and I'll do better."

"Please, leave it alone," she said, curling her knees up and crossing her arms around them. *Why does this feel so wrong? I liked his kisses before. Didn't I? There was the kiss at Hogwarts... No, I kissed him... A crushing kiss... in the heat of the moment, like he's doing this time. He kissed Lavender, and she liked his kisses except it looked like he was devouring her face, stuck to her like a leech. It's not the same...*

"So, you were only leading me on, is that it?" he asked angrily. "Why did you kiss me in the first place? Eh?"

"Ron, I wanted to be sure. I had to know if what I feel for you is the same," she pleaded for him to understand. One look at his face told her he didn't. "I wanted it to I needed to know, all right? I'm sorry. I like you, really... but I'm not in love with you." She rubbed her face with her hands, exasperated. "It's not you. It's something to do with me. I'm confused. I'm tired. I'm not sleeping well." *I want you to kiss me like Severus does*

"Ginny said that you've been dreaming nearly every night?" he said accusingly.

*Would Ginny betray my confidences?* "No, she didn't," she scoffed. "Ginny wouldn't have said that." *Harry might have, but not Ginny*

"So it's true then! You are having the same kind of dreams Ginny and Harry are having?" he asked confrontationally.

Hermione looked at him angrily. "I don't know what kind of dreams Harry is having he hasn't said anything to me about them!" She pulled away as Ron reached for her again. "No, Ron, no. Look, yes, I dream at night. Loads of people dream at night. It's nothing to get your wand in a knot over." She stood up, brushing off her bum. "I'm going back to the house. If it amuses you, ask Ginny to describe her dreams to you, and then we'll compare mine to hers. However, considering that Ginny and Harry are now officially magically Bonded and engaged she probably dreams about him. I can assure you, Ron, I do not dream about Harry!"

Hermione stomped off frustrated and angry. I just don't get it! Why can't he be gentle with me? Ginny said Harry was klutzy and awkward at first, but he was eager to make her happy and slowed down, started kissing her how she wanted, and now he's apparently the best kisser she's had. Why can't I get Ron to kiss me the way Snape does? Well, like dream Snape does. Although, it's not fair to want Ron to be like Snape, is it? Merlin, this is so messed up! Harry's in there angry because Ginny did the Match-Matching Spell and they're now Bonded, and I've just angered Ron by trying to make him act like Snape! And Ginny keeps reassuring me that this will all work out.

She looked up at the Burrow, seeing the soft lights in the windows and billowy smoke from the Floos that used to give her such a welcoming feeling, the magic of this house, built with love, that made this house such an inviting retreat to her and now seemed to mock her. I should've read up on this Moon-Song Spell before casting it; then I would've known what we were in for. Instead, I simply went along, and now look at what's happened! She looked up at the clouds in the afternoon sky. If you're listening, if you're there, I'd really appreciate it if you could help me, help us... I could really use some guidance right about now. I just don't know what to do.

~S~

He was reading in bed before dinner, and a deep, drowsy headiness overcame him. He closed his eyes, laying the book on his lap and pinched the bridge of his nose, unsure why he suddenly felt so sleepy. His body relaxed against the pillows that propped him upright, and he breathed heavily. *Gentle fingers touched his shoulder, gliding down his arm. 'She's back. Reaching out to me again, Hermione? Surely you're not sleeping now, are you?' He slid down on the bed and waited. 'Okay, witch, come.' Severus could feel her as her body seemed to materialize over him, closer than an arm's length, and he grasped her arms, pulling her toward him, feeling her body land on his, but without the crushing weight he'd expect. Her hands landed on his chest as his mouth met hers in a crushing kiss while her arms wrapped around him and he embraced her. 'This is madness!'*

*His penis came to life, jabbing into her stomach painfully. He rolled her over onto her back, straddling one of her legs as he propped himself up above her. She was completely nude, her body lit as if surrounded by candles. Her soft brown eyes met his with uncertainty, but were desirous for him all the same. Her lip quivered as she looked up at him in anticipation, and he leaned down and kissed her. 'It's a dream, only a dream. I might as well enjoy this.' His tongue parted her mouth, and he slipped it inside hers. She pushed at his tongue with hers as if to taste him. She tried rolling her tongue against his and used the tip to feel his in her mouth. He allowed her this tongue game as he fondled her breast. 'Why not, my dear, you want to play let's play...'*

*He placed one hand down to her groin, his fingers pulling gently at her pubic hair as he fingered his way to her core, and he felt the vibration of her moan against his mouth. She was wet with a few strokes of his fingers. A few more minutes and she squirmed beneath him. He could feel her muscles tighten, and he removed his fingers from her nub long enough for her body to relax and to feel her moan in frustration. Again he fondled her, careful to move his hand away as soon as she began to climax. He bit on her nipple gently, but hard enough to make her gasp.*

*'Yes, Hermione, I'm going to mark you tonight mark you as mine.' He clasped his mouth on her throat, then the tender skin under her ear, and then on her shoulder, each time leaving a love bite to mar her skin. 'Mine.'*

*He made small flicks with his tongue as he licked and kissed his way down her body, from her breast to her navel. She writhed under him. He sat back on his knees, separated her legs, lifting her calves to rest on his shoulders and began to kiss one leg, then the other, as he worked his way down to her juncture. She squirmed as if uncomfortable with what he was about to do, and he knew that he would be the first to lick her there. His penis stiffened and jerked, but he ignored it. His mouth clasped down on her moist lips, and he could feel her buck against him. He used her useless struggles to tease her nub and grasped her hips more firmly.*

*'Yes, I'm going to make you howl tonight, Hermione. Wherever you are, they are going to hear you. Hear you pleading, crying out my name and screaming for me.' His testicles retracted slightly in reaction to her movements as his tongue licked her nub. He hummed as he sucked on her, rolling his tongue against her until she undulated. He held firm, feeling her squirm and trying to twist. He laughed as she began to buck against him wildly. 'Yes, scream, Hermione. Cry out. Beg me to stop. I can't hear you but I can feel you.' She was so wet. He licked her, disgruntled that he couldn't taste her sweet juices. 'Soon, I will know what you taste like.' Her hands fisted as she arched her back, her shoulders digging into the mattress, her mouth wide open. Her body jerked, fell and arched again and again. He continued until she fell onto the mattress, reaching for him as if pleading for him to stop, her mouth open in a silent cry. He hated the silence. 'There. Now she's ready.'*

*He was so tight in anticipation, he thought he'd burst. The pressure in his testicles was nearly painful, so tight, it made it hard for him to control himself. Her body tensed*

with each plunge. 'Yes, she's still sensitive, still hot.' He felt spasms begin to at the base of his cock with each thrust, his testicles relaxing, then retracting again, pulling up, tightening. 'She isn't there yet, and I'm about to burst.' He flicked her nub a few times, stroking her as he pulled out slowly, and she bucked her hips, her head thrashing from side to side, and he began to pound into her, riding her hard. He could feel her clench down on him, and his movements became urgent, driven by his own need. She arched her back as he felt his release, the hot, jetting spasms shooting down his penis shaft and into her.

His release eased into euphoria, followed by a sense of completion as he braced himself above her. He loomed over her, his arms extended with his elbows locked straight, his hands on either side of her head as their eyes locked onto each others, and he smiled, knowing he'd just blew her mind.

Severus woke up again, sweating and panting in post ejaculate bliss. He hadn't moved much; he was still sitting, propped up in his bed, the forgotten book having been shoved aside. *This is some kind of curse! More than just Lustful Dreams Spell or a Dream Fantasies Spell. There is Dark magic to this curse!* Irritably, he called for a house-elf to change his sheets and give him a change of pajamas. *I'm going to find out what you did, witch... or who did this to us. But I will find out trust me*

~H~

Hermione woke up on her cot, gasping, her heart pounding and head swimming. She had been having recurrences of the lovemaking dream practically each night. It had started out the same the first few nights, floating in water as if she were a water nymph, then changed with her hovering over Snape like a ghostly apparition. Lately, the dreams took place in other places, most recently a four-poster bed with the dark blue, silky sheets, which was obviously his bed or her mind's creation of his bed. *Only I've never given his bed any thought before. I'd assumed that he slept in a regular bed, not one so lavishly appointed with thick, plush pillows and silk sheets.*

The bed, or what she could remember of it, was large, with gossamer hangings and dark blue drapes that matched the dark blue silk sheets and white down comforter. He'd even had multiple pillows, two in dark blue pillowcases, two in white and two in a soft gold fabric. *It isn't the kind of bed I'd have imagined for him... Even if I would've tried to imagine him in a bed at all, it certainly wouldn't have been that bed! Something all shrouded in black possibly with green accents or all green for Slytherin no, all black, like he dresses.* The room beyond the bed seemed airy and light. *As if I'd imagined only the bed and had it up in the clouds somewhere!*

Another night they'd been outside under the covered walkway of a garden. *I would never have agreed to having sex outside in the open where just anyone could walk up on us!* Tonight she'd been floating with him again as if in a cloud, then settled down onto soft grass. She could still feel the texture of the grass on her skin, could still feel the throbbing inside her as if he were still making love to her. Her nipples were still hard and standing out erect from his suckling, and she could still feel where his hands had grasped her hips as he plunged into her. *This is maddening! It's so real, yet so surreal.* Ginny still slept soundly in her bed, oblivious ~~thankfully~~, that Hermione had been dreaming of Severus again. *Again!*

His hands on her body were artful, and he was quickly learning her every sensitive spot and took pleasure in driving her mad with desire either before or while he was plunging into her. Still, it was incomplete. *I can feel him, touch him, but not hear him. I can feel the vibration of his low, growling laugh on my skin when he's pleased or feel him laugh against my mouth when he kisses me. But it's silent, like in a silent movie show, or like actually being underwater and being able to breathe.* She wasn't growing gills or fins, so she knew that was just part of the dream. Snape liked having her straddle him, either lying down beneath her or sitting up, looking up at her as he watched her move, sliding and grinding on his stiff penis, grasping her hips as he helped her movements by thrusting up into her. His rhythm was usually in perfect sync with hers.

She was amazed at how often he varied their position and astounded that she was completely unable to resist him. He controlled their lovemaking, he positioned her, and he took charge. *It's like he's really here, or I'm there and we're really together. I fall asleep, and my mind seems to reach out to him, finding him, and without any words as if it's simply understood, I shag him. Oh, gods! What if it's like Ginny and Harry's dreams? What if he feels everything I do senses me, sees me!* She covered her mouth to keep from screaming. *Ginny said that she and Harry had the same dreams every detail as if they were actually together. Does he? Could Severus be having the same dreams? Are we truly connecting in these dreams?*

She began to panic. *He'll murder me! If he's alive he'll kill me! If he's alive... but I saw him. He was dead when we left the Shrieking Shack*

She pulled out her vial of Sleeping Potion and took a large sip, just enough to quiet her nerves and allow her to fall asleep and not dream about him. She waited to feel the effects of the potion before she closed her eyes. *I'm going to have to talk to Luna. She'll be able to...*

~S~

Severus strolled out into the garden again just about the time he knew that Hermione would be falling asleep. The garden was dark tonight, the moon barely a sliver in the starry sky. The manicured hedges looked ominous tonight, and the gravel walkway crunched under his boots. He wore only a warm cloak to cover his body, knowing that she would be coming to him again soon. He found three stone benches in a ring of hedges, surrounding a small fountain and smiled. *Perfect. Dark, secluded and eerie, with only the trickle of the water and the sound of crickets filling the still night around us. And Lucius won't walk in on us me.* Sitting down to wait, he slid his hips forward and reclined a slightly on the bench, his boots firmly planted on the gravel.

Twelve nights she'd come to him. *The first night of the visits was on the full moon* he remembered with perfect clarity. It was the night he'd woken up from his coma after that terrible bite to his neck. *Narcissa had their family Healer attending to me, using the potions that I'd brewed in case I or any of the Malfoys were bitten by Nagini!* He smiled remembering Narcissa's face looking over him when he'd opened his eyes, the moonlight making her look like an angel. Only she wasn't his angel that night. *It was Hermione Granger who'd awakened me that night my sexual apparition, my ethereal waith.* He could still feel the disappointment from the three nights that she hadn't come to him. *Although, one of those was the night of the Malfoys' party when I'd drunk too much and passed out in my room she'd not visited me then I think. Or had she and found me passed out on my bed? Would she have used my body anyway?* The thought that she would aroused him.

In the dream three nights ago, she'd pushed his hair from his face, her soft, brown eyes locked onto his as he held her straddled on his lap, thrusting into her. She looked at him hungrily, the pleasure of his cock inside her evident on her face, and he loved that. *I'll have her do it again* She didn't cringe or recoil when he embraced her in these dreams, always reaching out to him, eager for him. *Still, why in all Hades is it Hermione Granger who comes to me in these dreams? Of all the witches I know, why her?*

These dreams were becoming constant. He could control them, to a point, varying the technique of his sexual assault on Hermione's body, but he couldn't change her face. *It is always her.* And now he actually wanted her. He wanted to have her, possess her, to take her willing body and hear her moaning beneath him, to hear her gasping out as he used her, and hear her screaming his name. In the dreams he could feel her, touch her, but he couldn't taste her or actually hear her.

He closed his eyes, his head resting on the stone behind him, listening to the soft night sounds. Within minutes he could feel her presence, and he welcomed her, holding his hand out to grasp hers, pulling her to him. *She was dressed in a nightshirt tonight that fell just to her thighs. He smiled. 'So like a child, yet so like a woman.'* He opened his cloak exposing himself, and her eyes scanned down his lean frame, unembarrassed until her eyes fell on his stiff penis. He pulled her closer, turning her around and having her sit on his lap. *She nestled against his chest, comfortably, allowing him to caress her. With one hand he parted her legs, his fingers caressing her moist lips, fingering her as the other slid up under her shirt to cup a breast. It didn't take long to have her squirming in his lap. He kissed her shoulder as he pushed her off him and turned her around, coaxing her to straddle his hips on the bench. She took the hint easily, climbing onto the bench, her knees tight against his hips. He tugged at her nightshirt, gliding his fingers teasingly on her skin as he raised the fabric up her body. He his penis rubbed against her moist lips, coating himself with her wetness as she held onto his shoulders, and he pushed his tip into her. 'Okay, take me in.' Slowly, she lowered herself onto him, the look of ecstasy on her face as she slid down his penis quite enjoyable to watch. 'Yes, Hermione, I will let you control tonight's union. Ride me. I want to watch you pleasure yourself on me...'*

He placed both of his hands on her waist, easing the nightshirt up, and he got her to remove it as he watched her with an appreciative smirk on his face. 'Beautiful. Nice breasts, pert nipples, small waist, round hips, her body is so well formed...' He tossed the garment away. 'You won't need this anyway. I want to see you, watch your breasts bounce when I take control...' His hands stroked her body as she lifted and lowered on him in a maddeningly slow pace. He pulled her body forward so that he could lick and suckle on her nipples and tried to refrain from thrusting into her. 'Yet.'

Hermione's eyes closed, and her head rolled languorously as she moved over him. He grasped her hip, making her tilt forward so that her nub would rub against his pubic hair, deepening his penetration in the process, feeling himself inside her. Her eyes opened, looking down at him, and she smiled. When she began to tighten on him, her breathing becoming hard and erratic, he cupped her hips with his hands and guided her. She began to rock, swaying, and she grasped the stone behind his head, and he smiled as he watched her. 'She's beautiful in the throes of passion, uninhibited and expressive.' Her expressions excited him, and his testicles tightened, the spasms starting to ripple at the base of his penis while he watched her. 'Oh, yeah, witch, that's it...'

He could feel her tighten on him, and he watched her expressions as her pleasure built as she rode him, making his testicles retract and loosen again with each of her small spasms. 'Yes, witch, come on me...' He increased the force of his thrusts, and she gasped, her mouth open as if moaning. 'That's it... come, Hermione, come...' His balls were so taut, he knew that he'd release too soon. He wasn't going to wait. He urged her to move faster, to ride him harder, meeting each downward movement of her body with a hard push. She tried to match him, her rhythm increasing as he pounded into her. His tightness in testicles restricted like a rubber band and then snapped suddenly, just letting go. 'Yes, gods oh, good... so good...' He grasped her hips, thrusting into her forcefully as the rushing release, the warm, jetting pulses shot down his penis shaft into her. 'Hermione! Oh, gods, Hermione!' He was only vaguely aware of her shuddering and tightening on him as he climaxed.

She collapsed on him in post coital bliss, and he wrapped his cloak around her, holding her possessively, still firmly inside of her, waiting until she moved or shifted so he could start all over again. Her hair tickled his nose, so he moved her hair from the side of her face and kissed her. 'Tomorrow. I'm going to find you tomorrow. You're going to be mine. No more dreams, Hermione tomorrow I will have you feel you hear you and taste you. Tomorrow, it will be for real.' He cupped her cheek as she turned her head to return his kiss, and he allowed her to shift over him and kiss him. 'Sweet, Hermione, so tender and sweet.' She sat up, her fingers pushing the hair from his face to look at him closely. She smiled as he reached down and fondled her breasts. She tried to adjust herself or to rise off him, and he clasped her to him tightly, and he pushed his penis up into her. Her eyes widened, and she bit her lip, rolling her hips along his stiffening penis. 'Yes, that's it, witch, ride me again.' He smiled encouragingly, letting her rub herself against him, obviously pleasuring herself. 'Yes, tomorrow, Hermione no more dreams tomorrow I will find you.'

~ T B C ~>

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## Now and Forever

Chapter 4 of 63

As the dreams continue to haunt her every night, Hermione's growing restless in anticipation, worrying about Severus Snape's reaction to the Moon-Song Spell and still wondering if it can possibly be at all real.

Severus, meanwhile, is pacing, unable to determine exactly what curse he is under, unable to break the spell, and yet eagerly anticipating the night when he will take Hermione and make her his.

~~~~~o 4 o~~~~~



Now and Forever

~H~

Hermione woke up, and Harry was still in bed with Ginny. *He must have snuck in late last night. I didn't even feel the wards or hear him come in* They were sound asleep, and Harry had Ginny cuddled in his arms, spooning with her. *Awe, they look cute together.* As quietly as she could, and while keeping one eye on the sleeping pair, Hermione quickly changed into her clothes and walked over to gently shake Harry's shoulder. "Harry, Harry, wake up. It's morning," she said softly.

Harry stirred. "Huh? Wha' time is it?" he asked, rolled slightly in the bed, nearly falling off the bed and onto his bum.

Hermione smiled. "It's morning. You don't want Mrs. Wesley catching you in here. Engaged or not she'll carry on like a banshee."

"We're magically Bonded, Hermione," he said, stretching and sliding from the bed. "You read the letters and the certificate. We're as good as."

*At least he still has on his pajamas* "Come on, I'll cover for you so you can slip up to Ron's room," she said.

Harry reluctantly withdrew from Ginny, waking her. "Gin, I'm sorry. I have to go now," he said, kissing her on the cheek and getting to his feet.

"Okay, see you at breakfast," she mumbled as Harry leaned down and kissed her again.

Hermione opened the door and peered down the stairs, gesturing to Harry that it was all clear to go up. Just as Harry was slipping past her, she stopped him. "When Ron is up, ask him if I could borrow Pig. I want to send a note to Luna and see if we can get together for lunch," she whispered.

"Sure, Hermione," he whispered, stretching. "But why don't you come up and ask him yourself?"

*Because I don't want to hear him whine at me again...* "You're on your way up there, aren't you? Please, Harry... I'll owe you one."

"Sure, okay. Hermione, I'm worried for you. Aren't you feeling well?" Harry asked with a yawn.

She looked at him, confused. "Yes, why?"

"I know you take a sleeping potion each night. I thought that maybe you're having trouble sleeping, unless it's because of me? But you know, Hermione, you shouldn't take too much of that Sleeping Potion," he whispered with a wicked grin. "You'll get addicted."

"Yes, Harry, I take the potion because of you. And before you start," she said, holding up her hand, "I only take it on nights you come in here."

He looked at her speculatively, then nodded. "Still wish you didn't, but thank you."

"Now, go on... before you're caught. And don't forget to ask Ron, okay?" she asked his retreating back.

\*

Mrs. Weasley was delighted to have Luna join the girls for lunch and gladly packed a basket for their picnic before she left for St. Mungo's. Ginny wanted to invite Harry, but when Hermione quietly explained why she wanted to go off with just the girls, she relented with a huge grin. "Besides, let Harry, Neville and Ron toss around the Quaffle a bit. The fresh air will do them some good," Hermione had suggested when Luna and Neville showed up together.

Neville had been delighted to fly with Harry and Ron and even Apparated home to get his new broom.

Sitting under a large oak on Stoatshead Hill, Hermione asked Luna how things were with Neville. "Oh, he's a lovely match. A bit shy at first, and he was really surprised when I owed him to come over for dinner. He really likes my Plimpy soup."

"So, he didn't just find you?" Hermione asked, relieved. "You invited him over."

"Oh, yes, I was tired of waiting," Luna said, gazing up into the tree. "He was most overwhelmed when I told him about my dreams."

"You told him? I told Harry too," Ginny said, eating an apple slice. "He confessed to me that he'd been dreaming about me and that these dreams must mean that we were meant for each other." She giggled.

"Wait, Ginny, I thought that Harry came to you because of the spell?" Hermione asked.

"I told him about my dreams the second time he came to me, and he was really surprised. I hadn't the heart to tell him what I did to make it all happen but he found out from the Ministry letter anyway," Ginny explained, looking at Hermione understandingly. "You saw how mad he was at first, but at least he came around quickly. He decided it wasn't such a bad thing right about the time I whispered that it meant we could repeat the dream whenever he wanted to. He was so nervous he was all thumbs, fumbling with my bra, and I had to remove it for him. He still can't quite get the hooks."

*Oh, Circe, Snape'll be mad! He'll curse me!* Hermione thought, staring at Ginny, trying to fight back the panic she was feeling, not realizing that she'd murmured softly.

Ginny looked back at her, empathetically. "Hermione, it will be all right, he'll know. The Moon-Song Spell wouldn't have matched you if you weren't compatible and couldn't come to love each other," she whispered, touching Hermione's knee.

"Are you worried that Professor Snape won't come, Hermione? He will," Luna said, smiling, missing the soft-spoken exchange. "He'll be drawn to you, magically."

"How?" Hermione asked. "I mean I still don't even know that he's alive. I know that the Aurors are looking for him, even though Harry showed Kingsley and a few members of the Wizengamot Snape's memories, and they spoke to Dumbledore's portrait... but there hasn't been any sign of him anywhere."

"Hermione, are you sure you're okay with this?" Ginny asked. "I know you aren't sleeping well, you're restless, and you toss and turn a lot, even when you're not dreaming. Are you really that worried about Snape?"

"Yes, ah no. I err yes. I'm afraid he's going to hex me, or worse, when he finds out. That's *if* he's alive, *if* he's having the same dreams, and *if* he comes to find me..." Hermione took a deep breath. "Luna, Ginny, is this real? Am I really going to shag Severus Snape?"

"Oh! If he's the one in your dreams, Hermione, then yes, he's having the same dreams. Exactly the same. Neville did," Luna said, looking at her with the most serious expression Hermione had ever seen Luna have.

"So did Harry," Ginny added.

Luna nodded. "And yes, if he's the one you've been sharing these dreams with he will come to you, and you will consummate the spell. The longer you wait, the more the moon waxes, his need for you will grow and so will his desire to find you."

"But how will it happen? How will he know where I am?" Hermione asked, trying to swallow her fears.

"He'll simply know as if by magic. He will feel you I suppose," Luna said. "But you will be drawn together by next Tuesday before midnight. Don't worry, Hermione, it will be all right. It will be like in the dreams, only real. I just didn't want to wait so long for Neville to come around. He was nervous enough as it was, so that was a good thing." She picked up a sandwich. "I do think his gran was quite surprised when the Ministry sent their letter and our Bonding certificate. But she'll come around. I do make Neville happy he told me so."

"So he will just come to me, right? Come right up to Ginny's room, and we'll he and I will..." Hermione started to say but couldn't finish the sentence. "Just like Harry did."

"*Oh, Circe!* You're right!" Ginny exclaimed, covering her mouth, her eyes becoming as large as saucers. "Mum will flip if he comes in the house after you," she said,

giggling, and then suddenly stopped, her eyes wide. "Urm, Hermione, you do have more of that Deep-Sleep Potion, right?"

~S~

Severus was amassing a pile of books on the table in the library, and Lucius wasn't being any help at all either. Although, he could have been more forthright with his friend, Severus didn't want to tell Lucius any more than he had to. So far all he'd said was that the dreams felt real, he could control the actions within the dream, but he couldn't change whom he was with. It was always the same witch. He never said who haunted his dreams either. *Lucius would laugh like a humeldinger. He's already grinning like a Clabbert every time he looks up at me.*

Severus set another tome back onto the shelf and turned to face the windows. By now he could practically feel Hermione's presence. It had been growing minutely stronger every minute all day long. His mind replayed the locations of the dreams, and except for a few, most had occurred where he was and on his terms. However, he knew that tonight he would find her; tonight he was going to have her. His mind pictured trees, a stream and a gravel road, a large hill and an orchard. It was as if he knew the place, it was familiar, yet still unfamiliar. *The Burrow. She's at the Burrow. That complicates things. He picked up a book he'd perused in his search and reread the Allurement Charm. If I can determine which room she's in which window is hers I might be able to cast the spell at her through the window. Make her come out to me...* He set the book down after memorizing the spell. *Trees, a stream and a worn gravel road, a large hill... outside the Burrow somewhere. I'll find her*

~H~

She couldn't stand the wait; she was restless and antsy. The night was full of stars, but it was a moonless night, as if the moon was gone, and to her it felt like the new moon was leaving a black hole in the sky.

Hermione walked down the road turning toward the stream, following the bank back in through the trees, listening to the water, the night creatures stirring, the crickets and grass as it rustled. The old beaver pond was tranquil and peaceful in the serenely quiet stillness of the night. The puppy dogtails swayed in the gentle breeze surrounding one-half of the large rock, which Hermione knew the Weasley boys like jumping off of into the water when they swam. She'd had fun jumping off it, too.

Hermione slipped off her shoes and her robe, wearing little else than a nightshirt that barely reached the middle of her thighs and a pair of knickers, but the night air felt cool, not uncomfortable on her bare skin. She stepped into the water, crossing herself with her arms, knowing how deep the water was on this side of the rock. The ache in her was pounding, her desire to touch herself intense. She walked away from the edge of the pool, wading into the water up past her knees. A cracking pop-like sound made her turn around.

Severus Snape simply appeared on the bank looking at her, staring at her with a darkly desirous look on his face. In a few quick steps, he was entering the pond, walking through the water toward her. He wore little else but black pajama bottoms under a dressing robe that opened as he strode into the water to get to her. His pale skin made the light dusting of hairs stand out in stark contrast to his lean muscled chest. Hermione backed up apprehensively, immediately comprehending that this was no dream, this was for real, as he reached for her. Suddenly unsure and frightened, she took a step back and stumbled, falling into the water with a splash. Severus simply reached down and grasped her arms, pulling her to her feet and into his embrace, and then his mouth descended on hers.

It was just like in the dreams except she could finally taste his kisses, hear his breathing and feel the wetness of the water. His body was strong and lean, firm and familiar under her hands. Another difference, she was chilled and soaked, craving his warmth to warm her, and she embraced him to feel his body heat. She began to crave his hands on her even as hers began to explore the familiar ridges of muscle down his back. She felt her knees weaken and her heart race as his mouth moved from hers, down to her throat and along her neck. She held onto him, shivering with desire as much from the cool water. He was warm, although the water from her nightshirt was now dripping down between them.

He kissed her neck, and his hands explored her body through the wet nightshirt. One hand slipped down her body, caressing her stomach before plunging down between her legs, and she immediately began longing for his touch on her sensitive spot. He slipped his hand under her knickers, sliding one, then another finger, into her, stretching her. *This isn't like the dream, this hurts!* she thought as the stroke of his hand on her sensitive spot warred with the dull pain of his penetrating fingers. She tried to back away from him, but he followed her, his hand slipping from her knickers as his other hand slid from her back to her shoulder.

"Hermione," he said softly, his voice thick with desire for her.

She paused, looking at him, her eyes darting down his body to his groin, his wet pajama bottoms peaked by his erection. She quickly averted her eyes back to his face. He was smirking at her in amusement. "What are you doing here?" she managed to ask.

"I came here for you," he said, stepping close to her again.

She tried to step back again, although Severus followed her easily, and she found her retreat halted by the presence of the rock at her heels. He loomed over her, his dark eyes searching her face as his hand grasped her waist

Her hands landed on his chest as he embraced her, leaning her against the large rock. "Damnation, Hermione, it was as if you'd called to me every night. I had to see you," he said, his mouth descending on hers again, crushing her legs into the rock behind her.

The water worn smoothness of the rock was cold, its surface scratching against her legs. The stone came up to her thighs, nearly to her bum before it sloped away from her, and he was nearly pushing her to lean against it. She hesitated, unsure, her mind spinning, both in fear of what she knew he wanted and in desirous anticipation that it was going to finally happen.

His hands roamed her body, down to her hips, gliding his hands on her skin as he pulled her nightshirt up. Like he always did in the dreams, he fondled her breasts, and then slipped her nightshirt up and off her. He leaned back, his eyes roaming over her hungrily. "So, beautiful," he growled, and he pulled her to him again, kissing her. One hand covered a breast, his fingers gently pinching her nipples. She began to kiss him back, relaxing, allowing him to fondle her, enjoying the familiar feeling of his caress. Once again his hand slipped down to cup her between her legs, into her knickers, his fingers finding her sensitive spot, and as he'd done in her dreams, making pleasurable ripples, shoot throughout her. Her knees became weak again.

"Hermione, I want you," he said, his voice slow and silky.

"Yes," she responded, unthinking.

"Lean back against the rock," he instructed. She leaned back against the slanted side of the rock, resting her buttocks on the cold stone as Severus leaned over her.

He looped a finger on each side of her knickers and slid them down, allowing Hermione to lift first her hips, then each leg as he removed them *There's no turning back now*, she thought as she stood, leaning against the rock naked in front of him, watching as he removed his pajamas.

He stood in front of her, allowing her to stare at him a moment before stepping up to her, reaching out to glide his hands along her sides. He pressed into her and lifted one of her legs up, then the other so that she straddled him. His penis poked at her, and his fingers once again began to fondle her as he leaned down and kissed her. He slid one finger into her, then another, moving them slowly in and out. The entry of the second finger hurt, but she could feel herself become wet in his hand. Gently, he pushed his penis at her entrance and leaned against her. The pressure of his body helped him thrust slowly into her, and she hissed sharply at the sudden intrusion of pain. He held still a moment, eased off a bit and pushed again. It felt like he was ripping her. He kissed her, and for a moment, she almost forgot the pain until he pushed again, causing her to gasp loudly and tighten up against his intrusion.

"Relax," he said in his silky drawl.

Hermione tried, and he kissed her neck as he pushed in again. She whimpered in pain, and he pulled out slightly, then pushed in, making her cry out.

His tongue licked her earlobe, distracting her as he moved again. She grabbed his arms at the sharp pain. He reached up and cupped her face with one hand, still gripping her hip with the other. His tongue licked her lips as he moved again, then he kissed her hungrily. Hermione tried to let go of his arms, realizing that she'd been digging her nails into his skin. He moved within her again, still causing her pain, and she tightened her grip on his arms.

"Relax, Hermione, let go," he said, his voice a seductive drawl against her mouth.

She shook her head, tensing around him and breathing heavily.

"Relax, it won't hurt so much if you relax," he said in his rich, silky voice.

It sent shivers down her spine, and she managed to relax a bit.

"Hermione, touch yourself," his soft, silky voice said seductively in her ear.

Hermione shook her head, and he laughed, releasing her face, and his hand glided down her skin to her groin until his fingers deftly located her sensitive spot. As if with well-practiced ease, he stroked her, causing jolt after electric jolt to shoot within her. He moved out slowly and pushed back in, flicking her nub. She quivered, feeling both the intense pleasure of his touch and the hard intrusion of his penis. His movements became faster, his pace more ardent, and Hermione whimpered against his shoulder.

"Kiss me," he demanded, his voice thick with desire.

She complied, stroking his tongue with hers, tasting his mouth. He kissed her back, allowing her to control his tongue and lips. He flicked her sensitive spot with each trust, and the jolts of sensation began to ripple in her in sync with his movements, which still hurt and burned a bit. She tried to relax and trust him, like in the dreams, but unlike the dreams, her mind kept becoming unfocused, aware of everything around her as well as the man before her.

His touch was the same, his kisses familiar, but the feel on him inside her was painful. His fingers were deftly creating the same pleasurable sensations that were building up inside her core, but it was different somehow, and she groaned. Her muscles tightened, and she clamped down on him, making him groan and his pace quicken. She began to moan. The faster movements were still painful to her, and the rock was uncomfortably hard against her bum. He moved his hand, gripping her hips tightly, grinding into her with each pounding thrust, his pubic hair brushing her nub with each stroke.

"That's it, come, Hermione, come, let the feeling go, let it go, just feel..." he said, his silky voice thick with his own driving need. The sound of his voice made her relax into the feelings inside her, and the pressure deep in her core peaked regardless of the burning ache. Her body started shaking, and the spasms rolled over her in waves as he grunted three times and buried himself deeply inside of her. She moved one hand into his hair and the other along his back, her head falling back as she gasped for air.

After a long pause, he pushed himself up to look down at her, and Hermione moaned at the loss of his weight and warmth against her. "What have you done?" he asked, nearly a growl, his groin still pressed tightly against hers, pinning her to the rock.

"Nothing!" she exclaimed, startled. "I just went for a walk. I couldn't sleep."

He straightened up, bringing her up with him, her legs still straddling his hips. He grasped her hips to him, lifting her off the rock, and Hermione clung to him, afraid of being dropped. He carried her to the edge of the pond as if she weighed nothing, gently lowering their bodies, laying her on the soft grass of the bank, and then leaned up to look her, still sheathed inside her. "What did you do?" he asked again, his dark eyes boring down into her own as his penis twitched inside her.

"I don't understand. What did I do what? When?" she asked, suddenly afraid of what he might say to the truth.

He started growling and she became afraid of him. "Tell me, witch, what did you do to me. What spell did you do?"

"Luna and I made a potion and said the poem for the Moon-Song spell," she answered as he stared down at her.

"Where did you get the directions for the potion?" he asked angrily. He straightened his arms, taking some of his weight off of her and looking at her intently. "Tell me, witch, what was in the potion?"

"Luna had it in her diary from her mum. We used sugar, spices, rain water, a unicorn horn, asparagus root, lavender, quince flowers, yesterday-today-and-tomorrow flowers... and hawthorn..." She couldn't remember it all with him staring at her like that. She still hurt between her legs, a dull throbbing, tingling kind of ache.

Still inside her, his penis twitched again, and his eyes narrowed. "What else was in it?"

She could feel her vagina tighten and loosen on him in response to each twitch of his penis, and she tried to relax, but her mind was focused on the feeling of having him still inside her. "Flowers, spices, aphrodisiacs and..." She couldn't think as he pulled away, hurting her as his tip drew near her entrance. "No, please don't, stay in," she begged him, and he groaned in frustration, swore again, but then pressed slowly into her, his entry less painful than before. "Oh, please," she moaned, and his penis jerked inside her again.

He smiled briefly, and then his face became a scowl. "Did this potion by any chance have a snip from a Bowtruckle tree, a snail and a puppy dogtail rush pod, Hermione?" She nodded and he swore. "Damn you, don't you realize what you've done?" he asked, drawing from her slowly.

"No, yes," she said, sighing. "Please, no... Severus," she pleaded, trying to lift her hips up to him. "Don't stop stay in." He thrust down into her, and she gasped, the pleasure of his entry greater than the discomfort this time.

"You like this, witch?" he asked, nearly a snarl, although his lips curled up into the semblance of a smile.

"Yes, I do," she moaned in response.

"Then good, Hermione. Because we will be doing this every night for the rest of your life," he snarled. His mouth claimed hers as he moved again, drawing out of her and thrusting back in.

She cried out, her sounds muffled against his kiss. "What?" she asked, pushing futilely against his firm chest.

"Yes," he said as he stopped, buried deep within her. "Your poem if spoken by a witch under the right conditions, which you have obviously done, casts a magical Pairing-Plight Betrothal Charm, Hermione." He pulled out of her slowly. "And if it's consummated, which, witch, we are currently doing have done it's magic becomes permanent, binding you and me together... for life."

He leaned down, nipping at her chin, kissed her neck, then marked the soft skin on her breast. Hermione cried out startled and he shifted, folding her legs up, his penis easily, finding her opening, and he slipped inside of her again. She groaned in pleasure as he filled her, this time causing only a dull ache as he plunged into her.

"So now you and I really are married?" she managed to ask, her breathing hard and her heart racing, both from the reality of what he'd declared and from his lovemaking. He withdrew, her feet dropping to his sides as he pushed into her again.

"No, stronger than that. We are magically Bonded, Hermione," he said, his dark eyes watching her face as he continued his move within her in rough strokes. "But for all intent and purpose yes, we are now bound together. A magically consummated union." His lip curled as she gaped at him. He deftly glided his fingertips down her throat and around her breast before kissing her, and once again, her body reacted to his touch as she arched her back to meet each thrust he made into her. A low growl of pleasure escaped his throat. "Yes, Hermione. You are now and forever mine."

~MoM~

The next morning, back in the Ministry of Magic, in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department, Maggie Whitmire noticed a glow coming from the Marriage Registration ledger. She walked over to peer at the large tome and saw immediately that the names: *Hermione Jane Granger and Severus Sean Snape* had changed. The entry now read: *Bonded*.

"So he is alive," she mumbled to no one. "The Aurors were right!" Maggie stared at the ledger. Mr. Lerman and Mr. Darthmyer have been very interested in my ledger lately. Ever since... since I mentioned the Plight Charm between the three couples... No! When I told Agethia that Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter had made a Plight Charm the same night Severus Snape had cast one on Hermione Granger... and Mr. Lerman had been quite concerned that all three had happened on the same night... "They will want to know this..." Returning to her desk, she pulled down a pale yellow piece of parchment and drafted a quick note.

*Severus Snape is alive. He has consummated the magical Pairing or Plight Charm on Hermione Granger, culminating the Bonding Charm to be irrevocably solemnized forever. They are now Bonded. He is apparently still very much alive. I thought you should know.*

*Maggie Whitmire,*

*Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office*

*Magical Licenses and Certificates Department*

She tapped the paper with her wand and the parchment magically folded into a parchment aeroplane and flew off for the Auror's office.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*Thanks you, Southern\_Witch\_69, for all your time and patience cleaning up all my mistakes and errors. Southern, you're the greatest. How did I ever get so lucky?*

## Rough Beginnings

*Chapter 5 of 63*

The magic of the Moon-Song Spell has been consummated, and the Magical Pairing-Plight Betrothal Charm has been sealed. Severus has openly declared himself to be her husband – no, that they are Bonded – magically – for life. Now what?

And to make matters worse, the Ministry now knows Severus is alive, Ron and Harry discover that Hermione has entrapped Severus in the Moon-Song Charm and consummated the Bonding Charm with him. Not only that, but Hermione knows Severus wants to see her again – soon.

~~~~~o 5 o~~~~~

Rough Beginnings

~H~

The owls came that afternoon, swarming into the Burrow and circling around Hermione just as she was setting the pitcher of apple juice on the table for lunch. There were six. All six owls landed on the table vying to give her their letter first, the three Ministry owls refusing to let anyone other than Hermione untie their missives. One owl carried one letter in a strange, pale green parchment, one owl was from Hogwarts and an old, rangy horned owl carried a letter with no return address or name.

"Well, go on 'Mione, 'pen 'em," Ron said with his mouth full, already digging into the sandwiches Ginny had made.

Ginny picked up the thickest one with a Ministry of Magic seal as Hermione finished untying the last letter. "You better open this one first," she suggested.

Timidly, Hermione opened up the letter. It was from Maggie Whitmire in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department and contained the forms and congratulatory letter for her Bonding Charm, just as she'd done for Ginny and Harry. However, she was also insisting she and Severus appear in person to receive approval for their Bonding certificate. "This is odd," she said, handing the letter to Ginny. "I have to appear in person? She didn't say that in your letter."

Ginny read over the letter, frowning, and Harry leaned over her shoulder. "Hermione, you're Bonded to Snape?" he asked, gobsmacked.

"SHE'S WHAT?" Ron shouted, bewildered, spewing his food all over the table. "What? When? How? I'll kill him!"

"You'll do no such thing," Hermione said as she opened the second letter from the Ministry, scanning down the contents. "It's from Kingsley. He asks if the notification he's received is accurate and if I need Ministry assistance to sort out my problem," she replied, receiving a nod from Ginny as she refolded the letter.

"Ell, yes! 'Mione, you're my girl!" Ron said as Harry asked, "What did did you do what Ginny did?"

"Yes," Ginny said, answering for her in an authoritative voice. "She, Luna and I did the Moon-Song Charm..."

"THAT'S DARK MAGIC!" Ron shouted at his sister. "'Mione, you didn't!"

Everyone stood stunned as two more owls came flying in and landed on the table. "Apparently she did something!" Harry pointed out. "And you got stuck with Snape? Severus Snape, the greasy git? The bat of the dungeons?"

"Enough, Harry," Hermione snapped at him. "I know okay? I know and yes. The spell connected me to Severus Snape."



"But it won't work if you don't shag him," Ron said hopefully. "WE can lock you in a tower! That way he can't you won't have to you know shag him. Spell broken."

"We're talking about Snape!" Harry interjected.

"Right um yeah. I'll get my brothers together, we can come up with spells, charms, enchantments he can't get through..."

Hermione groaned.

Ginny sighed. "It's already past the new moon, Ron." Both guys looked down at Ginny.

"We already have," Hermione admitted softly.

"You mean?" Ron said, going pale and Harry looked stricken.

Ginny picked up the letter from Maggie Whitmire. "It's just like with you and me, Harry. They were drawn together; it was inevitable."

Ron's ears turned red from anger, and he turned and ran from the room, slamming the door behind him. Harry quickly followed after him.

"What's the other letter?" Ginny asked. "Hermione, forget him, he'll come around. It's done, and you're Bonded to Snape. It will work out in the end. What I now know for certain is that my brother wasn't right for you, or this," she said, brandishing the Ministry letter, "wouldn't have happened."

"Gin, he's so upset," Hermione said, still staring at the door.

"That was bound to happen," Ginny replied. "Look, I knew about this spell. It was the foundation of several 'damsel in the tower' stories or 'magic knight seeks to find his true love' stories that later became legend magictales what you'd call fairytales. It'll be okay, really. I'll stand by you and help you any way I can. Open the next one."

Hermione opened the next on the pile. It was a letter from a Charles Lerman of the Auror's office questioning the whereabouts of Severus Snape and asking if he'd cast a curse on her or slipped her a potion. The strange, pale green parchment was from Rita Skeeter, seeking an interview, requesting a confirmation of the Bonding Charm and offering congratulations on bonding with a criminal. Minerva McGonagall's letter was warm and affectionate, offering her assistance and voicing her concerns of the match.

"At least she's supportive," Ginny said, setting the letter down. She opened one that had been vibrating with her wand, and six angry bees flew out. Hermione immobilized them, and Ginny repelled them out the window. "Leave Severus alone if you know what's good for you... Avoid Severus at all costs. He's a vampire..." This woman's nutters." She turned the envelope over. "Naturally, an unsigned letter, warning you to leave Snape ah, Severus, alone... Gonna be odd calling him by his given name, isn't it?"

"This one is warning me not to get involved with a Death Eater and wanted criminal. She says I should have better sense than that. And this one is accusing me of being a Death Eater and asking if I was trying to impede Harry's fight against Voldemort. 'All those months when you were hiding it wasn't hiding at all was it? You were holding Harry hostage...' Oh bother!" Hermione incinerated the offending letter. "Gin, how did all these people they find out so quickly? It only happened last night."

~S~

Severus paced in the library, unable to find a book he wanted, the one to tell him how to get out of this situation!*I've read all the books on breaking Matchmaking and Betrothal Charms and Enchantments, as well as the ones in Lucius' Dark Arts tomes.* Lucius was watching him, at least pretending to be reading his book, even though his eyes had kept flickering up at Severus enough times in the last two hours. *The only way out of the predicament I'm in had to have been done before the night of the new moon, before Hermione Miss Granger and I consummated the bond. And that would have been for her father or in her case, currently, Mr. Weasley to have found out about the dreams, locked Herm-i Miss Granger in a tower and guard it against me. As if Mr. Weasley could've been able to conceive of a tower or protections and spells that could've kept me out.* He moved down to another bookshelf, a fierce snarl on his face, and began perusing the binders, hoping for inspiration.*As if I'd fall for the damn damsel in a tower routine breaking through magical wards, scaling walls, battling dragons, thorns were always popular or Devil's Snare, creature-filled moats or dangerous beasts in the courtyards... the idiotic stuff of fairytales...*

"Go to her," Lucius said, breaking into his mental tirade.

"No, I will not," Severus said coolly, controlling his anger. *I will not be a pawn in her delusional fantasy of 'a dark, mysterious, brooding man, a tortured soul that simply needs a loving woman's girl's love to redeem him...' No. No.*

"You want her," Lucius said, breaking into his thoughts again.

"Mind your own business, please," Severus said, then stopped pacing, turned and faced his friend. "It was practically rape."

"I doubt that you were that rough with her," Lucius replied amicably over his book. "Your skills in coupling are legend even if you're the love 'em and leave 'em type. Of course..." He lowered his book a bit, looking up at Severus. "How long *has* it been for you?"

"Not her me!" Severus snapped, ignoring the question. "It was the Moon-Song Curse. The idiot girl cast the Moon-Song Curse!"

"So you've Bonded with someone that knows as much about the Dark Arts and as many curses as you do?" Lucius said, turning the page nonchalantly.

"No, she loathes the Dark Arts," Severus stated bluntly.

"Yet, she used the Bonding Curse? I don't think she *loathes* them as much as you think," Lucius replied, managing to conceal a smirk when Severus glared at him. "So, are you going to see your *bride* tonight?"

"No. She's not my bride she's my wand mate. We're Bonded. So, no," Severus stated firmly.

"Why ever not?" Lucius asked, astounded. "If I had a wife out there who could make me this antsy give me dreams like the ones you've been having nothing could keep me from her. Not even sea conchthroths in a moat, surrounding flaming dragons, protecting thorn brambles on impossibly impassable cliffs, to climb a tower..."

"I am not some witchtale white knight." Severus' scowl became darker.

Lucius suppressed his laughter, but it clearly reflected in his pale grey eyes. "So, just go get her and bring her here."

"Location, logistics and numerous complications," he said, ignoring Lucius's smirk.

"She's at her parents'? How young is she?" Lucius asked, obviously amazed by his answer.

"She was a student," Severus admitted. *Let it go...*

"You've been teaching for over twenty years. *All* eligible, young witches have been your students," Lucius stated. "Simply go get her and bring her here. You've my permission. Use the east wing foyer as your Apparation point. I'll adjust the wards for you."

"That's very kind of you," Severus stated with a hint of sarcasm.

"What are friends for?" Lucius said, smiling wickedly as he returned to his book. "Maybe you'd consider a threesome."

Severus's hands clenched into fists as he turned to glare at the bookshelf again. "No." *She is mine... for now.*

~H~

The next night Hermione was anxious as she lay on her cot. *How will things be different? Ginny said that she and Harry didn't continue having the dreams after they had consummated the spell, but Harry can't keep his hands off her. Will Severus be the same? He's not some randy teenager.* She'd gone up to bed early, but she couldn't sleep. Her mind was too troubled, and she kept jumping at every single sound. The room was quiet. There had been creaking coming from the stairs, but it stopped. The wind was blowing softly outside, making the shadows of the branches of the large beech tree sway. It was amazing just how many sounds the Burrow had when one was nervous. *Maybe he won't come tonight... Gods, what if he does? Will the Weasleys even let him in?*

The letter she'd received that evening, now hidden under her pillow, alarmed her. It read simply:

*Hermione,*

*Meet me or I will come in and get you.*

SS

She tossed and turned several times, unable to find a comfortable position. Suddenly something pale and silvery jumped through the window, and a doe Patronus stood staring at her a moment before turning and jumping out the window again. *Oh, no! That's his he's here!* She got up and went to the window expecting to see Severus standing in the back garden, looking up at the house. Instead, she only saw the Patronus trotting across the lawn and heading into the orchard. She quickly looked down at Ginny sleeping in her bed. *I can't let him come up here*

*Oh, Circe! His note... 'Meet me or I'll come up and get you...' Was it a threat? A declaration? Would he really?* She decided not to chance it and quickly grabbed her dressing robe, slipping on her Vans and exited quietly from the room. The stairs squeaked as she made her way down, and Hermione grimaced.

In the back garden, the chill of the night hit her. *Oh, I hope he won't want to do this outside..* She walked toward the apple orchard apprehensively. His doe Patronus ran out through the trees, turned, and Hermione followed it. Severus was leaning against a tree in his long black robes, his arms crossed, holding his cloak in each hand as he watched her walk toward him. "You received my owl, I presume?" he asked, his eyes roaming over her from head to toe.

His tone was harsh and it frightened her. "Yes, I received it. You didn't tell me where, exactly, did you?"

He smirked, but made no scathing remark, and Hermione took that as a good sign. He just simply pushed away from the tree as he continued to stare at her. "Come here," he demanded, extending a hand to her.

Reluctantly she walked forward, placing her hand in his, and he pulled her to him, embracing her tightly against his chest. She was about to ask him where he intended on doing this, but her words were cut off by the crushing sensation of Side-Along-Apparition.

They arrived in the foyer of a large manor home. A heavy, ornate table in the center with a huge flower arrangement of roses stood on a huge Persian rug. Marble pillars, marble floors and pale orange paint on the walls offset the white crown molding, creating the perfect backdrop for the paintings in gilded frames and expensive furnishings. Wherever they were, this house was elegantly appointed, but had the austere feeling of a museum. He took her hand and pulled her to follow him. "Where are we?" she finally asked as he dragged her up the stairs.

"Malfoy Manor east wing," he said casually, as if she should have guessed that for herself.

Hermione stopped, and he nearly caused her to stumble. "I'm where?!"

"Malfoy Manor," he answered, pulling on her hand to continue following him. "They have been my host now since the battle."

Hermione stumbled after him, reluctantly. "But why bring me here? They hate me! They will curse me..."

"They will not," he said coolly. "Would you have preferred the ground in the orchard? My days of shagging on the ground are over, Miss Granger. I prefer a bed." She shook her head and he smirked at her. "Come on, then." He turned to his left at the top of the stairs.

Hermione swallowed as she quietly followed, awed by the casual elegance of the house. She didn't want to wake any of the Malfoys if they were at home. She wondered if possibly they slept in the west wing, hoping that they did.

The room he led her to was huge. There were white gossamer curtains and dark blue drapes on each tall window and on the huge four-poster bed in the center of the room. The furnishings were sturdy and elegant in gilded-edged golden maple. The walls were pale gold, trimmed in white. The bed was the same bed as in her in her dreams. When Hermione turned around to speak to Severus, she realized that he'd been removing his cloak and robes while she'd been gawking at the room's decor. He stood before her completely nude. She took a step back as he advanced on her, his expression darkly purposeful.

"What? Did you think I brought you here to talk?" he said as he grasped her arm and pulled her to him, crushing her body against his. His mouth descended on hers, fervently kissing her, taking her breath away and instantly making her knees weaken. His fervid assault on her mouth was making her feel intoxicated. He removed her robe from her shoulders, and without Hermione really realizing it, he'd maneuvered her toward the bed. She nearly toppled over as her calves hit the edge. In a swift move, Severus yanked her nightshirt up to pull it off her, and she raised her arms to assist him.

He wasted no time in shoving her back onto the bed with a gentle push, reaching down to pull her knickers down her legs as he did so. He seemed more ardent than before, than he'd been in the dreams, much more tenacious. His gaze on her body was more lustful. He pulled her legs open, leaning over her, and positioned himself against her. He rubbed himself against her moist folds a few times, staring at the tip of his penis as he did so until she felt herself become wet. In one swift plunge, he thrust his penis inside of her.

He moved in deep, stroking motions as he entered and withdrew from her body, his dark eyes staring at her with an unfathomable expression. His demeanor was far more lascivious than sensual, and he kept lowering his head in order to watch himself as he moved within her, a feral grin on his face.

This time there wasn't the same amount of passion as in the dreams, his actions far more physical than passionate. It wasn't unpleasant, but not as stimulating, not as pleasurable for her. He was in control and she felt pinned. She didn't even know what to do with her hands, other than grip his arms. The usual well, dream arousal she'd come to expect wasn't building as rapidly within her. The forcefulness of his lovemaking seemed unrelenting, more driven this time. It didn't feel bad, he felt good inside her, but he was rough, his movements relentless, his expression hungry. He was driven by his need, and she simply allowed him to use her, not sure what to do otherwise.

His face suddenly contorted in ecstasy, his mouth going slack and his panting harsh as he pounded in her relentlessly; then he slammed in one last time and pressed down into her, pushing her deeply into the mattress. His body shook, and his arms stiffened as he held himself up to keep from collapsing onto her, leaving her emotions hanging and unsated.

She looked up at him, unsure of what to do. He wasn't looking at her, his eyes closed as his breathing slowed down and became more normal. The next thing she knew he

was pulling away from her, the stiffness in his penis obviously spent, falling limply between his legs. He stood up and glared down at her as if expecting for her to do something.

"What?"

"Do you need a towel or something?" he asked, his voice cold with an edge of indifference.

Hermione look up at him, dumfounded. "Is it always going to be like this? I thought..."

"That it would be like in the dreams? Or possibly like our first coupling under the influence of *your* curse? Really, Miss Granger, reality rarely is." His tone was harsh, almost angry.

*After this, he's should use my name at least* "Hermione," she stated.

"Miss Granger," he stated, his arms crossed, dark eyes frosty.

"If we're going to be intimate, don't you think you should use my name?" she asked, becoming incensed by his treatment of her.

He simply turned to retrieve his robes. "I thought Granger was your name my mistake," he said, pulling the fabric over his lean frame.

She felt used; his manner was confusing her. "It is but I thought that under the circumstances..."*He's angry at me? What did I do to deserve this...?*

"If we marry, Miss Granger, I shall." He turned and scooped up her nightshirt and handed it to her. "Honestly, do you really wish to be married to me? Do you expect me to think that *I'm* the man you would have chosen to marry? You did this with a spell Dark Magic to be precise. You entrapped me into this and these are the consequences. You are now stuck with me. Deal with it."

She grabbed her shirt and clutched it to her chest. "Stuck with you? Deal with it? How can you be so callous?"

"How could you be so insipid as to perform the Moon-Song Curse? Why would you have performed that spell? Were you even aware of what you were doing?" he asked, sneering at her. He waited a moment for her to answer, his dark eyes growing angrier by her dumfounded silence. "I thought not. Ancient magic, the magic of the lonely, broken hearted and desperate *that's* what you've done. I would've thought better of you."

Hermione's heart quickened, her fear of him rising.*Oh, Circe! What did I do...?*"I I didn't know I simply thought... I didn't..."

"Obviously," he snapped at her. "So, Miss Granger, do you wish to sleep here, or should I return you to the apple orchard?"

"I um..." was all she could manage under his scrutinizing glare.

He crossed his arms, standing stiffly arrogant in front of her. "Fine," he snapped, turning to leave. "You'll sleep here. I'm going downstairs for a drink. I don't know if or when I'll be back up. Go to sleep, Miss Granger."

When the door closed, she fell back onto the mattress and cried.

~L~

As was his usual routine lately, Lucius walked down the hall checking the windows. He needn't bother actually; they were magically secured and opened only when the weather was exceptionally hot. Still, his stroll took him to his true destination, Severus's room. The door was closed, not that he expected otherwise, but a simple detection spell indicated only one occupant. Female.

He placed his hand on the latch and had just barely opened the door when he discerned the soft sounds of crying from within*What in the blazes she's crying?*He turned and peered down the corridor, considering the cause of her distress. *He couldn't have taken his anger out on her has he? I knew he was upset... poor girl. I know how he can hold grudges. Still she did entrap him with that bloody curse.* He considered going down and having a drink with Severus.*No, not if he's in that mood not a good idea. I prefer my nose as it is.* He laughed at his friend's predicament.*I remember when Cissy's parents cast a Pairing Charm on their daughter Bella, and Cissy snuck a sip of the potion so that the charm would work on her, too. It took me a while to come around but Cissy won me over. Besides, we'd been good together at school as Prefects.* He closed the door and walked away. *Give Severus time, my dear; he'll come around*

~ T B C ~>

~~~~~o0o~~~~~

Author's notes:

*This was a really hard chapter to write, and I kept putting it off; however, I never quit something I've started nor back out of a promise, so I'll not abandon those who tell me that they like this story.*

*The problem is that Hermione has now ensnared Severus and trapped him with a Bonding Curse and he's now pissed really angry. This is grudge sex unfortunately. I tried to type Severus, a pissed-off Severus, with a sense of redeeming qualities, and well, I may have failed. Please believe me, they are there hidden temporarily under his anger. He'll come around. Just give him and me a little time (and by little, I mean a chapter or two). This will all work out with a fairytale ending I promise!*

*In the meantime, there will be angry sex, make-up sex, forgiving sex, and lover's sex. (Not all in one chapter of course!)*

*Thanks you, Amsev, for all your time and patience cleaning up all my mistakes and errors. Amsev, you're the greatest. How did I ever get so lucky?*

## Relentless Persistence

Chapter 6 of 63

Severus is still coming to terms with his anger at having been entrapped into his Bonding with Hermione Granger and

isn't taking things so well. After he returns her to the Burrow, Hermione asks Severus to sign and wand verify the Bonding Certification forms, and Severus gets mad with her, refusing to cooperate.

Meanwhile, the Ministry wants to take Severus into custody and thinks that Hermione will turn him in, since they have no idea where to find him to bring him in for questions. Oh, and do they have questions!

In addition, Rita Skeeter's discovered eavesdropping in the Burrow for information for her newest book.

Could things get any worse?

\*Warning this is explicit graphic sexual situations.\*

Dreams no more... the next chapters are for real. Sexual but not blissful. Yet.

~~~~~o 6 o~~~~~

Relentless Persistence

*What are little boys made of?*

*Snips and snails, and puppy dogs tails*

*That's what little boys are made of!*

*What are little girls made of?*

*Sugar and spice and all things nice*

*That's what little girls are made of!*

~S~

Severus woke up with a painfully stiff erection and the feel of a girl lying next to him. He'd come to bed fairly inebriated and had climbed in, careful not to touch the girl curled in a fetal position on the far side of the bed. However, sometime during the night or really early in the morning, depending how one would look at it, Hermione had uncurled herself and rolled over to his side of the bed, waking him. Her little body had been stretched out with one leg slung over one of his, her arm draped across his chest, her hair tickling his nose and her warm breath making his shoulder uncomfortably hot. In fact, the entire right side of his body had been too warm for an hour now.

He'd groaned in the early predawn hour for a house-elf to bring him some Hangover Potion, trying to brush her hair away from his face. He tried to gently shove her leg and arm off him without waking the girl and then tried rolling her away. Somehow, he'd managed the feat without waking her by the time the elf had arrived with his potion. He took the potion and fell back to sleep, feeling much better after taking the sour brew.

As the bright light of morning filled the room, Severus woke again, feeling Hermione once again stretched out alongside him, having successfully maneuvered him to the edge of his bed. *Bloody hell! Why do women always take up the whole bed? Why can't they just sleep on their half without trying to shove me out of bed?* He grumbled as he levitated her over and she rolled onto her back. *And she's so petite. Why does someone so small need to take up the entire bed?* He rolled up on one elbow to angrily look down at the girl who had ensnared and seduced him.

In sleep, she looked so young, although he knew full well she was eighteen and his union with her was in no way illegal. If that had been the case, he could've appealed to the Ministry for assistance. *Yeah, me a wanted murderer, Death Eater in hiding, presumed dead ask the Ministry for assistance* He smirked at the thought. *I'd land in Azkaban before I'd even finished my appeal. Not bloody likely! If the Ministry can break the Bonding, then the answer will be in one of Malfoy's books or Roquewood's.*

He pulled the covers back, kicking them to his feet and looked down at Hermione's sleeping form. The oversize nightshirt had hiked up her body, exposing her from her pubic hair down. *Her body is appealing, everything in perfect proportions slender with just enough curves to entice..* Only a month ago, he'd have been flogged for what he thought as he looked at her. Nevertheless, he liked how her body looked nude, but she had been his student and an irritating one at that. *Miss Know-It-All didn't bother with enticement or seduction. No! She went straight for ensnare, entrap and capture, and all with a bloody Betrothal Charm! And she hadn't even been aware of what she was doing. Surely, six years of magical education had taught her something?* With the slightest pressure necessary, he pushed the edge of the shirt up as high as it would go and then slid his fingers through her curly pubic hair. *My wife. My Bonded mate my Dark Arts enchantress* He ran his finger through her folds until he found her clitoris and began rubbing it. Hermione's eyes opened with a start, gasping as if in shock. "Good morning," he said softly with a smug smile.

She licked her lips, inhaled sharply, and her body shuddered as he watched her. "Good morning," she answered uncertainly.

His penis jerked and was so hard it was painful. *So now she's got me and I'll be damned if I'll let her off easy...*

"Did you...?" she started to ask, before his fingers slipped into her heat, stroking her. "Do you?"

"What, Miss Granger, sleep well? Well enough, yes." He shifted over her, making his intent clear to her. "Want something? Yes." His hand slid under her shirt to fondle her breast. "Sit up please. I'd like to remove your shirt," he said in his silky drawl. She opened her mouth to protest, and he leaned down and kissed her. "I could simply just have my way with you, but it is so much more enjoyable if you are willing."

To her credit, she sat up and removed her shirt, her eyes riveted on his. "Are you sore this morning?" he asked as his gaze traveled down her body.

"A little," she admitted as she lay back down beneath him.

*Damn.* "I'll try to go slow," he said as he eased her legs open and positioned himself, stroking his penis against her. *She's too tense.* His finger stroked her with each sweep of the tip of his penis, teasing her clitoris as he waited for her to relax and get wet enough for him. "That's it, Hermione, relax," he said in his honeyed drawl as she closed her eyes and her mouth opened slightly. He leaned down and suckled one pert breast, lathing the nipple with his tongue. *That's it, relax*

In an agonizing slow move, he slid himself into her, and she inhaled sharply. *Damn it, girl, I'm not that thick* he thought with a snarl. "Relax." He withdrew slowly, making long, slow strokes, as he moved in and out of her. He switched to her other breast as he continued his slow assault on her body. When she moaned, he moved faster, his thrusts harder and deeper. Her knees bent and she opened herself wider for him. *Yes, thank you.* He stopped kissing her, holding himself up above her when his nads started to constrict, and his concentration refocused on the sensations he was feeling, making his movements more fervent. She moaned again, her hands stroking his arms, shoulders and chest, but it didn't matter anymore. He grabbed her hips, gripping her tightly as he plunged himself down into her heat with each stroke. His testicles grew hard and taut, the constriction increasing as he moved. She was trying to move with him and it amused him slightly. He closed his eyes as the pressure in his nads released, sending waves and spurts of come through his penis shaft.

He wasn't sure if she'd reached release or not; her eyes were closed, her breathing labored. He rolled off her in post-climatic bliss, feeling a sense of completion and

waited for her to open her eyes and look at him. When she did, he was still uncertain if she'd reached climax. "Do you wish to go down for breakfast here, or do I return you back to the Burrow?"

"Pardon me?" she asked, bewilderment evident in her soft brown eyes. "I can't eat here!"

"Suit yourself; the house-elves make fantastic crumpets." He rolled over and rose from the bed. "Get dressed. I don't want to miss breakfast. Lucius and Narcissa are expecting us, but I'll make your excuses."

Hermione scrambled from the bed, donning her nightshirt quickly and took her dressing robe he'd scooped off the floor and held out to her. He was fully dressed by the time she'd located her Vans. He strode purposefully from the room, certain that she followed him and held out his hand once they were in the east foyer.

"I can Apparate..."

"No, *you* cannot Apparate off the Manor's grounds, and the hounds are loose this time of day, so I'm not walking you to the gates," he interrupted her. She placed her hand in his, and he pulled her tightly to him, crushing her against his chest, and then tipped her face up to look at him. His dark eyes searched hers, wondering why she was being so receptive to him. *After all those years of berating her and dismissing her talents, yet she's here, surprisingly submissive and compliant* He wanted to use Legilimency to read her thoughts, but chose not to. Instead, he leaned down and kissed her. Hermione closed her eyes, and he took his time, savoring her lips with light, feathery sweeps of his lips. She responded, trying to reciprocate with lush caresses of her own. His tongue teased across her lip, and she opened her mouth, allowing him to deepen his kiss. He was amused to feel her wrap her free arm around him to try to bring their bodies closer. He still held her hand clasped tightly in his, holding the side of her face with his other while they kissed, controlling her movements. She hardly seemed to notice that she stood in a foyer anymore and that Lucius or Narcissa could walk in on them, considering her earlier declaration about breakfast. In fact, it was rather nice kissing her, and she responded to him as if they were actually lovers, which amused him. She made a tiny mewling sound when he shifted his head, momentarily breaking contact, and he was sure it was in response to feelings his kiss was invoking.

When he stopped and raised his head, it took her a few seconds before she opened her dazed eyes and focused on his face again *Nice*. "Time to go," he said with a smug smirk on his face. He pulled her to him in an embrace and Apparated them to the apple orchard, exactly in the same spot where he'd taken her from.

"Severus," she said, and he scowled at the familiarity she took in using his given name. "I have to we have to sign the forms for our Bonding Charm. The Ministry expects us to..."

"Hermione," he growled out her name. "I don't care what the Ministry wants. They're not simply going to accept that I didn't Imperius you or use a potion to coerce you into making a Betrothal Charm. They most certainly will not believe that *you* used Dark Magic to coerce me. Nevertheless, you and I are Bonded. I suppose they said that you and I will have to be confirmed, and they will want me to go with you to the Ministry for approval am I correct?"

She nodded and he swore. "I am not going. You'll have to do without the pretty, golden-embossed certificate. We are a magically Bonded couple, and they cannot change that unless I *am* dead. But they will lock me away for life and declare me dead so the Minister of Magic can have you released from me. I'm not going to give them the chance to lock me away by entering the Ministry on some trumped up nonsense."

"But they say we have to sign it and wand verify it," she tried to explain.

"No, I do not." *I don't want to*. He took a deep breath and slipped into professor mode to hold her attention. "Look, you are Muggle-born so I don't expect you to fully grasp the situation. When a witch or wizard casts a Pairing, Betrothal or any matchmaking spell, curse or charm it creates a binding magical contract. Such magic is recorded automatically in the Marriage Registration ledger in the Ministry of Magic and becomes a permanent record. Most pairing and matchmaking spells have conditions that have to be met. If those conditions are consummated or completed such as our copulation the magic of the spell is sealed. The certificate is a formality. The magical Bonding has already happened hence it's called a Bonding Charm."

Hermione stared at him, finally understanding the difference in her letter and Ginny and Harry's letter. "But it would be nice to have it..."

"Forget it. It's a piece of gilded parchment, nothing more," he said firmly, growing annoyed at the conversation. "You will meet me again night after tomorrow. I expect you to be out in the back garden after ten. I'll be waiting and summon you."

Then he left, leaving her standing in the orchard, feeling even more confused than before about why she would've used a Pairing-Troth Curse in the first place. He was still angry with her. Angry that somehow she'd decided to trap him into a relationship with her, especially one he couldn't find any acceptable escape from. *Hermione Granger is now my wand mate for life. Can the fates be that unkind? Why did her spell connect me to her? Why not some Ravenclaw or Gryffindor?*

Severus entered the manor and headed for the dining room to join Narcissa and Lucius for breakfast. The scent of fresh crumpets filled the air from the kitchens as he passed. Lucius and Narcissa were already seated, sipping on fresh breakfast tea. "Morning," he said, sitting down.

Lucius raised his eyebrow, taking in Severus's appearance. "Either you slept in your robes, didn't bother to change or didn't see the clean robes hanging in your wardrobe?" he said softly. "Surely, your wife..."

"Wand mate, please," Severus said, laying his napkin on his lap. "I'll change later."

Narcissa watched him, her pale, blue-grey eyes speculative. "Isn't your *wand mate* going to join us?"

Severus turned politely to Narcissa. "No, I'm sorry. I had to take her home."

"Home?" Lucius asked. "To her parents' house? Exactly how old is the witch?"

"I'm sure the young lady is of appropriate age," Narcissa softly chided her husband, "or her parents wouldn't have cast the spell."

Severus tried to suppress his emotions into indifference. Lately it seemed harder to do. "I'm afraid that the young woman cast the spell herself, Narcissa. However, she is of legal age, so I cannot request an annulment." A house-elf set a plate of freshly baked crumpets before him.

"She used the Moon-Song Curse, dear," Lucius informed Narcissa.

"That old one?" her eyebrows rose in surprise. "Surely she's... I'm sure she's lovely. So, when do we meet her?"

"Not today." Severus took a large bite of his crumpet, hoping to end the conversation.

"We'll have to throw you a reception party," Narcissa stated. "I'll need her name for the announcements, and if you'd give me a list of her friends and family..."

"I don't believe you'd like the guest list," Severus said, trying to suppress the smirk on his face. "I'm sorry, Narcissa. Let's see... There's Harry Potter, the Weasleys, the Lovegoods, the Longbottoms, the Joneses, several members of the Order of the Phoenix. I'm sure we would need to invite several members of the Hogwarts staff including Hagrid. I hope that he won't bring his giant brother with him to the party, but apparently she's well-acquainted with Grawp... I'm sure I could get a list of her school friends for you..."

"And of course, Severus, your circle of friends," Lucius added with an amused smirk.

Narcissa tried to conceal her shock, but her face had paled slightly.

"Yes, my dear, that would be quite a challenge for you to pull off," Lucius said with a grin. "What date should I clear off the calendar?"

~H~

Hermione returned to the Burrow not sure exactly what she was feeling. Her night with her husband wasn't exactly what she thought it would be like. *Well, what exactly did I expect he's Snape Severus, I mean. He's never exactly liked me all that much, and I can't expect him to change his mind over night.* She laughed at the thought. *He gets magically Bonded with the insufferable know-it-all Gryffindor, who he's called silly girl more times than I can count, and I expect him to act like he did in a dream dreams. Actually, he's not being as terrible as I might have expected.* What she wanted now was to slip into the Burrow and take a nice long hot bath.

However, as soon as Hermione opened the door, Mrs Weasley cried out and came running over to greet her. "Hermione, where have you been? We've all been so worried about you!" She pulled Hermione into a crushing, motherly hug. "Ginny said you were out all night."

"Mione!" Ron cried out as he and Harry entered the room.

"You okay?" Harry asked, looking relieved. "Ginny said you didn't sleep in your bed."

Hermione knew that Ginny didn't need to tell him that, Harry was now slipping into Ginny's bed nearly every other night. "No, I was... with Severus, and he took me to his place..." she started to explain as Ginny bounded down the stairs.

"Oi, there you are!" Ginny said, sitting down to breakfast as if nothing was amiss. "So, how did it go?"

"You were where? With whom?" Mrs. Weasley looked confused. "How did what go?"

Mr. Weasley came down carrying his briefcase. "How did what go, exactly?" he looked up, startled to see Hermione in the kitchen. "Oh, there you are. You should tell us if you'll be gone all night. Almost sent for an Auror in case well, you're safe."

"She was with Snape," Ron said accusingly. "Weren't you?"

"Snape?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "Severus Snape? How could she? He's dead."

"Yes, I was, only he's not dead, and yes..." Hermione started to confess before she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Now who could that be at this hour?" Mrs. Weasley asked, concerned, moving to open the door.

Mr. Weasley's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Hermione, is there something you need to tell me?"

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, there is..." Hermione stopped as two wizards she didn't know but recognized from the Battle of Hogwarts entered the house.

"I'm Auror Lerman and this is Mr. Darthmyer from the Auror Department, special Death Eater assignment," a tall, lanky-looking fellow said, pointing first to himself, then to a squat, square-faced wizard next to him. "We're here to see a Mrs. Hermione Snape." Both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked gobsmacked while Ron glowered and Ginny and Harry shook their heads.

"Hermione, what's going on?" Mr. Weasley said as Mrs. Weasley shrieked, "Snape?" as she turned to Ginny and Harry and then back to Hermione, "You didn't do it too?"

"We detected an Apparation this morning on the premises, and we believe that Severus Snape may have been trying to abduct Miss Hermione Granger. We have discovered that Miss Granger is now Bonded to Severus Snape and believe he preformed a Matchmaking or Betrothal Charm to align himself with her," Darthmyer stated. "Although, we were unable to determine who Apparated. So we'd like to speak to Miss Granger..."

"It was me," Hermione said defensively. "I'm Hermione Granger. I just returned this morning." She quickly turned to Ginny, mouthing, *Get Kingsley.*

Mr. Lerman had turned to Hermione, interrupting her. "You prefer to be called Miss Granger rather than Mrs. Snape?"

Thankfully Ginny understood and nodded, turned and whispered to her dad.

"Don't call her Mrs. Snape, they are not married," Ron blurted out, cutting off Mr. Lerman.

Mr. Lerman looked confused and pulled out his note pad and quill to recheck his facts. "The twenty-third of June at approximately eleven forty-nine, Severus Snape performed a magical Pairing-Plight Betrothal Charm on Hermione Granger, and they are now Bonded."

"They are what?" Mrs. Weasley asked, staring at Mr. Lerman with her mouth agape. Mr. Weasley, however, disappeared in the Floo. "Wait! She's...? You're saying she's Bonded to Severus Snape?"

"We are aware that Severus Snape has conducted and conjugated a Bonding Charm with Mrs. um, okay, Hermione Granger-Snape. We believe that he is intending on using her name and status to gain his freedom. Mr. Snape has been successfully eluding us, and his whereabouts are currently unknown. We now know that Mrs. Snape Miss Granger is in a unique position to assist us in capturing this hardened criminal..."

"You think that Hermione will turn him in!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Well, of course we do she helped Harry there hunt and fight against Tom 'Lord Voldemort' Riddle!" Darthmyer stated. "We are very well aware of Mrs. Snape's involvement in assisting Harry fight and destroy..."

Bedlam broke out as several people tried to respond at once. "I can't do that!" Hermione exclaimed.

"He's not a bad guy you've got things wrong about him," Ginny said defensively. "The Carrows would have hurt everybody..."

"He was in the Order, and he was working on our side through all this war," Mrs. Weasley declared. "He helped save lives..."

"He was Dumbledore's man, his spy I know it for sure," Harry added. "He helped me loads of times..."

"What did I miss?" Mr. Weasley asked, coming through the Floo.

"You cannot really expect me to simply turn him in!" Hermione exclaimed aghast. "He's my husband!"

"There are memories in a Pensieve; they explain everything," Harry stated. "Dumbledore's portrait you can ask him yourself..."

"He tried protecting the kids at school," Ginny stated. "Did what he could so no one was truly maimed..."

"At great personal risk to himself, too, might I add," Mrs. Weasley finished. "Gave us loads of information... warnings..."

"Aurors Lerman and Darthmyer want Hermione to turn Severus over to the Ministry," Ginny explained to her dad as Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped from the Floo.

"Just tell us where to find him and we'll take it from there," Mr. Lerman said, sounding very much like a demand.

"I cannot do that," Hermione determinedly.

"Why ever not?" Ron cried out.

"Because he's not a criminal!" Hermione answered him angrily.

"He most certainly is! He killed Dumbledore, young lady. Surely, you aren't under his spell or Imperiused are you? I could take you in and question you..." Mr. Lerman stated, pulling his wand. Four other wands pointed right back at him.

Mr. Darthmyer drew his wand.

Minister Shacklebolt stood up to his full height and bellowed, "HOLD ON THERE!" as Mr. Weasley pulled his wand from his robes.

The room fell quiet.

Mr. Lerman still had his wand pointed at Hermione. Hermione, Ginny, Harry and Ron had their wands pointed at Mr. Lerman. Mr. Darthmyer had his wand pointed at Harry. Mrs. Weasley's wand was centered on Mr. Darthmyer's chest. Mr. Weasley had his wand out, pointed at Mr. Darthmyer's should he do anything to his wife, but he was the first to lower his wand, although he watched the wand tip pointed at Mrs. Weasley closely.

"Wands down, now." Everyone turned to look at Kingsley, and slowly wands lowered. "Now would someone please tell me what wait," he said, holding up his hand. "I know why you are here, Lerman, Darthmyer. Miss Granger or should I call you Mrs. Snape now?"

Hermione, feeling safer now that Kingsley was in charge, turned around and faced him. "Please call me Hermione."

"Fine," he said. "From what I know you and Severus Snape have consummated a Bonding Charm of some kind, of which I have a few questions of my own. But what has my interest now is why on earth are you protecting him?"

"Stan Shunpike," Hermione and Harry said in unison. Hermione smiled at Harry and he blushed back at her. "He was not a Death Eater. He was simply bragging and landed in Azkaban. Remember Charlie Smythers? Not a Death Eater was Imperiused but jailed anyway. Ministry jails first, and then forgets to ask the big questions," Hermione stated. "I've my reasons. He's not a saint, but he's not well, is was a Death Eater, but he's not what everyone thinks he is. Besides I don't know where he is at this time."

Kingsley crossed his arms regarding her closely. "And if you did?"

Hermione shook her head.

Kingsley held up his wand and raised his eyebrow. "May I check?" He waited until she nodded and swept it over her, nodding to his Aurors. "UnImperiused. Hermione, why? *Legilimens*."

The soft invasion was quick. Very few flashes crossed her mind, but they were mostly images from Order meetings, times that Hermione'd seen Severus standing at Dumbledore's side, and Hermione suddenly realized, *He didn't pull forward any of my memories about the dreams or being with Severus last night! He's not looking! He's giving me a message!* The contact broke and she looked down at the floor to hide her smile. *He's telling me that he knows what side Severus was on, that he was one of us, the good guys!*

"She doesn't know, gentlemen. I suggest we let the family have their breakfast." He turned to Mr. Weasley and Harry.

Hermione successfully repressed her smile, knowing that Kingsley just lied to his Auror's regarding her knowledge about Severus' whereabouts, although she had no idea why he'd do that.

"Arthur, come by my office when you get to the Ministry. Harry, I'd like to see you, too, if you don't mind." Kingsley crossed the room ushering his Aurors out the door. He turned and looked at Hermione one last time before leaving. "I suggest you change your mind, Hermione, and decide to help us out. I would like to see you in my office later today as well."

Hermione nodded and watched him leave, wondering if she should have told him, then decided now wasn't the time. She needed to be sure of her feelings before she caused Severus to be sent to Azkaban. She sighed and started for the stairs. "And where do you think you're going *Mrs. Snape*?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Hermione took a deep breath, turned and faced Mrs. Weasley. "Okay. Yes. I did the Moon-Song Charm the potion and ritual along with Ginny and Luna. *Angles*, somehow, it linked me to Severus Snape not Ron."

"Ha! I knew wait you thought me and you?" Ron said flabbergasted. "You thought it'd be me?"

Hermione ignored his outburst. "I didn't know how to break it so well it happened. And now all this and..." She made a sweep of her hand. "I don't know why he wants me but he seems to and... well..." She looked at Ginny. "It will work out somehow I assume. But for now all I'd really like is to clean up and change."

"Hermione, do you have any idea where he is?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"No, I don't, well, not really," she said, not sure why she'd just lied to him. "But he'll come back. He told me so. He said he'd summon me... Please, can this wait?"

Mrs. Weasley walked over and put a motherly arm across Hermione's shoulders. "Oh, of course it can. Go up and take a quick bath, and I'll fix you a spot of breakfast."

"Thank you," Hermione replied, gratefully.

"Hermione, wait!" Ginny called after her, reached up and pulled something from Hermione's hair. "You've a bug. Mum, do you have a jar?" she asked, examining the beetle with a wicked grin.

The beetle instantly Transformed into Rita Skeeter. "No! No, please not again. I'm sorry! I was on Darthmyer's robes I had no idea!" Hermione, Harry and Ginny all looked at her in disbelief while Mrs. Weasley beamed in delight! "I just thought, since I'm writing a book on Severus Snape, and Darthmyer is investigating him you know... first-hand scoop. Information straight from the..."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "You're writing a book on Snape and you came *here*?"

"On the Auror Darthmyer's robe! I assure you, I had no idea where we were going... Okay, I did, and I was curious, and I thought..." Rita turned to Hermione. "Don't think you'd like to make it official. Tell me a few facts, something the readers might love to know?"

"No!" Harry, Hermione and Ginny all said definitively.

"No juicy tid-bits? No little snippets... no juicy news? You could tell the wizarding world your side," she begged. "How you ensnared him? How he reacted? I would pay

handsomely for an interview."

"That's enough," Ginny said, quickly casting her Bat-Bogey Hex on Rita.

She shrieked, batting at the flying bogeys around her face. "I have plenty of gossip already I know what you did! I I know what you all said. I heard you..."

Harry stepped forward. "You'll print your lies, and I'll come out and tell the truth."

Rita tried to look at him, and Harry stepped toward her, his wand raised. "But listen to me, Rita, you'd better not make Hermione's life miserable. Do you hear me? I'm warning you."

"Fine," she snarled as Harry corralled her toward the door, making her leave.

~ T B C ~>

~~~~~o0o~~~~~

*Author's notes:*

*I know that this chapter isn't as 'hot' as the first three and that Severus seems to have cooled considerably. However, he is or will be coming around. He's still recovering from the knowledge that he's consummated the Bonding Curse or Spell, whichever way you'd like to call it. At least Hermione is coming to terms with it.*

*Thank you, Amsev, for taking on this story and helping me to make it readable. Without your help I'd never get accepted on the site!*

## Troublesome Misconceptions

*Chapter 7 of 63*

Hermione turns to her friends to sort out her feelings after a rough night with Severus.

Ron, feeling jilted, makes one last effort to sway Hermione into choosing him over Severus by taking advantage of her inebriated state.

Severus, meanwhile, searches for his wayward mate.

~~~~~o 7 o~~~~~

Troublesome Misconceptions

~H~

Hermione walked up the steps with Ginny after breakfast, feeling a little better than when she arrived. Harry, who had gone to the Ministry with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, had finally departed for St Mungo's to help in the newly added childrens' ward. Ron had gone off sulking somewhere. When Ginny had told him that they were just going up to her room to have some girl talk, he'd tried to follow them up stairs until Ginny threatened to curse him. Finally, after a rousing row of innuendos, Hermione suggested Ron go fly over to Luna's and see if she and Neville would come over. He'd mumbled, but went up his room to collect his broom and walked down the stairs, still grumbling.

"Sometimes I can hardly wait to move out on my own. Only I won't be on my own exactly, will I?" Ginny asked, giggling. "I'll be living with Harry. He's talking about having us move into Grimmauld Place, and believe it or not, Kreacher is thrilled! He's even cleaned up all the rooms, and Harry said I could repaint the master suite in any color I choose as long as I don't pick pink." She laughed again. "It's going to be strange when we all have our own places, isn't it?"

*Oh, Circe! Move in to Snape's house... Does he even have a house? He's living at Malfoy manor now...*"That's not something I want to think about right now, Gin," Hermione stated, suddenly feeling nervous. *Will he expect me to live with him?*

Ginny looked at her from over her shoulder. "Why ever not? Oh. Is Snape's place terrible? I mean he's lived at the castle for so long, well, most of the year when he's teaching. It may just be neglect..."

Hermione shrugged. "I haven't seen his place. I have no idea what it looks like." Hermione pushed open the door, turning to look at her friend.

"You don't but you just said downstairs... Where did... I mean did he take you to an inn?" Ginny asked, stunned.

"No, worse." Ginny gave Hermione a questioning look as Hermione stepped into Ginny's room. "I told you our first night was here," she said softly, pointing in the direction of the back garden.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, rather romantic considering..."

"Last night he took me to Malfoy manor," Hermione said, ushering Ginny inside quickly.

"NO! Really? Malfoy manor! I thought," Ginny said as she closed the door, "he'd take you to his house!"

"Please, Gin, not so loud, I just... I didn't want to say anything, not in front of everybody. I'm still trying to look at the silver lining in all this." Hermione walked over and fell onto her bed, leaning against the wall.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Ginny asked, walking over to sit down next to her.

"It's not like in the dreams," Hermione replied, fighting back a sense of longing. "He's not as... it's not as good."

"It was exactly the same as in my dreams with Harry well, except for the tips you gave me," Ginny said as Hermione bit her lip. "They really helped by the way. I've even got Harry to let me top him. Does it hurt? Is that the problem?"



Hermione forced herself to smile. "No, not last night, not as much, that part feels pretty much the same, I think. It's him. He's like he was in school, but not... I don't know. I expected..." she replied. "I was hoping he'd be like in the dreams but he isn't."

"It's supposed to be. Things are supposed to be the same." Ginny looked at her friend, concerned. "It is Severus we are talking about though, isn't it? Oh, if I'm going back to school to finish my N.E.W.T.s, I'd better not get used to calling him Severus, huh?" she asked, grinning.

Hermione looked up and smiled. "So, you still intend on attending, even considering that you'll be a married woman by the time school starts? I'm glad you're going back, even if you and Harry can get your way about it and marry this summer," she said. "We may even be dorm mates. I signed up to return. Minerva asked if... Do you think Severus will try and stop me?" Hermione asked, worried. "We've not discussed we've not discussed anything. Well, that part is just like the dream. No talking. No questions. Just shagging."

"You're kidding? Really?" Ginny's mouth dropped open. "I suppose it will take the two of you a bit more time to get acquainted with each other as husband and wife," Ginny said as she squeezed Hermione's hand. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I don't mean to sound insensitive. But really, this spell always makes a good match. The reason it was abandoned was because girls who cast the spell couldn't predict who they would be matched up with, and often the wizard turned out to be... um... really unexpected. Parents would become furious, and well, you can imagine."

"You mean they turned out to be Muggle-born?" she asked.

"Well, yes, or they were from the *wrong* families: families that didn't get along, feuding families, wrong social standing, poor, wrong political associations... and yes, wrong blood lineage. On the other hand, there are many times where the spell made an unusual match that turned out grand, like Luna's mum. Aunt Muriel was raving once about her parents making her and her sister cast the spell, and it worked out well. Course Aunt Muriel's on her third wizard," Ginny said, trying to cheer her up.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her arms as if cold. "But can you see Severus as my true love? My wand mate? I can see where we have some things in common, but he's so cold and condescending and snarly... Gin, he's not the caring, gentle lover that came to me in the dreams. I try to please him and do what he expects, but I just feel... used. Part of me still thinks something went wrong."

"Hermione, what you told me about when he came to you, the way he just appeared, walked into the water, grabbed you and kissed you... sounds exactly like the way it's supposed to happen," Ginny said. "There are stories, witchtales that stem from the Moon-Song Spell. Romantic stories. Oh, I remember a story about a witch whose father locked her in a tower because the Moon-Song Spell matched her to the son of a man her father hated..."

"How did that one end?" Hermione asked crossing her legs, watching Ginny.

"Fought trolls, scaled a castle, slayed Graphorns and dragons, fought an army of knights and climbed the tower stairs to his true love," Ginny replied smiling. "How else?"

"I cannot see Severus doing that for me," Hermione said with a heavy sigh.

"Believe me he would have, if my brothers would've had any warning of what we'd done," Ginny said, giggling. "Ah, Hermione, don't worry. I know it's Severus Snape, but really, the spell wouldn't have matched you if you were not compatible. He'll come around and things will be fine. Look at Neville and Luna, they're matched and they're happy."

Hermione started to laugh. "Oh, yeah, there is a great comparison. Severus and Neville, never were two more opposite wizards ever made. I cannot see Severus nervously trying to ask me if I was sure I wanted him or not, then fumble with my buttons and trip over his trainers... No, Severus just pulls me to him, kisses me as if it's assumed, and makes love to me. Believe me, Severus and Neville are truly different."

Ginny shrugged. "So what are you going to do?"

Hermione looked out the window wondering the same thing. "Wait until I get his owl and hope for the best. What else can I do? He's now my husband, isn't he?"

"Well, Bonded mate at least," Ginny said sympathetically. "Hermione, just give him time. He's probably just angry and coming to terms with this, too. I have to believe that it will work out. You'll see it will."

Hermione nodded, wanting to believe. "So when Luna gets here, what do you want to do? Any other spells you think we should try for fun?" she asked sarcastically.

"We could always try brewing a potion or transfigure something?" Ginny proposed, laughing.

Hermione glared at her and then started laughing, too. "Transfiguration it's safer."

Unbeknownst to the girls, a large beetle had been resting on the windowsill listening to every word. With a flicker of its hard elytra, the beetle exposed its flight wings and took off, nearly missing the boy that hovered on his broom just below the window.

\*

Hermione checked her face and hair and then slipped from the loo just as Harry opened the door. "Hermione?"

"No wor-riess, Harry, I'm done in there," Hermione slurred, carelessly brushing against him as she passed him into the hallway. She'd had too much of the champagne punch George had made to celebrate the anniversary of the day he and Fred opened up shop.

George almost didn't want to celebrate the night, but Lee'd talked him into a quiet party with just close friends and his brothers and so he'd relented. Hermione had no idea George was so popular or had so many *close* friends. George's small flat had been engorged earlier to accommodate the guests, but the flat was packed with well-wishers and friends. So far the party had been fairly low-key. Songs were being sung using a karaoke machine Lee had dug up somewhere. Canary Creams were being passed around on platters along with Twittering Chews that made the eater sound like a songbird. Earlier George had made a presentation to Harry as he repaid the loan, which of course Harry had refused, but George pressed upon him anyway. Hermione knew that Harry considered the Galleons blood money, won because Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle had killed Cedric Diggory. To fend off any hurt feelings, Hermione had suggested he lend the money to Neville as a start up on a nursery. Harry liked the idea and stashed the Galleons in his coat pocket with a grin. The party had been fun, but Hermione was feeling a little snookered and knew she should head back to the Burrow, but really didn't feel like going.

"Are you having a good time?" George asked, handing her another glass.

"Spiffing! I should get you to gives me some of this for my tomorrow night," she replied, sipping on the tangy drink. "It'll makes a sourpuss friendlier."

"If you want, sure, I'll send some home with you, although as a true friend, I shouldn't let you leave." George tipped his glass, watching her with a wicked grin. "Hermione, you're snookered. Do you want to sleep it off here? If not, I've also got rooms reserved at the Leaky Cauldron, too, you know."

Hermione leaned unsteadily, and George reached out to support her, smiling. "No, I've a husband now, I can't be sleeping with you," she stated,

George wrapped his arm around her waist. "I've heard about that. Severus Snape? Talk about a spell going wrong!"

"No kidding," Ron said, leaning on the wall across from them.

Hermione looked up, surprised to see him standing there. "You're telling me! I thought it would be you. Make the potion, say a rhyme, sip the tea, take a bath, and everything would be confirmed... But no I get Severus Snape."

"Is it that bad?" George asked, looking at Hermione with concern. Her eyes started to fill with tears and George guided her to Fred's old room. "Hermione, what happened? I thought you and Snape... Ginny seems so assured it'll work out all right. I admit when I'd first heard about the Bonding I thought that he did something to you, you know a potion or something. I mean, the last I'd heard you and Ron were finally a couple then I read that a Bonding Spell has bound you and Snape, and Ginny tells me you girls did the Moon-Song Curse. What happened?"

"They did do the Moon-Song Curse," Ron spoke up as he closed the door. "Ginny was matched up with Harry, and Luna with Neville, and..."

"And I'm now Bonded with Severus... Only he doesn't like me," Hermione confessed. She finished off her glass, nearly falling backward as she put her head back to drink the last drop.

"Whoa," George gasped, grabbing her before she fell and helped her sit on the bed.

Hermione shook her head. "No, George, I shouldn't be in bed with you, 'cause everyone knows the temper of my... my... husband." She looked up at him. "He calls me insufferable, you know?"

George ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah, I know that magically aligned unions can go through a rough period, but usually the couples work things out, and in the end they generally turn out well."

"Well, we may be the first wizard couple ever to refute that misconception." She covered her face with her hands. The room was tipping and her nose felt fuzzy.

"Okay, look the party is going to rage on for a while, and you look like you could use a bit of peace and quiet," George suggested, still squatting down in front of her. "Take off your shoes and lie down. No one will bother you, I can make sure of that." He slipped off one of her dress pumps, looking at the Muggle shoe with a grin, then removed the other. "If you fall asleep, don't worry about it. I'll take you out for breakfast tomorrow and we'll talk, all right?" He smiled as Hermione nodded and lay down. He pulled a blanket up over her legs and stood to go.

"Right, then, I'll just sit with her a while," Ron said softly. "Don't really feel like going back out there just yet, anyway."

"Ron?"

"I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" George asked.

"Just want to be here for her," Ron replied. "We've been friends forever you know."

Hermione wasn't sure when George left the room, before or after the light dimmed, but she reopened her eyes as Ron sat down on the bed beside her. "I would have married you, you know."

"Yeah, Ron, I know you would have." He was right; in fact she knew he would still marry her.

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I'd have treated you better, been right proud to be your husband." He began to absent-mindedly twirl a curl of her hair around his finger.

"I know you would have," she replied, her drunken mind enjoying the feel of his fingers in her hair.

"I wouldn't make you cry," he said with softly spoken remorse.

Hermione sat up. "You can't promise me that; all we do is argue and fight."

Ron wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him. "I think you do know how things would be. We'd fight occasionally and I'd eventually tell you you were right or you'd tell me it didn't matter, and we'd kiss and make up."

Her tears were flowing now; she couldn't hold them back, and she threw her arms around his neck. "I really did think the spell would simply confirm that you were my match," she said, burying her face in his neck.

"Shhhh." He stroked her head and then tipped her face up to look at her. "It can't be all that bad?"

"He was so gentle in the dreams, so passionate, and it was so good..." she started to say, wanting him to understand how things were supposed to be.

Ron looked at her, obviously confused. "But you said he treated you bad."

"Not bad, distant, not as caring, not as giving or... It just kind of happened so quickly," she mumbled. She looked into his blue eyes, which now looked quite dark in the nearly dark bedroom. For a moment, she could almost think his eyes were as dark as Snape's, that his lips were as thin, and that his shoulder-length, wavy hair was as black. She closed her eyes as she remembered the way the dream Snape used to cup her face before he kissed her, how Snape would pull her to him, so aroused and desirous for her it made her heart ache. She felt him reach out and brush her hair from her face, his warm hand cupping her cheek. Hermione leaned her face into his palm, and he leaned forward, hesitantly brushing his lips against hers. The soft sensual kiss befuddled her drunken mind even more, and she kissed him back, needing his passionate reassurance.

"Hermione," Ron breathed softly and she gasped. Ron obviously took her gasp to mean acceptance and deepened his kiss, pushing Hermione back into the bed, lying down practically on top of her as he groped her breast.

"Ron, no, stop, no," she gasped out between kisses, trying to push him away.

"Hermione, you know I love you," Ron pleaded, trying to kiss her again and make her submit to him.

"I'm married. Everyone tells me that is what this magical Bonding is," she was saying as she struggled to sit up, "practically married!"

"You deserve better," he said softly.

"I'm Bonded to Snape," she said as she tried sliding away while pushing at the same time. "Ron, stop! I can't!"

"You don't love him, you love me," he said, leaning over her.

"Hey, Bro, what are you doing?" George asked, coming into the room.

"Apparently nothing," Ron said, getting up.

"Are you daft?" George asked, gobsmacked. "You do know that her Bonded mate is Severus Snape?"

"Yeah, I'm very well aware, thank you," Ron snapped angrily. "But she doesn't love him she loves me."

"I'm still here you know," Hermione said from the bed. The room was tipping again and her felt dizzy.

"No, you're not you're his," Ron spat at her. "If you were here, you would be with me not loyal to him! He doesn't even like you!"

"Ron, that's not fair," she pleaded with him.

"No, it's not," Ron said as he stormed from the room, slamming the bedroom door.

George walked over and sat on the bed, holding a steaming mug in his hand. "He's mad, Hermione. He still loves you."

"I know, but it doesn't matter anymore," she said remorsefully. Tears welled up in her eyes, rolling down her cheeks. "And he's right, you know, he doesn't."

George rubbed her arm reassuringly. "Here, drink this. It's Hangover Potion with some Sleep Potion added in. At least you can sleep this off, and tomorrow I'll be here if you need me."

Hermione took the mug staring at the potion inside. "I can't sleep with you, either, George," she said as she took a sip.

"I have my own bedroom, Hermione," he replied with a laugh. "It's across the hall. You can sleep here in Fred's old room, and I promise *this* time you will not be disturbed. Now drink up." He waited until she finished the potions and pulled the blanket back over her as Hermione lay down. She was drowsy and dizzy, falling asleep before George closed and warded the door.

~S~

Severus paced outside the Burrow, hidden by the lilac bush next to Molly's garden gate. He'd sent his Patronus up to Hermione twice, and she still hadn't come down to him or shown her face in the window. He was getting impatient. He stormed deeper into the trees and Apparated to Grimmauld Place, but the house was completely dark. Growling, Severus Apparated back to the Burrow and was just about to go up and knock on the door when Potter and Miss Weasley arrived on the drive. Severus waited until they were close enough and cast a silent Imperius at the girl, giving her the instruction to come back outside once Potter had either left or had gone to bed. Both were obviously drunk as they staggered into the house, Potter tickling Miss Weasley and whispering something in her ear that made her giggle. Severus quickly amended his instruction, "Come back outside to me."

He waited.

The door finally opened, and Miss Weasley walked out into the back garden and over to the garden gate. "Where is Hermione?" Severus asked, trying to control his annoyance.

"She's still at the party," Ginny answered vaguely.

He scowled. *This is the problem with the Imperius, no direct answers. You have to dig to get the information you want* "What party?"

Ginny looked up at him with a blank expression. "My brother, George's."

Severus controlled the urge to hex her. "And where exactly is that?"

"In his flat," she answered dully.

*Terrific.* "Which is where, exactly?" he asked, trying to drag the information he needed from her.

"Above his shop, 93A Diagon Alley," she replied.

"Pick some lilacs and go to bed," Severus said, slipping from view of the girl. *No point in rousing suspicions. Merlin knows, Potter is overly curious and suspicious*

Ginny picked a handful of lilac and turned to go back to the house. Just before she got to the door, Severus released the Imperius, smirking, as Ginny turned around, confused, looked at the lilacs in her hand, shrugged and walked inside.

He turned and walked into the apple orchard and Apparated to the Apparation point in Diagon Alley, drawing his hood up to try and conceal his identity. The street was empty except for two revelers walking down the street, obviously drunk. He walked confidently down the street, looking for the Weasley boy's shop cautiously, careful to not attract attention. The shop with its garish window display and neon sign was easy to find, the entrance to the flat apparently not. He scowled as he realized the primary entrance to the flat might be from inside the shop itself, and after business hours, there were numerous wards and alarms to prevent thievery so that access was denied him.

Severus looked up. He knew she was still in Weasley's apartment, he could feel it, and it irritated him even more. The windows were dark, showing no hint as to which window he should aim at. Taking a chance, he aimed his Patronus at the flat and watched the silver doe fly up into the window. Seconds passed and the doe returned. Half an hour later, Hermione still remained elusive. Swearing, Severus paced, stared at the flat again, and then Disapparated, unconcerned about the noise echoing in the street, setting off the Apparation-Proximity alarms.

Back at the manor, Severus was in a fit of rage, breaking the mirror in his room, and then repairing it twice.

Lucius strolled in, his long, sleek hair slightly windswept from running, yet he was trying to portray a casual indifference. "I'm to assume things didn't go well?" he asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Severus snarled and then turned to face him, forcefully controlling his temper. "No, things didn't go well."

Lucius nodded. "There is always tomorrow," he said smoothly. "In the meantime, Narcissa asked me to ask you to not destroy the house."

Severus lowered his head, although his hands still remained clenched tightly. "Tell Narcissa that I'm sorry. I'll try to control my temper better." He looked up, startled to see Lucius smiling. "All right, she wasn't where I told her to be. She went to a party and I... didn't like it."

Lucius nodded again. "Understood. I've some old statues you could blast, if you feel the need, down by the pond. I find blowing up marble to be quite stress-relieving."

"Actually the mirror was quite sufficient, thank you," Severus stated, already starting to feel calmer. "Be sure to tell Narcissa that the mirror is repaired."

"Night cap? Possibly a nice three hundred-year-old brandy?" Lucius offered.

Severus shook his head. "Maybe tomorrow. In my frame of mind, alcohol would not be a good idea. Maybe I'll go for a walk."

Lucius turned, stopping at the door. "The side path down to the pond is lovely this time of night. Just repair the marble busts before you come back to the house."

"Good night, Lucius."

"Good night, Severus."

~R~

Meanwhile back at the Burrow, Ron lay on his bed, arms crossed, fuming over Hermione's rejection. To make matters worse, Harry was still in Ginny's room, and he knew

that they were not doing astronomy charting. He heard the stairs squeak and rose, slipping to the door, wondering why Ginny didn't skip the third step. He saw his sister hurry down the stairs and quietly followed her. He was stunned to see Ginny run outside barefoot, wearing her dressing robe.

Ginny ran around the house, heading for the back garden, and Ron quickly turned to go to Charlie's old room to see where his sister was going. He'd just made it to the window as Ginny came to a halt in front to the garden gate, leading to the apple orchard. A tall, dark figure stood next to his mum's lilac bush, talking to Ginny. Ginny was standing still, almost rigid, as the man seemed to pace slightly as if agitated. Suddenly the figure stepped two inches too far into the light, and Ron recognized the dark shape. *Snape. Snape's looking for Hermione! Snape came here to get her...* Ron stepped away from the window, his irritation at the situation turning to hatred. *If it weren't for that git, Hermione would still be my girl. If he'd just go away and leave her, she would come back to me I know it, he thought as he returned to his room.*

Ron heard the door open, and Ginny came up the stairs holding a bouquet of lilacs in her hand. "What did Snape want?" he snapped at her.

"Ron! What are you on about?" she replied, confused.

"He was at the garden gate, next to the lilac bush," Ron said angrily. "I saw him. You were talking to him, Gin."

Ginny shook her head. "I wasn't talking to anyone, Ron. I wanted lilacs..."

"Liar. You're covering for him. Well, it won't work. I saw you and him, and I know," Ron said as he stomped off for his bed.

Mr. Weasley poked his head out of his bedroom door. "It's all right, Dad," Ginny said, turning to her dad. "Ron's still mad because of something that happened at George's party, and I think it has something to do with the Bonding between Snape and Hermione. I'm going to bed."

"Okay, Ginny," Mr. Weasley said, watching her walk up the stairs. "Good night, dear."

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*Thank you, Amsev, for taking on this story and helping me to make it readable. Without your help I'd never get accepted on the site!*

## Troubles and Traitors

*Chapter 8 of 63*

Ron unintentionally lashes out at Snape and confesses what he knows to the Aurors.

Thanks to a few pointed words from Lucius, Severus comes to a realization regarding his actions.

*I owe a huge thank you to my beta, Amsev, her for all her help and support. Thank you for your infinite patience with me, because without your help, this would still be a mess!*

~~~~~o 8 o~~~~~

Troubles and Traitors

~MoM~

Ron arrived at the Ministry for Auror training ahead of Harry. Harry had spent the night in Ginny's room and Ron knew that Hermione had never shown up, so he assumed she'd spent the night in Fred's room. The memories of last night were still a little vague from all the champagne punch he'd had, but one thing stuck in his mind clearly. Hermione had kissed him passionately and then rejected him again for Snape. He remembered seeing Ginny talking to Snape, but then when he'd confronted her, she had the nerve to lie to him about it. *So Snape comes to my house to collect Hermione and meets her at the garden gate that leads to the apple orchard, does he? Hermione or Ginny could have told Kingsley or either Mr. Lerman or Mr. Darthmyer about that, and Snape would've been arrested, then she'd be free of him. But no, Ginny and Hermione are protecting him. Why? "Why choose Snape over me?" he mumbled as the lift opened.*

As his luck would have it, Mr. Darthmyer came walking in just as he'd spoke. "Weasley?" he asked, stunned. "Who chooses Snape over...? You're talking about Ms. Granger, aren't you?"

Ron's ears turned red. "Yes, sir. She, er, won't... We were dating before she cast the Moon-Song Curse, and well, I still fancy her."

"We know that already, son." Mr. Darthmyer crossed his arms and looked sternly and expectantly at Ron. "All right, give. You'd better tell me what you know, trainee. As an Auror trainee, you're obliged to assist any ongoing investigation if you discover pertinent information." He continued to stare at Ron until the lift opened again. "Son, if you're hiding something... Come with me. I'll give you a note for your training instructor."

Ron's shoulders slouched. Mr. Darthmyer was an accomplished Legilimens and taught the trainees how to perform Legilimency when the subject came up in their curriculum. He followed Mr. Darthmyer to his office cubicle. Pictures of Snape, Thornison and MacTavish decorated every flat surface. But the most shocking thing was seeing Rita Skeeter sitting primly in Mr. Lerman's cubical directly across the aisle. Auror Lerman was listening attentively to Rita, but looked up as Ron and Mr. Darthmyer approached.

"Ah, good," Mr. Lerman said, smiling. "Darthmyer, we have a solid lead on Snape."

"Yes, he sends an owl to Hermione Granger-Snape to tell her when and where to meet him," Rita said proudly. "Then he takes her to Malfoy manor for their tryst."

Mr. Darthmyer leaned against his desk, looking at Ron. "Is this true, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron squirmed inside. "Yes, it is. I think," he said. "The git picks her up at the garden gate. He was there last night, talking to my sister, only she wouldn't admit it to me."

"She was under the Imperius, I believe. Don't know for sure, I didn't hear him actually cast the spell, but Mrs. Potter was indeed befuddled. She looked like she was Imperiused," Rita said smugly.

"Well, that surely puts some wandlight on the matter, doesn't it?" Mr. Lerman asked with a grin. "Well done, trainee. I'll put a good word in with your instructor. You best be off now, unless you have anything else to add?"

"No," Ron said, shaking his head. "It's as Mrs. Skeeter said. I don't know anything more than that. Snape owls her, and Hermione goes down to meet him. I don't know where he is, except that one time Snape took Hermione to Malfoy manor, and I think before that he took her to an inn in Ottery St. Catchpole."

"Never the same place twice," Mr. Darrhmyer said, drafting a short note. "Smart man. You can go, Mr. Weasley. Thank you for coming forward."

Ron left for training class, crumpling the note in his hand, his gut tied up in knots and his thoughts warring between guilt at what he'd done to Hermione and the hurt and anger he'd felt earlier, which by now was losing to the guilt.

~H~

Hermione woke up a bit confused with a pounding headache and a smiling George sitting on the side of her bed, holding a mug of hot tea spiked with Headache Potion. They ate breakfast in his flat, discussing everything that had transpired, and Hermione listened to him tell her what he knew about the Moon-Song Spell. It seemed that most wizards considered the spell to be a curse since it was usually witches who used the spell to entrap unknowing wizards as Bonded mates. However, like Ginny and Luna, George was completely convinced that everything would work out all right in the end. She just needed to keep her chin up and to give Snape time to adjust and get to know her better. Hermione argued that she'd known him for six years, to which George reminded her it was as his student, pointing out there was quite a big difference from seeing someone as a kid you had to teach, to a woman you had in your bed. He left her to ponder what he'd just said while he went to open the shop, telling her she had free run of his place or she could come downstairs and talk to him if she wanted more advice.

After a long bath, she joined George downstairs in his workroom, talking and listening to more of his advice while they made potions together. The day seemed to fly quickly, and by late afternoon, Hermione was glad she'd stayed. When George announced that he was going to close the shop, Hermione bid him farewell. She used Diagon Alley's Apparation point to return to the Burrow, feeling better about their situation and looking forward to dinner with her friends.

She had walked as far as the shed when she saw Snape leaning against it, looking furious. Taking a deep breath, Hermione walked over to him, expecting to have him confront her, but instead he grasped her arm roughly and Apparated her to a terrace overlooking a magnificent garden. "Stop it, you're hurting me!" she exclaimed as soon as her feet touched solid ground. She knew instantly he'd brought her back to Malfoy manor.

"Where were you last night?" Severus snarled.

"At a party with my friends," she said angrily, yet trying to keep from cowering under his dark stare. He looked livid with her.

"I told you to meet me," he snapped.

"I must have forgotten," she snapped back. "Why are we back here?"

"This is where I have been staying. What I want to know is why you were sleeping with George Weasley," Severus snarled accusingly.

Hermione gasped in shock. "I wasn't I didn't! I had too much to drink, and I slept it off in Fred's old room!" she exclaimed earnestly, astounded by his accusation, but he glared at her in disbelief. "It's the truth! I didn't sleep with George."

"You expect me to believe you?" he asked, reaching out to grip her chin. "It would be so easy to know ~~everything~~."

"Then look!" she said angrily. He stared at her and she stared back at him her eyes locked onto his dark ones as she waited for the invasion of her mind. She knew he would see how snookered she had been and that she hadn't shagged George, but he might see Ron snogging her, and she hoped he would delve through the images from that night long enough to see her refute him before breaking contact.

"You would allow me to, wouldn't you?" he finally asked, releasing her. "You are too open, too trusting. I can always tell when you are lying to me, Miss Granger."

"Well, apparently not if you still think I was sleeping with George. He's a friend *And* he was being a good friend to me last night and this morning. Why are we back here?" she asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Why do you think," he said, pulling her toward the door of the manor. Hermione tried to withdraw her hand, and he stopped, turning to face her. "Perhaps you'd prefer we do this in the garden, then? I seem to recall you liked doing it under the pergola. Or possibly you'd like to do it in the rose garden or on a garden bench perhaps?"

"No," she said blushing, becoming frightened by his anger.

"Then come along," he said with a slanted smile that sent chills through her as he pulled her along with him into the house.

"What about dinner?" she asked, her hunger fading as the uncertainty of what Snape intended to do to her grew.

"Dinner?" he said with a smirk. "You couldn't face my friends for breakfast, but you'd like to dine with them for dinner?"

Hermione shook her head and he reached out and cupped her chin, looking into her eyes again. "That wasn't what I meant, I am expected for dinner at the Burrow," she replied.

"Possibly you'd like to share dinner with me in bed then, my dear?" He turned before she could respond. "If you are hungry, we can eat after."

He led her up the same stairs as before. "After?" she asked as she trudged up the stairs, trying to keep from tripping, following him down the same corridor and to his room.

He opened the bedroom door, ushering her inside. "Yes, after. Why do you think I brought you here?"

Hermione turned and swallowed as she stood watching him, unsure of what she should do. "I suppose you didn't bring me here to talk," she said curtly.

"No, I didn't," he said as he closed the door behind him.

He leaned against the door simply watching her. "I don't suppose you would care to try talking?" she asked as she chewed on her lower lip, nervously.

"You want conversation. What would we talk about?" he asked her. His eyes were riveted on hers as he began to peel out of his robes while she stared at him. "Did you want to discuss the newly discovered potion for the cure for Langerdousy Fever, perhaps?" His robes fell to the floor, and he stepped away from them, leaving his boots behind as well, and started to peel his shirt off. "Or possibly you'd like to tell me how a witch such as yourself, who was touted to be the brightest witch of her generation could be so insipid as to brew the Moon-Song potion, say the rhyme and complete a ritual that would enact the curse, which bound you to me?" He dropped his shirt to the floor as he took another step toward her, his eyes still riveted to hers intently. "Because I'd really like to hear you explain that so that I can possibly understand it."

"I had no idea it would bind you to me," she said defensively. "I merely thought it would confirm who my wand mate my soul mate was. I had no idea it would be you. I thought you were dead until I saw your face in my dream, and Luna told me you had to be alive; otherwise, the spell wouldn't have connected us together."

"Luna? Do you mean Luna Lovegood? You took her advice and did the spell?" he asked as he undid his trousers, letting them fall to his ankles. "Really, that is absurd."

"She is my friend," Hermione replied, still feeling defensive. "She, Ginny and I did the spell, and yes, it did not turn out as I thought it would. I certainly would never have imagined it would bond you and me."

"Well, it did, didn't it? So now you have me, all of me. I suppose you are regretting your actions now, aren't you?" he asked, his dark eyes roaming down her body as he spoke.

"It was a surprise, yes. I'm not sure how I feel about it, to be honest. To be truthful, I keep wondering..." She backed up a step, not realizing that she had matched his advancements by her own retreat, literally backing toward the huge bed.

"Yes," he said, staring at her intently.

"Why you keep coming to get me," she said, feeling nervous. "I don't know why you bring me here if I'm if this Bonding is so distasteful to you?"

"You are now my Bonded mate. We are now a couple. I suppose the fact that I do want you is a mystery," he said with a curl of his lip. "Do you wish to remove your clothes, Hermione, or is that going to be my job as well?"

Her eyes raked down his naked body; her breathing hitched as her eyes fell on his engorged penis protruding from his dark pubic hair. The fact that he wanted her wasn't what made her nervous, it was the way he was acting, as if he wanted to ravage her. Nervously, she began to unbutton her silk blouse as he watched her, not sure where to put it once it was off.

"Drop it," he instructed, taking another step toward her. The blouse fell from her fingers as she took another step backwards. "Your bra." Hermione swallowed and unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the floor as he took another predatory step toward her. "Your skirt."

Her heart raced in her chest as she nervously unfastened her skirt letting it fall to the floor. "You really want to do this, make love to me?" she asked, and Severus stepped forward, making Hermione try to move back in retreat, her motion stopped suddenly by the edge of the bed as he pressed forward.

"Hmm, nice," Severus growled in appreciation and advanced on her. "Yes, I want to. Does that so surprise you?" He grabbed her and pulled her into his arms as his mouth descended on hers. She gasped under the rapacious and insatiable kiss, and he immediately deepened the kiss, bending her back onto the bed. His hands swept down her body swiftly, hooking his fingers into her knickers, breaking contact with her as he pulled them from her, making both her shoes fell to the floor as well.

"Yes," she admitted.

He parted her legs wide with his knee and settled between her thighs as he leaned back into her. "Well, I do."

Hermione wrapped her legs around him, allowing him to press against her warm moist lips, his penis already trying to stab its way into her. He flicked at her nub a few times and then thrust into her in one plunge, burying himself in her. She hissed at its intrusion, her back arched as he filled her, and he pulled back, then thrust into her roughly. She clenched the soft duvet in her fists as he moved, her eyes closed and her lips pursed tightly to keep from crying out.

"Argh, this isn't going to work," he said, still buried inside of her.

Hermione looked up, perplexed. "Pardon me?"

"I feel like I'm raping you," he growled, letting her legs fall.

She didn't know what to say. "Oh, um, should I um..."

"Yes, you should." He propped himself on his arms as he leaned over her, looking down into her soft brown eyes. "I'm not used to inexperienced women."

"What should I do?" she asked, suddenly ashamed with her inexperience.

"Groan moan don't hiss," he said. He pulled out, bringing one leg up, then the other to rest on his stomach, and entered her again. She felt folded in half as he thrust into her, feeling him push deep inside her with each stroke, and she looked up at him, watching him as he moved into her. He was still rough, his movements hard and forceful, and she clenched her teeth so she wouldn't cry. His hands gripped her hips tightly and she hissed softly. He stopped and looked at her, his expression questioning.

"It, um..." she started to say but refrained, not wanting to anger him.

"What?" he snapped.

"You're too rough, it still hurts," she confessed, fighting back the feeling of wanting to cry.

He dropped his head and sighed. "Move up on the bed," he instructed. Hermione moved onto the bed until she rested against the pillows. Severus laughed, tossing several of the pillows to the floor, until only one pillow remained behind her head, holding the last one by her side. "Lift your hips up." She complied, and he placed the pillow under her bum and spread her legs apart again.

He leaned down and licked her, making Hermione gasp as his tongue stroked her sensitive nub. He continued to suck, lick, and roll it with is tongue as she lay there gasping from the sensations that he made, sensations that were growing, intensifying until she began to whimper and moan. He gripped her hips to keep her from squirming away from him, his soft chuckle adding electrifying vibrations. The intensity grew and peaked, then rose and peaked again as she cried out, her hands clenching the covers of the bed again.

He rose, his mouth slowly trailing kisses back up her body as he repositioned himself and entered her in one smooth thrust. This time the intrusion felt good rather than forced, and Hermione arched her back, driving herself up on him. He grabbed her hips again as he began to move inside her. She tried to press herself up on him each time he pushed deeper into her, clenching her hips as she tried desperately to match his rhythm and he smiled. He pulled her toward him, grinding into her, and his strokes became ardent again, his pace faster than she could match, but she didn't care. Suddenly he stopped, his hands tightening on her as he thrust once more and held himself inside her, his breath a sharp hiss, his body shaking. She watched him as he relaxed, a look of satisfied completion on his face. He yanked the pillow out from under her and fell onto the bed beside her.

Hermione watched him, unsure what to do. *Is he done?* He turned his head looking at her, his expression unreadable. She decided to pluck up the nerve and ask him. "Severus, why is it so different from the dreams? Ginny and Luna told me it's like the dreams for them."

"You discuss our sex life with... Of course you do." He turned his head to look up at the canopy above them. "They lied," he said, his voice deep and soft. He turned his head back to her, scrutinizing her face. "I told you, reality isn't the same as in dreams. This is real, this is how it is."

It wasn't what she wanted to hear. Another thought suddenly came to her, pregnancy. *I could get pregnant.* "Severus, there is something I think I should ask you," she said softly.

"What is it now?" he asked, his eyes closed.

She cringed at his tone. "I was wondering if you could give me, or lend me a book, so I could make an effective Contraception Potion for Ginny and me?"

"You've got to be kidding?" he snarled, rising on his elbow to look at her, his dark eyes flashing dangerously. "You aren't using one?"

"Not really. Well, one, but it's apparently not a very effective one," she said. He shook his head and growled in annoyance, so she tried to explain. "I don't have one in my school books. Ginny knew about one Mrs. Weasley's books she'd used, but it's apparently not all that potent. Ginny said that her mum had Ron while she was using it, and possibly her as well..."

"Of all the insipid... idiotic," he snarled in a scathing tone. "How could you be so irresponsible? Well, yes, you could be *can't* you? Why didn't you say something sooner? Do you want to have a baby?" He glared at her venomously, sitting up and turning on her, his face contorted in anger. He rolled off the bed, swearing as he reached for his robes. "Stay here, I'll be back," he snapped as he redressed so he could go fetch a Contraception Potion. "I'll not be siring children, witch. How dare you! You trap me in this Bonding, and now you want to trap me with fatherhood. I won't have it." The door slammed behind him, leaving Hermione alone in stunned silence.

His last words played over and over in her mind. *This is how it will be with him. I trapped him in this; he doesn't want me doesn't want children with me either. He feels trapped!* She fell back onto the bed and began to cry.

~L~

Lucius stopped at the door to ask if Severus and his new wife would be joining them for dinner. *The papers all keep claiming his new wand mate is Hermione Granger, which Severus won't confirm nor deny. Nevertheless, whoever she really is, Narcissa is anxious to meet her and had postponed dinner in hopes that Severus would bring her down.* He raised his hand to knock and stopped as the sounds of crying once again emitted from the girl inside. *What the fuck?* He dropped his hand at the same time Severus entered the hallway. "Your young lady seems to be crying again," Lucius said casually, confronting Severus in the foyer. "Surely you haven't lost your touch? One would think that you are abusing your wand mate. If she goes to the Ministry with abuse complaints, they would add those charges to your already extensive list of criminal acts."

"I have not been abusive," he said, hating to be questioned regarding his actions toward Hermione. "The witch hasn't been taking her potions, exactly. I'm going to have to lend her this book, if that's all right, so that the insipid girl can brew a proper Contraception Potion."

One gracefully curved, platinum eyebrow rose slightly as Lucius regarded his friend. "And you don't want to brew it for her?"

"No, I do not." Severus crossed his arms, holding the book against his chest. "She's fully capable of brewing it herself. Besides, apparently she needs it for her friend as well."

"I take it you don't want kids?" Lucius asked with a smirk.

"No, I don't want kids," Severus stated firmly. "I've had enough dealings with kids from teaching, dealing with their stupidity starting at age eleven, through puberty and up until they supposedly reach adulthood. I don't need to start dealing with children in nappies!"

"It's quite different when it's your own child," Lucius stated, his smirk relaxing into a grin.

Severus's dark eyes narrowed slightly. "You had house-elves to change Draco's nappies as well as a governess and an au pair, if I recall."

"I'll gladly acquire you au pair if you need one?" Lucius offered graciously.

"No, thank you," Severus said smoothly, masking his annoyance. "I won't be requiring one."

Lucius knew Severus too well not to notice the subtle hints in his pose. "I know that this arrangement has you out of sorts, but really you should reconsider your actions."

"Reconsider what exactly?" Severus asked sharply.

"Look, we've been friends for years. You know that Narcissa and I were matched with a Pairing Charm. I do know what you are going through," Severus snorted in derision, but Lucius wasn't to be deterred. "Severus, you know that there has to be some compatibility, some shared commonalities between you two if the spell connected you. I know you, you're angry about being ensnared like this, but you've got to come to terms with it..."

"Are you through?" he snapped angrily.

"No, I'm not," Lucius said firmly. "But I see that I'll have to speak to you about this when you're thinking more rationally."

Severus's arms dropped to his sides. "No, I don't need your advice..."

"Yes, apparently you do." Lucius took a step back in order to show supplication and avoid a true fight. "Try and play nice, Severus; you may really regret it later if you don't."

"I'll try and not break my toys, Dad," he said, turning to go.

"That's a start," Lucius said, disappearing to the other side of the house.

~S~

Severus hadn't wanted to hear what Lucius was telling him, but he was right. That alone infuriated him, but he didn't have the inclination to worry about Lucius or his meddling or what the Ministry would think about his relationship with Miss Granger. *Actually it's Mrs. Snape now, isn't it? Shite, Lucius is right* He entered the room and walked over to sit on the bed, removing the vial from his pocket. *For better or for worse...* "Hermione, here, drink this." She rolled to face him, tears streaking down her face. "You should have asked me to brew this for you. I would have, you know."

"I didn't think to ask you. I thought I'd find it in my books," she said, and he sneered at her ignorance, then softened his expression. She took the vial and swallowed the potion.

"Here is a book on potions for feminine needs. There is also a very good Pain Relief Potion and one for menstrual cramps in there, as well as for other things women are concerned with. It is Narcissa's, so take it and copy all the potions down, and I'll get it from you later." She took the book, opening it to examine the pages as he removed his robe and climbed up on the bed. Hermione sat up, quickly scooting away from him. "Come here," he urged her.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Look, I was harsh and curt with you, but really, are you truly satisfied?" he said soothingly, using the deep silky drawl that women usually reacted well to. *Lucius says to play nice I can play nice.*

"What do you mean?" she asked, and he wanted to laugh at her.

"Come here and sit on me like you did in the dreams, Hermione." She looked at him warily as he pulled her up on to his lap. He encouraged her to straddle him, talking down all her protests. "That's it, now relax and feel." His fingers found her clitoris easily, and he began to stimulate her, watching her emotions war on her face. Her small

hands pressed down on his ribs, and his own desires for her grew. "Touch me," he said softly as he guided her hand down to his stiff penis. Her fingers touched him so gently it was almost maddening. *Well, that's just one more thing I'll have to teach her* "Ease yourself down on me," he said in his smooth drawl.

Hermione watched him as he positioned his penis at her entrance as she tried to balance herself over him. "Like this?" she asked as she situated her body and lowered herself down on him.

"Yes, just like that." His lips curled up in an amused smile as he held her hips and pulled her down, thrusting up into her. *Merlin, she feels good* "Okay, ride me. Rock your hips until you find a motion that feels good." *Gods, she makes me sound like her bloody professor* "Come down on me, adjust your legs so that you are comfortable. That's it, now lift yourself up," he instructed and she complied. "Lower, and rub yourself against me." He gripped her hips showing her what to do and her eyes widened. "There, now, that's better, isn't it? Do you like this?" he asked as she moved herself on him.

"Yes," she replied and blushed.

Her reaction was amusing. "There you go, keep going, it will happen, just keep going," he urged her. He reached down and fondled her as she moved on him. Eventually her body relaxed more, and he could tell she was finally getting the hang of it. Her breasts were bouncing nicely and her head tipped back. "That's it, Hermione feel it, take what you want."

It wasn't too long before she began to tighten on him, her movements were not as controlled, as she began losing focus, with her impending climax. He gripped her hips to help her, thrusting up each time she clenched down on him. His own body was tightening again, his nads straining as he watched her face. Her expression when she was close was erotic, driving his own need to possess her. She started to moan loudly, her breathing became heavy, and he knew she was close. He strained to hold himself until she was near the edge, stimulating her clitoris to push her toward climax. Finally, she tightened, her muscles squeezing down on him, and she began to quiver. *That's it, witch. Merlin, you're tight*, he thought, caught up in the moment, focused on the tightening of his testicles and letting go of his own release, pushing up into her as his come shot out of him. She collapsed on top of him, and he turned with her so that she lay in his arms.

After a while she stirred, and he moved to sit up. "So, are you going to come down and have dinner with me here, or do you want me to take you back to the Burrow?"

She looked up at him, her brown eyes showing her discomfort. "I'd rather not see the Malfoys, if you don't mind."

"Then back to the Burrow it is. Get up and get dressed." He rose and summoned his clothes, watching in amusement as she collected hers and sat on the bed to dress. She picked up the book and followed him to the foyer, stepping into his arms to be Apparated back. "So, if I asked you to meet me again, day after tomorrow, will you actually show up?"

"Yes," she said, refusing to meet his eyes.

"It won't be bad, Hermione. It will just take some adjustment to get used to each other." He cupped her face, wishing he dared read her mind. "Given time we may even like this."

She nodded, looking up at him with trust in her eyes. "I'm willing to try."

He laughed to himself, thinking how easy she was to manipulate. "Let's get you back to the Burrow," he said as he Disapparated. They arrived in the apple orchard, and he held her a moment before kissing her. "Go on then. I'll see you day after tomorrow," he said softly. She nodded and turned to go. He stood watching as she walked to the garden gate, turned to wave at him and then disappeared around the house.

Severus turned to walk back into the trees so his Apparation wouldn't be noticed from the house and found himself facing three wizards, wands drawn.

"Hold it Snape," a squat, square-faced wizard called out as a tall lanky-looking wizard said, "Stop right there," from his other side.

A muscular dark-skinned wizard in front of him was sneering while brandishing his wand at Severus's face. "We've got you now *STUPEFY!*"

*Bloody hell*, his mind swore, reaching for his wand before his mind went blank.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I toned down the angry sex a little to make up for the grudge sex Severus did in using Hermione, and his second time was more gentle. He's not totally a jerk, and he'll come around. In the meantime he's got a little trouble on his hands. And a Weasley is going to be in trouble....*

## Prisoner of Azkaban

*Chapter 9 of 63*

Hermione finds out that Severus is in Azkaban and confronts her friends about it, only to find out that Severus won't even stand up for himself or talk to Kingsley to clear his name. So, she decides to see him for herself and try and talk some sense into him.

*\*Warning this is explicit graphic sexual situations.\**

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Prisoner of Azkaban

~H~

"Hermione." Ginny's soft voice woke Hermione up from a very vivid dream, one she really didn't want to awaken from. Although the dream wasn't as real or tactile, it was



every bit as sensual as the dreams she had before when she'd been under the influence of the spell. She could have cried, being roused away from her dream Severus, who was so different from the wizard who'd taken her to Malfoy manor.

"Hermione," Ginny said again, gently shaking her shoulder. "Wake up."

"Maybe we should let her sleep. She'll find out soon enough." Hermione recognized Luna's soft, airy voice. "She looks like she needed a good night's sleep."

"I'm up," Hermione said, stretching as she pulled herself up to sit and face her friends. She suddenly realized that both girls had very sad and serious expressions. "Why? What's happened?"

Ginny looked apprehensive, although Luna looked as if she was contemplating something on Ginny's bedroom wall. "It's Severus, he made the front page." Ginny handed the paper to Hermione as she sat down next to her. "It says that the Aurors caught him last night, right here in town. Somehow, they knew you were with him and that he would bring you back here... Hermione, I'm sorry."

Hermione lowered her gaze to the paper in her hands. An image of Severus Snape, wearing the robes he'd had one the night before when he'd brought her back to the Burrow, stared at her from the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, his expression hard but emotionless. Hermione gasped as she began to read the article under Severus's picture. "Notorious Death Eater and Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle's man at Hogwarts, Severus Snape, was captured last night and taken into custody by Aurors. His magical enslavement of Hermione Granger that resulted in their magical Bonding is still baffling reporters. Hearing to be held over Dumbledore's death and other confirmed and unconfirmed Death Eater activities are... He's currently being held in Azkaban!" She dropped her hands into her lap, the paper crumpled in her fists as she looked at her friends, completely gobsmacked. "But I was with him last... Oh my gods! He'll think I turned him in!"

"Rita Skeeter credits you for bringing Severus to the prearranged site," Ginny said, looking remorseful and trying desperately to be supportive for her friend.

"But I didn't I wouldn't!" Hermione gasped out, her eyes scanning the article to confirm what Ginny said. Sure enough, Rita Skeeter's article stated that she had indeed passed the information to 'long time friends' Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter, Auror trainees, and to Rita herself, 'a long time friend and confidant.' The specifics that led to the capture of this 'violent and dangerous wizard' were exaggerated but completely spelled out in every detail. "But I didn't speak to Rita at all!" she exclaimed as she rose from the bed, stormed from the room, and barreled down the stairs to the kitchen.

Ron, Neville and Harry were still eating breakfast at the table. They all looked up as Hermione angrily stormed in. "You! How could you!" she screamed, brandishing the paper at them. "He did *not* ensnare me! I was *not* abducted, and he is *not* a violent and ruthless killer! I *never* told you anything of the sort, least of all this rubbish!"

Neville dropped his sausage off his fork and nearly stabbed himself in the lip as he stared at her, stunned.

Harry dropped his fork at her outburst. "Hermione, calm down, he's..."

"ARRESTED! YOU TURNED HIM IN!" she yelled at him, tears filling her eyes.

"You don't love him. He *did* abduct you. And yes, you *did* tell us that he comes to get you," Ron shouted back.

"YOU *you did this?*" she screeched as Ginny tried to calm her down.

Ron stood up, knocking the chair over as he did. "Yes, I did!"

"You bloody cockatrice! After everything he did for us, for everyone, and THIS is how you repay him?" she snarled as she brandished the paper at him again.

"Mione, he has to answer for his crimes," Ron shouted back. Neville quickly scooted his chair away from Ron.

"Ron, Hermione, we can sit down and talk about this rationally," Ginny said, unheard.

"He has!" Hermione yelled. "He's suffered enough for everything he had to do."

Ginny tried to gain their attention again. "Will the two of you please sit down and..."

"Hermione, he has to have his name cleared." Harry stood, trying to place himself between Hermione and Ron. "After that, they'll have to let him go."

"I'm sure there has been a mistake," Neville tried interjecting.

"So you're going to DEFEND HIM?" Ron snarled at Harry. "We are talking about Snape here! He killed Dumbledore. You've seen his record everything he's accused of!" He pointed at Hermione, still glaring at Harry. "She was my girl, and he stole her! Snape..."

"HE DID NOT STEAL ME!" Hermione shouted. "*I ensnared him!* It's *my* fault, Ron, *not* his!"

"Ron, you know about the Moon-Song Spell as well as I do," Ginny added as Luna came down the stairs. "The spell matched her to him. It's done, and you can't change it."

Ron's hands clenched in fists, and he glared at her. "Yes, you can if she *wanted* to!" he said furiously.

"Hermione, you can petition the Accidental Magical Reversal Department for an annulment," Neville suggested, but was cut off by Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Harry all talking at once, each louder than the other so that no one was understood. "QUIET, PLEASE!" he shouted.

"I see," Ron sneered, then turned and stormed from the house, slamming the door.

"I think the thing to do is to hear what *Hermione* wants to do, not try and decide for her," Luna said as she entered the kitchen. Everyone turned to look at Luna as she casually walked over to Hermione's side. "So, what do *you* want to do?"

Hermione wanted to hug Luna, whose rational calm seemed to suddenly affect everyone, especially her. "I want to clear his name, firstly. Harry, you know what he did, you have those memories from Severus, all those talks with Dumbledore," she implored him.

"Hermione, I've already been trying to clear his name," Harry stated. Hermione's mouth dropped open, but Harry held up his hand, to have her hear him out. "I thought he was dead. So did Kingsley until that morning when you said he came here. Well, before that actually. Kingsley realized he was probably alive since his name appeared on the ledger. He has been trying to locate Snape before the Aurors do, to prove if he is alive or not, or possibly if he was lying somewhere in a comatose state of some kind. However, since Kingsley wasn't sure if Snape was actually... Hermione, I'd told him that I *saw* Snape die. Kingsley thought one of the Death Eaters took him and maybe had him in some kind of Dark Arts stasis or a coma. We thought we had time. Then Lerman and Darthmyer tracked him here that morning... but Snape was clever, elusive. We tried to contact him but had no idea where to look. Kingsley even went to his house, and we checked at Malfoy manor, but nothing. We couldn't find him."

Hermione gasped. "The memories he showed me?"

Harry and Ginny looked confused. "What memories?" they asked nearly in unison.

"Wait, what ledger?" Hermione asked Harry.

"The Marriage and Magical Unions ledger. Maggie Whitmire in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department sent an interdepartmental memo to the Aurors' office and to Kingsley, and who knows who else, as soon as Snape's name appeared on the ledger, saying you were *engaged*. When you were Bonded, she apparently sent them again. The same as she did to Ginny and me."

"And to Dad's office as well," Luna piqued in. "We ran a simple announcement in the *Happy Tidings* section, unlike the *Daily Prophet* that put you on the front page. That was tacky."

"I read that, it was a nice announcement," Neville said. Luna beamed at him. Hermione wondered briefly if Luna's dad had run the same announcement for her and Severus.

Harry shook his head with a slight grimace and then looked at Hermione, getting serious again. "What memories are you talking about? When did Kingsley show you memories?"

"The morning that Mr. Lerman, Mr. Darthmyer and Kingsley came here, Kingsley used Legilimency on me. Only, he wasn't searching my memories to see where Severus was or anything about our night together; he pulled forward and showed me visions of Order meetings and Severus standing next to Dumbledore," Hermione explained. "I took it as a message, being reminded that Severus is an Order member."

Harry nodded. "He probably was. Hermione, ever since you and Snape became Bonded, well, we've been working together. He told me he knew that Snape was alive and asked me to put Snape's memories in a Pensieve for him to review. I've given him a full accounting of all the times Snape tried to help me at school as well. Hermione, a few days before that morning he called me into his office..." Hermione had rushed over and hugged him. "*Humfph*, well, yes, we have," he continued. "But, Hermione, Snape won't defend himself! He won't *say anything!*"

"Then we will have to speak for him," Luna said.

Neville looked up at her confused. "Us?"

"Yeah, she's right. All of us have firsthand knowledge of what he did for us," Ginny stated. "Like when he tried to save you from Sirius and Lupin, and when he tried to keep Hermione and Luna from the fight when Draco let the Death Eaters in the castle. He even tried to keep us from being hurt by the Carrows loads of times."

"Ginny, I don't think he was really trying to save us," Neville stated, still confused. "He was awful toward us."

"Not Snape! Well, he's Snape. I mean the other Death Eaters in the school, especially the Carrows. Snape changed our detentions from being served under Filch or the Carrows and possibly being tortured, to having detentions with Hagrid, telling him to give us ground keeping duties as punishments. I remember hearing Filch complaining about it in the corridor, and Hagrid told me about it after the final battle when he'd heard that Snape had been killed. He said Snape wanted him to help protect us from being maimed. That's why Hagrid had so many detention assignments. He was monitoring detentions nearly every night."

Luna had walked over and placed a hand on Neville's shoulder. "All the members of the DA were sent to Hagrid for detentions. And who do you think told Aberforth when we needed food?"

"That house-elf..." Neville tried to recall. "The one that called us Headmaster's Army..."

"Dobby," Ginny stated. "Severus told him to send food to the Hogshead so Aberforth could get it to us. When the Carrows found out Dobby was providing us food, Snape sent Dobby to the Hogs Head to clean glasses and wash the linens."

"Sounds like we well, everybody, misjudged him. I know he did a lot for the Order," Harry stated. "I've seen Kingsley's reports, they're rather extensive at this point, but a lot of it is speculation. If we could get Snape to confirm half of what we have, he'd have a chance at a full pardon."

"So, if we all tell what we know, provide our memories in a Pensieve, would that help, Harry?" Hermione asked hopefully. "I mean if we provide our memories for the Pensieve, it's not speculation, right?"

Harry shrugged. "Wouldn't hurt. Yeah, I can take you all to the Ministry with me, and you can all talk to Holden Goldstein in Magical Law Enforcement. He's working with Kingsley on clearing Snape's name."

"Harry, why doesn't Ron know what you're doing?" Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged. "He knows a little, but ever since Hermione and he broke up... Gin, we're Auror trainees, and we've just started in the training program. Trainees aren't involved in serious criminal investigations. I am simply because I had pertinent information, loads of it actually, but I wasn't involved at first."

~S~

Severus had been shuffled from his cell in Azkaban, dragged to the showers to clean up, and then dumped unceremoniously into this odd cell with no explanations, except for a lot of smirks and sneering from the prison Aurors. The shower had been truly delightful. Ice cold and under supervision. The cell he'd been dumped into was a plain room with a sturdy plank-board table and a narrow bench cot. At least the one sheet and wool blanket looked clean. He'd even been given a fresh robe and drawstring trousers. *Oh, yes, the celebrity treatment.*

He paced the room for what seemed like hours, then threw himself on the cot, amazed that the thing was so sturdy. *A far cry from the cot in my usual cell* Since this room didn't have any chairs, he doubted that Holden Goldstein from Magical Law Enforcement was planning on giving him a visit, but the lack of seating didn't rule out the Aurors, Lerman and Darthmyer, from showing up again. His last visit from the Aurors left very little doubt in his mind that Azkaban was going to be his permanent home. And Mr. Goldstein had asked him the most ridiculous questions, alluding to the fact that he was a murderer, while trying to dig out conformation regarding his Death Eater activities, so that Severus was certain that the Ministry simply wanted him locked away for life.

He sat on the cot, arms crossed, shoulders against the smooth stone with his feet stretched out, and his ankles crossed while he waited to see what they had in store for him today. He sincerely hoped it wasn't that insipid reporter, Rita Skeeter, wanting to interview him again. *Circe, I want to curse that woman*

The door finally opened, but Severus refused to rise, not wanting to give the visitor any indication that he wanted or desired a visitation. He was stunned when Hermione stepped into his cell, wearing a simple, black button-front robe and soft leather boots. *She's even tamed that hair of hers in a braid* he thought, amused, as she walked in, uncertainty and apprehension in her brown eyes as if she fully expected him to Crucio her on the spot. *If I had my wand, believe me, my dear, I would* "What are you doing here?" he snarled at her.

She swallowed and stood her ground, although she looked as if she was ready to run for the door and beg to be let out. *Welcome to jail, sweetheart.*

"You look good," she said as if not sure what to say to him.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure I do," he sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You didn't answer my question, witch. Why are you here?"

"I came to see you, to talk to you," she stated nervously, biting her lip.

*She has every reason to be nervous, doesn't she?* "Well, take a good look, Hermione," he said, opening up his arms and glaring at her.

"You've bathed," she stated, looking at him with concern in her eyes. "Do they feed you all right?"

*Circe, you've got to be kidding!* "Yes, they let us shower. It was wonderful," he sneered. "Ice cold water that pours out from a pipe, a bar of lye soap and a flannel. It's jail, Hermione, not some hunt club. And no, the food here is unappetizing."

"I'm sorry," she replied, actually looking remorseful.

"I'm sure you are," he sneered at her. *You turned me in arranged the trap, and you're sorry. Brilliant!*

"Are you treated all right? I mean, they aren't abusive or anything, are they?" she asked, looking at him imploringly.

"I am treated exactly how I knew I would be," he said coolly. "How did you manage to gain a visit? I thought that your friends in the Ministry would have arranged your annulment by now."

"I haven't petitioned for one," she replied demurely.

"No? Why ever not?" he asked, sitting up.

She squirmed slightly, but held his gaze. "I, um, not until you are out, and we can discuss this."

"You mean to tell me you want to remain my Bonded mate? Is that what you are telling me?" He couldn't believe her. "Go back to the Burrow and forget me. This shouldn't have happened in the first place."

"No, I'm not going to just forget you. Severus, why won't you talk to Goldstein and clear your name? Why won't you confirm the information Kingsley and Goldstein have on you regarding your actions for the Order?" she asked, sounding sincerely concerned, although he didn't believe her.

"Is that why you're here, to convince me to go before the Wizengamot and beg for my life?" he scoffed at her presumptuousness. "I'm a murderer, or didn't you know? I'm surprised they even allowed you in here with me."

She stood still, her warm brown eyes focused directly on his face. "I had to request a conjugal visit, as your wife, well, Bond mate, in order to see you. Kingsley approved..."

"Oh, I bet he did," he said, rising off the cot, walking over to her to glare down his nose at her. *Have to give her credit; she hasn't even flinched* "I suppose that you feel I'm impotent without my wand, Hermione."

Hermione stood perfectly still as he paced around her. "No, I know better," she said softly. "But I still trust you..."

"Do you?" he asked, stopping to stand right behind her. "So, *wife*, are you here to beg me to accept a farce of a trial or did you come for other reasons?" He wrapped his arms around her pulling her roughly against his chest.

"I came to talk to you," she replied evenly.

"Oh, I just bet you have," he sneered. "Why should I believe you? They knew exactly where to find me and knew details only you would know." He tightened his hands on her arms and felt her breathing deepen and become uneven. "You know I could snap your neck for turning me in." His hand went to her neck as he said it, and he could feel her pulse race under his fingers.

"I never turned you in! Please, Severus." Her voice was softer and thicker than normal. "Believe me, it wasn't me."

"How am I to believe you?" He tightened his embrace, holding her firmly against his body.

"Because I believed in you I always have." Hermione relaxed in his arms. "There is more to you than you let on. Just like what you did... everything. There is more to it than what everyone believes."

*Circe, if she doesn't feel good. Damn, this witch...* "What do you want, Hermione?" he said lazily in her ear, feeling her stiffen in response to his voice. "Why did you really come here to see me?" He moved his hand down to cup her breast, his mouth inches from the soft skin below her ear. "Tell me what you want?" he asked silkily against her flesh as his other hand slid lower to rest on her groin, holding her tightly against his erection. "Or should I hazard a guess?"

She swallowed, her chest rising and dropping with each heavy breath as she leaned against him. "I told you; I want you to defend yourself, um, clear your name..." Her voice wavered and trailed away as his fingers pressed down between her legs. "But you have to talk to them..."

He could feel her tremble slightly and felt amazed that he could elicit such a response from her. "Should I take advantage of your offer of a conjugal visit, Hermione?" he said, nipping softly on her neck. "Do you want me to make love to you? Do you like in your dream?"

"Yes," she sighed heavily and made to move as if she wanted to turn around. He didn't let her, holding her firmly.

"No, don't turn around," he said as he kissed her neck. He slowly began opening her buttons, slipping his fingers underneath the fabric occasionally to tease her skin while he kissed her. She practically melted against him. When he opened her robes, he explored her body leisurely, and she moaned with pleasure from his touch.

He turned her around, pleased to see the skimpy, black lace bra and knickers she'd obviously worn for his pleasure and backed her up against the table, keeping his back to the portal, knowing that the guards could be watching. *If she is going to allow this, I'm sure as Hades going to enjoy it* He opened his prison robes and allowed Hermione to stare at him. Her warm brown eyes, gazed up at him in wonder and trust so evident it was unnerving. He didn't deserve such open, unconditional trust. She leaned against the edge of the table as he caressed her body, fingering the lacy bra and pulling the lacy knickers off her hips. She reached up and opened the front clasp of her bra, and he smiled slightly, lifting her up to sit on the table.

"Sit back," he said silkily, pulling her knickers off her legs. He touched her, his hands roaming her flesh slowly, finally resting on her hips. His fingers found her clitoris, and he circled it lazily with his thumb as his other hand slid up to cup her breast. He wanted to taste her, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from her and the look of exotic pleasure he was giving her reflected on her face. She moaned in response to him and her eyes closed briefly. When her moans became louder, and she started undulating under his hands, he knew she was ready for him. He pulled her to him, parted her legs wider as he positioned himself at her opening and pushed into her slowly. He kissed her as he moved his hips forward and back in a slow rhythmic motion.

"Oh, gods, yes," she practically purred.

Her hands explored his body as he stroked and caressed hers. He forced himself to keep the pace of their coupling leisurely, savoring every aspect of her body, certain that this would be the last time he'd be able to use her like this. He actually liked the light delicate touch of her fingers and the soft glide of her hands on his skin. The way she tried to match his kiss, mimicking the way he nipped, sucked and caressed her lips, and the way she stroked her tongue against his. When she tried to insert her tongue in his mouth to reciprocate, he thought it was amusingly sweet. He was amazed at how sensual and giving a partner she was, how uninhibited she was willing to be, and it impressed him. "Lie down," he said softly and smiled as she eased her back down on the table surface and looked up at him in anticipation.

He drew her bum down to the very edge of the table as he leaned forward. He gripped the edge of the table, her legs held against his body, as he thrust in her. She tried to touch him, her fingertips glided on his stomach, down his body to where they joined, and her fingers slipped between them. "That's it, touch yourself," he instructed her, encouraging her. "Feel me slide in you."

"You like this?" she asked.

The gentle strokes of her fingertips added a tingling sensation on his shaft to his movements, heightening his enjoyment. "Merlin, girl, yes, I like this."

She began to groan, her hands grasping onto him as his climax built up, his nads tightening, and he quickened his pace, rubbing her clitoris to push her over the edge with him. He thrust into to her hard as his release broke, his seed squirting into her in hot jets, filling her. He continued to move in her, his nads and penis becoming really sensitive as he watched her climax overcome her. She clenched her fists, cried out his name between gasps for air, and her euphoric facial expressions were delightful to watch in his post-climatic bliss. He smiled down at her with a sense of completion, a smug mental acknowledgement of his accomplishment. He waited until she relaxed before pulling out of her. "Thank you," he said softly when she sat up and looked up at him.

"I suppose I should say thank you as well," she said, blushing, fastening her bra.

He smiled smugly. "At this point you can say anything you like." He wished she wasn't adjusting her robes, that she'd just sit there nude and let him look at her, but he knew that the guards would most likely end their visit soon anyway.

"Just promise me one thing, please," she begged him as she finished the last of her buttons. "Talk to Kingsley Shacklebolt or Holden Goldstein. Help them to clear your name. You don't belong here!"

That was not what he expected her to say and it angered him. "I do belong here, or haven't you been reading the paper," he snapped at her.

"Yes, I read the paper! But since when does the *Daily Prophet* report the truth or get all the facts right?" she asked, raising her voice slightly. "When have you ever known Rita Skeeter to quote anyone without twisting what they say or *didn't say* into lies, and when have you ever know me to be her *confidant*?" He narrowed his eyes at her, but he suppressed his anger. "I always thought you to possess a brilliant intellect. Was I wrong?"

"Now, you wait here!" he shouted at her.

"No, the man I knew wasn't a coward or a shirker," she shouted back.

"Do not call me a *coward*!" he snarled, his anger making his powers shimmer.

"Then prove it!" she snapped back at him, holding her ground against his fury. "A coward would lie in here, berating himself, comfortably wallowing in self-pity and self-contempt. I thought you were a fighter, stoic and brave." He glared at her, furious, but she pressed on. "Yes, the man I want would stand up for himself, the world be damned, and hold his head up high. He'd face everyone and take his due and move forward showing everyone they were wrong about him."

"Are you through?" he asked icily.

"NO!" she said, stomping her foot. "If you won't be the man I know you are, then I'll have to talk for you so will Harry and Dumbledore's portrait. But I will see you released from here. However, if you won't stand up for yourself and continue to act like a sniveling coward *then yes!* I'll request that annulment *and get it!*" With that she walked out of the barrier without looking back.

"I am not a coward!" he shouted after her. He paced in fury. *Coward, sniveling... shirker! How dare she! I am not wallowing in self-pity I am in bloody jail!* His eyes fell on a slip of black lace on the floor. He picked it up. Hermione's lacy knickers unfolded in his fingers, and he held it to his nose to smell her scent on them.

He leaned against the wall, still fuming. *How dare she? She's going to speak for me and Potter? What good will that do? Potter would want me in here!* He paced again, recalling her words as his anger grew. *The man she wants, as if she really wants me* He paced again, feeling like a caged gryphon. *But she hadn't asked for the annulment; we're still bloody Bonded. Why in bloody Merlin didn't she?* He leaned against the table, wondering what she would do, but deep down he was actually impressed by her tenacity.

~ T B C ~>

Author's Notes:

*I really wish to give the much deserved accolades due to my beta, Amsev, for all her time making this story presentable. Amsev, thank you, so very much, and I just want you to know I appreciate it very much.*

## The Ministry of Magic

Chapter 10 of 63

Hermione faces the Ministry of Magic. Luckily, with the help of her friends.

Sorry, image is currently unavailable.



Thank you to everyone who has been following this story and to everyone who voted for me. I really appreciate it. This means far more to me than you know.

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The Ministry of Magic

~H~

The next morning after breakfast, the owls started arriving again, swooping in and dropping letters in front of Hermione and Ginny. Harry unraveled the *Daily Prophet* and let out an angry explosive sound as he tossed the paper to Ginny. "According to Rita, you and I are having a baby."

"No!" Ginny said, laughing. "Are you pregnant?"

"Not that I know of," he replied, laughing, as Hermione stacked up her letters.

Hermione reached for the paper. "If you want, Ginny, we could brew a different contraceptive potion. Severus gave me a book that has a fairly potent one in it. Not implying anything, but I think I'd rather use it than your Mum's."

"But hers didn't work all the time," Ginny added, laughing. "I know. Mum said that it works fine, but that she didn't take it properly because she didn't really care if she had another baby. I think she was still trying for well me! But if you have one suggested by Severus, I'd be willing to take it."

"So you girls will be busy today," Harry said, giving Ginny a wink. "Well, I'm off to the Ministry. Come by around eleven. I'll meet you in the Atrium and get you in to talk to Kingsley."

Ginny stood up and kissed Harry. "We'll see you at eleven, then," she said. "Have a good day."

"Don't drink any more potions," he chided her with mock sternness. "I'm going to Grimmauld Place after training. If you'd like, come by and we'll have dinner there. With Ron all upset, Hermione, it might be good if we consider moving into my house for a while."

"Tired of sleeping with me already?" Ginny teased.

"Tired of the fighting," he said and kissed her cheek again. Hermione dropped her head slightly at Harry's remark. "Hermione?" he asked.

"Yes, sure, good idea," she replied, waving him off.

Harry came around and sat down next to her. "Hermione, it's not the first time you and Ron have been through a difficult time, but you always manage to patch things up. We've been friends for a long time and through some really difficult spots. I know you'll both work this out."

"I'm Bonded to Severus Snape," Hermione said, exasperated. "This isn't about him snogging Lavender or me seeing Viktor Krum or Ron running out on us. I Bonded to Severus while he and I were talking considering getting married! Heck, I really thought the spell would simply confirm that Ron was the one for me, and instead, it proved that he's not! Well, not my soul mate at least."

Harry placed his hand on her shoulder, obviously at a loss. "Look, this is weird for me too! My best friends are fighting again and are constantly storming away from each other... Ron gets put out if I follow you to try and console you, and if I follow him, he rants on about Snape as if he's the devil and demands that I choose him or you. And that fiasco at George's party he really thinks you love him and are just sticking to Snape for whatever reason and doesn't understand why you won't get the annulment and marry him anyway. I don't get it but this time I'm staying out of it. Personally, it's a bit weird to think of you with Snape actually I try to not think of you with him... you know!"

"It's weird, I..." Hermione looked down at her hands. "It's weird thinking about Severus that way. But, Harry, it's just that I can't do it end it unless he's found guilty. If he's found innocent or pardoned that's another matter. It's like kicking someone when they're down. That's a rotten thing to do to someone anyone."

"Yeah, I know. More than that, I know you and I get it. But I'm still going to move back home. You're welcome to stay with me if you want. I'd actually like having you there," he said with a grin. "Besides, I was hoping you'd help me get the master bedroom cleaned up and ready."

"Isn't that Kreacher's job?" Ginny teased him.

"It's Slytherin green, black and has all this tarnished silver with snakes and what looks like seaweed carved into the wardrobe and bedposts. I was hoping Hermione would know how to Transfigure it into something more nice." Ginny grimaced and he just laughed at her.

"I'll be glad to see what I can do," Hermione said, "but I'll let Ginny decide on the color scheme."

Harry smiled. "Sure, anything but pink or roses!"

"How about daises or sunflowers?" Ginny suggested, watching Harry grimace. "Or better yet, Horntails and Snitches, and we can keep the green! Oh, or Gryffindor red and gold!"

"We could do a nautical theme with sea shells and sail boats! Or mimic the Forbidden Forest," Hermione added as Ginny giggled and Harry hurried away. She waited until he disappeared in the Floo before turning back to Hermione. "So give, how was the visit?"

"He was fairly angry at me at first," she said, opening up her first letter. "Asked me why I was there and wanted to know why I didn't get an annulment."

"No! I'm sorry," Ginny said, sitting down across the table from her.

Hermione picked up a letter, toying with the corner. "I just don't understand this. I mean I was happy with Ron, well, most of the time. And then I find out I'm Bonded with Severus Snape and he can barely tolerate Ginny he doesn't like me! It's not working out."

"You have to give it some time," Ginny stated, looking at her with a worried expression. "I mean you two haven't spent any time together except you know shagging."

"He doesn't even want to talk to me. I tried to get him to talk to me last time, and he was so hateful, surly and sarcastic," she said, trying to keep her emotions out of her voice. "I tried to get him to realize he's jeopardizing his chance at freedom by sulking in prison and refusing to talk to anyone, but all we did was end up fighting. Well, I called him a coward and accused him of being a martyr."

"You didn't!" Ginny said, covering her mouth, her eyes wide in shock. "You talked back to Severus, and he didn't give you a detention?"

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed. "He's been so resentful, and he's been taking it out on me. I just don't know how much more of it I can take."

"But did you, er, you know?" she asked.

Hermione threw up her hands, but she knew she was blushing all the same. "Oh, yes, he was still interested in that."

"And?" Ginny prompted. "Want help with these?"

"Sure," Hermione said, passing her an envelope and opening the next one. "It was nice. He seemed to it was like he was in the dreams. Augh! A disgruntled housewitch telling me I made a mistake not getting the annulment." She tossed the letter aside, selecting another. "What if she's right? Maybe I should. Great! Another hate mail thinks I'm a Death Eater."

"Nutter. This one thinks Severus Imperiused you. You and Ron were never that great, you know," Ginny said, balling up the offending letter. "All you ever did was fight and then make up. You were mad at him practically half the time at school last year, and don't forget how he treated you at the Yule Ball. I just never really got you and my brother. Lavender yes, they fit, but you're way smarter than he is, more cultured, and you don't talk with your mouth full. Truth, I never saw you as working out." She tossed another letter aside. "This one is more advice on your annulment. Something about your sun sign in Mars..."

"But I love Ron. Last year in Potions when I smelled the Amortentia, I smelled Parchment, fresh cut grass, and soft, earthy woods, smoky berry and a patchouli sweetness. The same scent I smelled on Ron that day," Hermione admitted, opening an envelope with the Ministry's seal.

"I never knew Ron to smell like smoke or earthy smelly yes, but..." Ginny suddenly started to grin. "Do you mean like woody-earthly, kind of outdoorsy with a wisp of smoke like from a fire on a cold night?"

"Yes, exactly." Hermione said, nodding. "Shite. I have to go to the Auror's office today. I'm to be questioned regarding Severus."

"What time?" Ginny asked, ripping open another envelope.

"Eleven," Hermione said, showing her the letter.

"Well, you'll have a busy day. Maggie Whitmire has sent you an owl declaring that you haven't signed your forms. She is requesting that you come by the office if you plan on remaining Bonded, or if you intend on requesting an annulment, you have to pick up the request form for the proper signatures. You aren't, are you?"

Hermione shook her head as she took the letter. "Oh, this is rich! If I don't get Severus to sign her forms, we are going to have a hearing regarding ensnarement and coercion charges. They think Severus did something to make me take a plight troth." She folded up the letter. "Great, lets add that to his list of charges!"

"Won't he sign it?" Ginny asked.

"He said he wouldn't go to the Ministry and wand verify the forms because they would arrest him," Hermione explained.

"Well, that's not a problem now, is it?" Ginny stated, smiling. "Just ask to see him in jail again and see if he will sign the form."

Hermione looked at her bemused. "Ask for another conjugal visit? I only get one a month. I don't think I could wait a month."

"He's that good?" Ginny asked, laughing.

Hermione blushed again, but ignored the question. "I don't think she will wait a month, judging by this. She expected this signed within a week of our Bonding. I have to have this resolved by the end of the week," Hermione said, setting the letter aside. They continued opening the letters. Hermione had received three warnings, two more accusing her of being a Death Eater and four claiming she was daft for marrying a known murderer. Hermione crumpled up the letters and walked over to throw them into the Floo, then followed Ginny up to her room. She showed Ginny the potion directions, and she flicked her wand, igniting a flame under the cauldron, and poured in two cups of rainwater, then measured out the Ashwinder dust and salamander blood, pouring them into the water.

"Any more thoughts regarding school?" Hermione asked, adding the palmetto and wormseed Ginny had prepared.

"I'm going. Mum and Dad won't let me marry Harry unless I finish school. So I'm going," Ginny said as Hermione handed her the licorice root to cut up after she measured out the ground flaxseed.

"I am going to return as well," Hermione said, stirring the potion, adding the fennel oil, then started preparing the willow bark.

"If you do, we will both be seventh years. We may actually end up dorm mates!" Ginny started cutting up the wild yams. "What about Severus?"

Hermione added in diced soybeans and crushed red clover. "He has to understand that I would want to finish school. If not, I'll have to talk him into letting me."

Ginny added the sprouts and started crushing the mung beans. "There is always weekends in Hogsmeade!"

Hermione started laughing as she squeezed the two Plimpy glands into the cauldron. "Oh, yes, the once-a-month conjugal visit in the Hogs Head."

"That's if we can get him out of Azkaban," Ginny replied, adding in the black cohosh. "Do you ever worry that Minister Shacklebolt won't succeed?"

"I try to not think about that," Hermione said and sighed heavily. "Ginny, he deserves a life, one without masters, megalomaniacs and Dark Lords. I don't really know at this point if he and I can work things out, but I can't just kick him when he's down that would be cruel. I'm going to wait until the hearing and decide. Mostly, I just want him free to choose what he wants to do. Is that crazy?"

"As crazy as a dragon rider!" Ginny said, laughing. "Oh, wait, you've already done that!"

~MoM~

Ginny sent her Patronus to Harry, telling them that they would be in the Atrium of the Ministry five minutes to eleven. Both girls dressed in their best robes and Flooed to the Ministry. Harry was waiting and guided them through the wand check, then up to the waiting room outside Kingsley Shacklebolt's office. Both Neville and Luna joined them only moments later. Hermione showed Harry the letter from Maggie Whitmire. "We'll get this straightened out as well," Harry said, giving her a one-armed hug. "But my question is this: do you want an annulment or not?"

"I want to be able to wait and see what happens with Severus first," she replied. "I don't think it's fair deciding this while he's locked up. Maybe I can have an extension or something."

"He'll want to keep you," Luna said. "I do hope that the Flutterwortz in Azkaban don't bite him. They could render him impotent."

Both Harry and Hermione shook their heads at her statement, and Neville laughed, kissing Luna on the cheek. "She's so concerned for Snape's welfare lately."

The door to the Minister's office opened, and they were ushered inside. Kingsley stood from his chair and immediately added five chairs, indicating that everyone sit down. A tall barrel-chested wizard sitting next to a striking, older, blond wizard quickly introduced himself as Holden Goldstein from the Magical Law Enforcement office and lead investigator of Severus' case then introduced the blonde wizard as Mr. Oswald Grunthyme, a member of the Wizengamot and lead chair of Severus' case. A tiny witch with a beehive hairstyle, decorated liberally with several feathers, sat primly on the other side of Kingsley's desk, poised at the ready with a ready-flow quill and a pad of parchment on her knee.

"So we are here to discuss the case of Master Severus Snape," Kingsley stated, and the witch's quill scribbled his every word.

"Minister, before we begin, there is a small matter to address," Harry said.

"Kingsley," he stated with a kind smile. "These meetings will be informal." Harry took Hermione's letter and passed it over to Kingsley, who read it and nodded.

"Kingsley," Hermione said, feeling a little intimidated, "I also have a summons to be in the Auror's office at eleven today, and I can't very well be in two places at once."

"Not a problem, Lerman and Darthmyer are due to arrive anytime now," Kingsley reassured her. "However, this does need taking care of. I for one want to know what you intend to do, young lady. Are you going to stay Bonded to Severus Snape?"

Hermione sighed. "I keep asking myself the same question and keep changing my mind. I don't know. Truth is, it's still a bit of a shock, and truthfully, I can't believe it real, finding myself Bonded to *him*, of all wizards. I want to see him freed first before I have to make that decision. But, I just can't ask for an annulment while he's in prison awaiting his trial; it doesn't feel right."

"So, I'll grant the extension for the request. Maybelline, please see that Maggie Whitmire receives notification." Maybelline nodded as she scribbled with her quill as Kingsley turned to address Holden Goldstein and Mr. Grunthyme. "All right you have heard what evidence Harry Potter has provided regarding Severus Snape's activities and several members of the Order of the Phoenix, a recognized group of witches and wizards who were fighting against Tom 'Lord Voldemort' Riddle during Dark War I and Dark War II. We are here now with Hermione Granger-Snape, Mrs. Ginevra Potter, Mrs Luna Longbottom and Mr. Neville Longbottom to hear what they testify to as Severus Snape's actions. Let's begin with Neville Longbottom."

Neville looked up alarmed. "I don't know what I can say. I never really knew Professor Snape except at school."

"That's all right, Neville. May I call you Neville?" Kingsley asked, smiling. "This is an informal inquiry to determine if there will be an actual hearing. Harry has made some discoveries that pertain to you, and I simply want to hear your opinion." Neville nodded as Kingsley began asking questions about Neville's involvement with Dumbledore's Army in his fifth and seventh years.

Neville answered each question, explaining what he knew about his detentions his seventh year, the times Snape treated him with potions after he'd been tortured by Almycus Carrow and the food sent to the room of requirement. Neville was shown a stack of detention cards, obviously taken from Hogwarts, on which several of his detention punishments had been crossed off and reassigned as having been served with Hagrid. Hermione was amazed at how many cards there were. Finally Neville was asked to give any other account of actions which he knew Severus to be party to.

"There was fighting in Hogsmeade one weekend. I had slipped out to the Hog's Head to talk to, er, I don't want to get anyone in trouble."

"It's okay, son," Oswald Grunthyme said. "If it will help the case, please, tell us."

"Okay, Fred and George Weasley, they were running an underground radio program, and they wanted me on it. Only, I was seen by a Death Eater and brought to Professor Snape. I think he Imperiused me, because I was saying things that weren't true, and even after I was given a liquid, which I was told was Veritaserum, I still wasn't saying the truth. Both Mr. and Mrs. Carrow kept asking me things, and I was lying. Then Professor Snape said he was going to take me to Filch, but he took me to the Room of Requirement instead and told me to be more diligent. It was weird."

Maybelline's quill stopped suddenly and Kingsley smiled. "You can of course provide this memory for a Pensieve?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Neville said. "There was another time, fighting in the castle. I thought that I was going to be hit by a curse from Mr. Lestrangle. I fired a spell to protect myself, but I know I missed him. He ducked you see, and I think I hit a door. Only Mr. Lestrangle fell, hit by a yellow jet of light. I only had a minute to look, I was still fighting, but I thought I saw Professor Snape pointing his wand at him. I did see a Shield Charm wrap around Professor Sprout, which I know Professor Snape cast, but then he disappeared. But I know he did it."

"I'll expect that memory as well, son," Oswald Grunthyme said.

Ginny was questioned next, then Luna. Both girls were shown their detention cards from the Hogwarts files, and like Neville, there were loads of them. It seemed that Alecko Carrow particularly had singled out Ginny. Many of the cards had the assigned punishments crossed out and reassigned by Headmaster Snape, giving them detentions with Hagrid 'pulling weeds and sweeping walkways.' Luna was questioned about why Snape had stunned Professor Flitwick her fifth year at the first Battle on Hogwarts. "He wanted to keep us out of the fight and away from danger," she said.

"Are you sure about that?" Holden Goldstein asked.

"Fairly. I mean he thought of us as kids and under his protection," Luna replied. "It made sense. Besides, I asked him about it when I was called to his office after, um, defacing a wall. I'll be happy to give you the memory if you like, but I'd want it back. I rather like that one."

There was a knock, and Mr. Lerman and Mr. Darthmyer were ushered into the room. "So, you did show up," Mr. Lerman said rather snippily. "I sent an Auror to your residence to retrieve you."

"Sit down, Ralph," Kingsley said. "I also asked Hermione here, but I didn't send you an aeroplane because I was expecting you at eleven as well. You'll be given a copy of the minutes as soon as Maybelline types them up." He turned to Luna with a wave of his hand in her direction. "Please, continue. Now were you witness to any of Severus Snape's activities during the battle?"

Luna shook her head. "No, but the night Dumbledore was killed, I saw Professor Snape pulling Draco away. He cast several spells to clear his path, a few hitting the Death Eaters we were still fighting, but I can't be sure. They could have simply been near misses, but I don't really think his aim is that terrible if he meant to hit us. You may have that one too, but I'd like it back. I was fighting next to Neville you see, and he was doing so well..." Luna said, turning to smile at Neville before looking at Kingsley again. "Oh, and I can say for a fact that he brewed potions for Neville's recovery. I was doing lines in the Potions classroom for detention. Professor Snape and Professor Slughorn were talking about potions Professor Snape was brewing. I believe one was an antidote, which required a particular venom, Acromantula, if I remember correctly. I remember him saying that they had bitten two students, and Professor Snape wanted a large quantity of the venom. The professors argued and Professor Slughorn relented, giving Professor Snape a wine bottle of it. After I finished my lines, I went to see Neville in the Hospital wing. I was getting water for him when Professor Snape came in and gave Neville and Seamus their potions. Neville and Seamus recovered and were fine the next day. I'm certain Professor Snape cured them. But I also remember Professor Snape telling Madam Pomfrey to keep the Acromantula Antivenin Potion in a cool place. He was greatly worried about the fact that there were so many Acromantula in the Forbidden Forest."

"We have testimony from Madam Pomfrey that Professor Snape did in fact provide potions for her during all his years at Hogwarts, even when Headmaster," Oswald Grunthyme stated.

Luna was questioned further, and she tried to confirm what she knew. Finally, Kingsley turned to Hermione. "I've kept you for last because you may have more to shed on Severus' activities than anyone," he said.

"I don't know what I can say that Harry hasn't mentioned," Hermione said, sitting up and mentally bracing herself. "I know that Severus Snape has always tried to help protect Harry. First year, he tried to save Harry's life when Professor Quirrell tried to kill Harry during a Quidditch game. I know that our second year he brewed the potion for revive the students from the Basilisk. Our third year, he tried to save Harry, Ron and me from a werewolf and suspected murder. He healed Ron's leg that night, and he tried to find Harry when he ran off after Sirius Black. I know our fourth year he was constantly watching Harry during the Triwizard Tournament and was one of the first wizards at his side when Harry returned with Cedric's body. I know that he assisted Madam Pomfrey after the Battle in the Department of Mysteries to help Neville, Ginny, Ron and myself. I know that he was the first to assist Katie Bell when she was cursed with a necklace and was trying to save Dumbledore from whatever curse destroyed his hand and was killing him. I know he gave Harry the Sword of Gryffindor when we were in the Forest of Dean, and that he accidentally cut off George's ear trying to save Remus Lupin. I know he's not perfect, but I do know which side he was on. He was on our side, Harry's and Dumbledore's, all along."

"She's only saying this because of a spell!" Mr. Lerman stated.

"No, I'm not!" Hermione said, outraged.

The questions began to fly. Accusations were flung. Hermione did her best to answer the questions, frequently supported by her friends and occasionally by Kingsley himself. Every memory she had about Severus was questioned and dissected. The same was done to Luna, Ginny and Neville. Several times she felt Harry squeeze her hand. Finally, Kingsley called for quiet. "All right. We will break for lunch and meet back here. Hermione, you will stay; Harry, Ginny, Luna and Neville, you might stay as well. I want a full hour, gentlemen. Oswald, you will have someone from your staff brought here to write down and verify their individual statements. I will have the memories collected and will need half a dozen bottles. Until then."

As the four wizards filed out of the office, Kingsley asked his secretary to send an aeroplane to Maggie Whitmire to have her join them in his office and to have lunch brought in for six. When he returned to his desk, he looked at Hermione, laced his fingers together and placed his hands under his chin. "Well, young lady, other than the obvious, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing all right, considering," she replied, finally feeling at ease. "So how is the investigation going?"

"Well, as you can see, it's involved. My primary witnesses for the murder charge of killing Dumbledore are a portrait, Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy and a few secondhand memories. Thankfully, under these circumstances, Oswald is accepting both Harry's and Draco Malfoy's Pensieve memories and the word of Dumbledore's portrait as admissible," Kingsley said. "I've already spoken with most of the surviving Order members, and I've spoken at great length with Minerva and the other professors. I'll have to speak to Hagrid again and see if he can corroborate Ginny, Neville and Luna's claims regarding the detentions for the record and then locate the other students of this Dumbledore's Army. If I can, and they will cooperate, that will help. I'll call the Order members together for a meeting and bring Holden, Oswald and José Aladama from the Magical Law Enforcement office. But truthfully, things look good."

"If we have enough supportive evidence of his involvement for the Order and his efforts to thwart Riddle, he has a good chance this won't go to trial at all," Harry said. "He was cleared of all charges during Dark War I as a spy for Dumbledore, so all we have to prove is that he took up the same role during Dark War II. It's the murder of Dumbledore that will be difficult."

This was good news. A knock interrupted them and Kingsley's secretary came in carrying a tray. She was followed by a woman that looked all too much like Rita Skeeter, only with grey hair, faintly tinted with blue, and wearing horn-rimmed rhinestone-encrusted glasses on a silver chain. She even had rhinestones on the buttons of her cardigan. "Ah, yes, Ms. Whitmire, please come in," Kingsley said. The woman looked at Harry and Hermione, and her eyes widened in surprise. She sat primly in a chair, never taking her eyes off Harry, or more likely, his scar. "I don't know if you recognize Harry Potter and Hermione Granger-Snape? This is Ginny Potter, Luna and Neville Longbottom."

"Y-yes, I-I do," she stammered. "I-it's an honor."

"I understand that Hermione and Severus Snape have yet to confirm their Bonding by signing the appropriate forms. I'll be granting the extension for the request of annulment and putting a hold on the due date for confirmation, due to unusual circumstances," Kingsley stated, and Ms. Whitmire looked at him, stunned.

"But I've given them several days to comply," she stammered, confused.

"And he has been detained in Azkaban," Kingsley stated. "So unless you'd like to go see him in Azkaban, I suggest you allow the extension."

"Certainly, Minister. Whatever you think best," Ms. Whitmire replied, obviously terrified of the idea of being sent to see Severus in Azkaban herself. She took a deep breath and turned to Hermione. "Do you know if you'll be affirming the Bonding or will you be requesting an annulment, dear?" she asked, trying to sound motherly and failing.

"I'm not deciding at this point," Hermione stated. She knew this woman was the gossipy type just by looking at her, in spite of what Harry had mentioned. "I don't know what Severus and I want at this point, and I think it should be a mutual decision." She hoped that was enough to fend off the woman's curiosity.

Kingsley interrupted before Ms. Whitmire could respond. "Was there anything else, Ms. Whitmire?"

"No, Minister," she answered, rising, knowing that she was being dismissed.

As soon as she left, Kingsley passed out the sandwiches and butterbeers, tossing one to each of them. Hermione missed her butterbeer, which was saved from crashing on the floor by Harry. "I have another matter to discuss with you kids, sorry, old habit, young people. Apparently, the Malfoys are claiming all of you as witnesses for them at their hearings," he said, levitating them all napkins.

"They are what?" Hermione asked, gobsmacked.

"After what they did to Luna?" Neville said, incensed.

"What exactly do they think we can tell the Wizengamot?" Harry asked at the same time then apologized to Neville.

Ginny turned to Harry. "Didn't you say that Narcissa lied for you in the forest?"

Luna patted Neville's hand. "It's all right, I wasn't really hurt too badly. It's Hermione who got most of it."

"They abducted you and held you prisoner," Neville said angrily.

"I thought that they were at home?" Hermione asked, confused. "If Severus is in Azkaban for his crimes, why are the Malfoys at home?"

"They are under house arrest and have monitors they have to wear. Their wands are being held until after the investigation. But truthfully, besides destruction of the Hall of Prophecies in the Department of Mysteries, and the fact that Lucius was a Death Eater, we don't have very much on him and nothing on Narcissa. And Draco Malfoy has almost no charges against him except arranging the break in to Hogwarts and using the Cruciatus on fellow students, although he bears the scar from his Dark Mark."

"He Crucioed *me*!" Neville spat, expelling a bit of chewed sandwich.

"We also know that they took Severus before the Final Battle and apparently saved his life," Harry stated. "He was staying at the manor, right under our nose."

Kingsley smiled. "I know. Lucius had Severus' room under the Fidelius Charm. We knew he was at Malfoy manor but were unable to find the room he was in. We searched several times. No one could find the room in the manor or see Severus unless he showed them the room himself. Quite clever actually."

"But he told me where he was staying," Hermione said, confused, "and I told Ginny."

Harry looked at her, confused as well. "Yes, and no. Didn't you say that he took you there?" Kingsley asked. "That's one of the loop holes of the charm; Severus could take you to the room, but you'd not be able to find it on your own. And yes, you could say he was at the manor, but every time we inquired, Lucius simply said 'he isn't here,' and that we were 'free to look around.' We had quite a time of getting the truth from the Malfoys because of the charm and their lack of cooperation. Narcissa was *most* assiduous about protecting Severus."

"So let me get this straight," Luna said, setting her butterbeer down on the desk. "The Malfoys are all under investigation for being confirmed Death Eaters, but are given the privilege of house arrest as long as they don't have their wands, but Severus, who is actually innocent, is in Azkaban?"

"Yes," Kingsley stated.

"That's hardly fair," Luna said angrily.



"No, it isn't," Kingsley stated. "So help me fix this wrong."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*Okay, I know that not everything in Neville's, Luna's and Ginny's statements are canon, but I wanted to show that Severus did do things to aid them, and this is what I came up with. I hope you'll indulge me. Besides, he could have done these things, right?*

*Thank you Amsev for taking on this story and helping me to make it readable. Without your help I'd never get accepted on the site!*

## The Second Visit

Chapter 11 of 63

Hermione is granted another visit to Severus in Azkaban to try and talk him into defending himself. Meanwhile, Rita Skeeter manages to stir up quite a bit of trouble for Severus.

\*Warning this is explicit graphic sexual situations.\*



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The Second Visit

~H~

Hermione returned to Grimmauld Place with Ginny after an exhausting day at the Ministry, floating her trunk ahead of her and everything that wouldn't fit in it in her beaded bag. Mrs. Black began wailing as soon as they entered the door. Hermione was too tired to deal with her and simply splattered the canvas with paint conjured from her wand in a bright fuchsia pink. Immediately, the woman scooted to hide behind her frame, cursing and screaming. "Well, if you don't shut up, I'll make you Mrs. Pink!" she shouted back.

Immediately the wretched woman silenced. "You wouldn't dare," she finally said as Hermione set down her trunk.

"Oh, yeah? Try me and see if I don't!" Hermione snapped back.

Kreacher stood glaring at her from the doorway until Ginny asked him for tea. The elf stomped off for the kitchen, grumbling angrily.

"You know he'll have her all cleaned up by morning," Ginny said, joining Hermione on the couch in the living room.

Hermione was too tired to even turn her head. "Yeah, I know, I wouldn't expect anything less. Kreacher really is a terrific house-elf, even if he can't stand me." She pressed her hand to her temple. "Merlin, my head hurts, but I'm in too much pain to get an ice pack."

Ginny laughed, and then groaned. "Me too. Did you ever think that removing, copying and replacing all those memories would be so painful? I feel like I was interrogated for hours."

"We were," Hermione groaned.

"Miss, friend of master?" a deep, hoarse voice asked from beside Hermione.

Hermione turned her head, wincing at the effort and saw Kreacher standing there, holding a towel. "Yes?" she asked.

The elf walked up and handed her an ice-cold towel filled with more ice. "For your head," he said.

Hermione smiled as she laid the towel on her forehead. "Oh, Kreacher, this is heavenly. Thank you."

"Miss is welcome. Mistress, I has one for you," he said. Hermione peeked out from under her towel and smiled as Ginny placed an identical towel on her forehead. "When would you like your dinner?" he asked softly.

"Whenever Harry arrives," Ginny said. "Thank you, Kreacher. This is nice of you." Kreacher laughed softly and left the room, his footfalls making too much noise on the hard wood floor. "So, did they hound you about the Malfoys as well?"

"Oh, yes, just after asking every question Mr. Lerman and Mr. Darthmyer could think up about Severus at least four times," Hermione replied. "Not to mention, Mr. Goldstein, Mr. Aladama and Mr. Grunthyme."

Ginny laughed softly. "I actually thought the questions Mr. Grunthyme and Mr. Aladama asked were rather kind compared to those of Mr. Lerman and Mr. Darthmyer. And Mr. Goldstein, geeze! The things he asked!"

"Mr. Goldstein and Mr. Aladama are from the Magical Law Enforcement office, and Mr. Goldstein is lead investigator of Severus' case. Mr. Grunthyme is a member of the Wizengamot. I suppose they are handling the investigation from different angles," Hermione said. "But at least I think Severus has a chance. Do you have any Pain Potion in the house?"

"Nope," Ginny said with a groan. "I used up the last when Harry rammed his knee on the goal post, dodging a Bludger in his dive for the Snitch playing Quidditch last weekend. I have to brew more. Care to help?"

Hermione was finally comfortable sitting here on the sofa, legs stretched out on an ottoman, eyes closed, even if her head ached. "Let's rest a while and see if this ice helps. If not, then yes. I'll even brew it for you."

"Deal," Ginny said with a sigh.

~S~

Severus was awoken roughly by one of the Auror guards and escorted from his cell to an interrogation room. For some reason his keepers felt it necessary to have four wand armed guards to move him from the west wing on level ninety-eight up the stairs to the west wing on the ninety-ninth. *As if I could curse all four of you wandless with my wrists bound*, he mentally scoffed. His wrists were unbound as they turned and closed the entrance for the interrogation room. *There are only two chairs this time at the table, so that rules out another visit from Mr. Lerman and Mr. Darthmyer. They always visit me together*, he mused. *And it won't be either Mr. Grunthyme or Mr. Aladama; they bring a clerk with them to record everything I say. Possibly Holden Goldstein. He hasn't been by to pester me in two days. Although on occasion, he brings a clerk with him as well...* So far, as his defense MLE, Mr. Goldstein had been hardly promising. He spent all his time trying to get Severus to extrapolate on his Death Eater activities, as well as any and all atrocities he was reported to have done or been party to. To Severus, Goldstein was already convinced that he was guilty and was simply trying to prove it.

Severus sat in one of the chairs, reclining with his leg crossed over his knee as he waited, and began reciting potion ingredients for some of the potions he'd made last and mentally listing their contrasting and reactive properties.

He was none too pleased when Rita Skeeter walked into the room, smiling at him, followed by an Auror guard. "Hello again, Severus. May I call you Severus? Lovely," she said as she sat down. Severus simply glowered at her as she opened up her crocodile-skin handbag, pulling out a pad of parchment and an acid-green quill. "You don't mind if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill again, do you? Wonderful." She quickly sucked the tip of the green quill for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright over the pad of parchment.

Severus watched the pen as it stood balanced over the parchment, its point quivering slightly as it waited to write her nonsense. "So Severus, it's true that you and Miss Hermione Granger-Snape are still unofficially Bonded by a Pairing-Troth Charm?" she asked as the quill began to scribble. "A bit untoward, don't you think? That you are now magically Bonded to a wand mate that is not only many years younger than yourself, but also vastly less emotionally mature than you are, who was until recently your student, and still would be if you were to return to your post as Headmaster of Hogwarts. Concerned?"

He took in her heavy-jawed face with its heavily penciled eyebrows curving over her imitation jeweled spectacles silently. She flashed her gold teeth at him with a ridiculously wide toothy smile with a sense of cool indifference. "I don't really care what lies you write," he said with his best sneer.

"Of course you do, Severus," she replied with a wink that Severus despised. "Sources tell me that Miss Granger, or should I call her Mrs. Snape, is holding off requesting her annulment. So what is it? Love that is keeping her tied to you, or do you have her under a potion? You could tell me, confidentially if you like. You are a renowned Potions master, you know, it would be so easy for you whip one up." Rita's quill was writing madly on the pad of parchment.

Severus maintained his stony mask of indifference, although he was seething at her words. "From Azkaban? Hardly."

"From your own lab or possibly even from the Potions classroom at Hogwarts. We know you've the skill. Still, one has to wonder why Miss Hermione Granger pardon Snape will not file for the annulment. Is it love? Fear? Intimidation? You're known for being intimidating and cruel. Is that the hold you have over her? How intriguing and so... disturbing. Or is this dark, dangerous and brooding wizard thing you've got going what she finds so... captivating that she's fallen for your... ensnarement?" Rita Skeeter smiled and shook her head making her blonde curls sway slightly. "No matter. If everything goes unfortunately for you, do you think Miss Hermione Granger sorry Snape will seek an annulment, or do you think she will keep her ties to you? I understand she was here to see you. A conjugal visit, wasn't it, or a way to exert your hold over her? Some elicit Dark Arts spell or enchantment?" She winked at him again, but Severus remained silent, refusing to take her bait. The quill, however, continued to fill the page with what he could only assume was utter nonsense. "You can tell me, what happened between you two during her visit?"

Severus sat unmoving, silent, and maintained his indifferent composure, although he wanted to curse the witch into the afterlife.

"No, grindylow got your tongue? All right then, no matter. Because you're no ordinary wizard, are you, Severus?" she asked, continuing undaunted. "Your story's going to be legend. Do you think it was the trauma of your past, being ostracized and tormented at school that made you so keen to enter such a dangerous relationship with Tom 'Lord Voldemort' Riddle?"

"Do not say his name," Severus spat angrily.

"Oh, sure, I can call him whatever you wish," she replied with a toothy grin, pointing one of her red painted taloned fingers at him. "Everyone loves the tall, dark, dangerous yet mysterious, brooding male, Severus. And you have that aura around you in spades." She caressed her pointed chin with one large, mannish hand as she gazed at him. "So what made you want to join up with such a megalomaniac wizard in the first place? Was your mother involved with him? I know you were very heavily into the Dark Arts as a child even before you ever attended Hogwarts. Did you learn them from your mother, or was the allure to learn the Dark Arts your own personal desire? Was your mother supportive or afraid for you in your pursuit?"

Severus continued to glare at her, keeping his expression as indifferent as he could. *You have certainly done your research*, he thought.

"Your father was Muggle was he not?" she asked casually, as if this was common knowledge. He gave her no indication, but her quill wrote on furiously. Rita looked at the pad of parchment, smiled and turned the page. "Speaking of your parents, were they alive, how do you think they'd feel? Proud? Disappointed? Or concerned that you joined up with such a dangerous lot, who were determined to wipe out witches and wizards such as yourself? Witches like your mother who married outside her race? Would she be concerned for your pathological need for attention and acknowledgement your need to... fit in? To belong to a group of pureblood elite and powerful wizards, led by one of the most dangerous, most powerful wizards of the century. On the other hand, I have to wonder if you joined them to protect her, Severus? Is that why you joined them? Or were you attracted by Riddle's psychotic quest for supremacy and domination?"

Severus turned to look at the wall, wondering how long he was going to have to endure her this time.

"Of course you weren't," she replied. "You were Dumbledore's man were you not? His spy for his Order of the Phoenix, I believe they are called. Or were you spying on Dumbledore for Tom Riddle? Is it all right if I call him that Tom Riddle? It seems strange that a man, loyal to Dumbledore would spend so many years helping him, aiding him, creating potions and curing him, only to turn on him and kill him. What made you do it? Why did you betray him?"

"Are you through with this farce?" Severus snarled, his eyes narrowing at her dangerously. "Guard, I'd like to return to my cell."

"Are you finished with him, Ms. Skeeter," the guard asked her politely. "I really should get him back to his cell."

"No matter. I got what I wanted," she said rising to go. "It was lovely to speak to you, Severus. I do hope we can do this again sometime."

"Not if I can help it, we won't," Severus snarled, glaring her down with his darkest look, allowing his raw power to surge slightly.

She recoiled, her eyes wide, and hurried for the door as the Auror stepped forward. "Snape, be nice to Ms. Skeeter," the Auror demanded.

"Nice is not in my vocabulary," Severus growled darkly.

~H~

Hermione followed the Auror through the prison, feeling the weight of depression and despair she'd always associated with the name Azkaban. She was ultimately glad there weren't any more Dementors, but there was a gloom about the place she couldn't shrug off. *I'd simply be moping over Ron and fighting back the anxiety I feel about Severus. At least if this really doesn't work out, I can get an annulment, and maybe I can get Ron to take me back... But after all this why would he? Would he really want me back after the fiasco of this Bonding? After being so intimate with Severus... Still, the night of George's party he wanted me I know he did. But could he ever really forgive me?* She forced herself to stop worrying about what could have been and concentrate on why she'd come.

Holden Goldstein had arrived at the Burrow looking for her, carrying a letter and parchments from Oswald Grunthyme's office, granting her another conjugal visit with Severus in hopes that she could talk him into cooperating with his investigation, and to verify the statements made about and against him. She had no idea how she was going to convince him, if he was so adamant to remain in Azkaban as a martyr.

Hermione stood outside the cell with a feeling of nervous anticipation.

She had been wand searched for weapons upon her arrival and again before being led onto the prisoner wards. Her wand had been left at the desk so Severus couldn't use it against her, and she was escorted to the same cell she'd visited Severus the first time.

On Ginny's advice, Hermione had chosen to wear a button-down dress under her robes, since Harry had told her that the guards of the prison could watch them through the barrier of the cell if they so chose to. The thought that guards could have been watching her and Severus during her first visit had infuriated her. *Still, Ginny is right. If I act like I didn't know, maybe, just maybe, I could use my robes as a shield for some relative privacy. That's if Severus will actually want to do anything with me again. Besides, didn't Cosmo say that sex is a woman's weapon against the male sex? If I can get him to lower his guard, maybe I can actually reach him and make him see reason?*

Severus was lounging on the cot, one leg up on the bed, the other on the floor, his arms crossed and smirking at her as she entered. "Back again so soon? Couldn't get enough of me? Or are you missing the dreams so badly you decided to request another visit? You must have pulled some strings; prisoners usually only get one conjugal visit a month, not once weekly."

"I wanted to see you and talk to you about your investigation," she replied, walking over to sit next to him.

He didn't move, so she was forced sit at the end of the cot next to his foot. "If you were here to talk to me about my investigation, they wouldn't have brought me here. They have a cell specifically for talking," he said snidely. "Believe me, I've spent quite a few hours in that room already."

"Holden Goldstein and José Aladama told me," she admitted. "Holden came by the Burrow to see me."

"So, you're still staying with the Weasleys?" he asked.

Hermione smiled. "No, I've moved into Harry's house until school starts."

"School?" His eyes narrowed when she mentioned Harry's house, but quickly decided it was better there than at the Weasleys. Still, her declaration that she was returning to Hogwarts surprised him. "So you're going back to Hogwarts?" he asked condescendingly. "I was certain you'd have been offered honorary N.E.W.T.s and been given the Order of Merlin for your efforts during Dark War II."

"Yes, I was given my Order of Merlin. I was also offered my honorary N.E.W.T.s, but I declined them. I want to actually finish school~~earn~~ my N.E.W.T.s and graduate. Would you have expected anything less of me?" she asked, smirking slightly.

"You, no, I suppose not," Snape stated. "So have you finally come to your senses and brought the forms for me to sign to request the annulment?"

She looked up at him boldly. "No. I've been granted an extension on the parchmentwork until the matter of your innocence is cleared up."

"I'm not innocent, Hermione, face it," he snarled. "You're Bonded to a murderer."

"Not if what I saw in your memory was true, you're not," she said, placing her hand on his leg.

He looked at her hand, then back up at her face. "Potter showed you my memories?" he sneered contemptuously. "How so like him."

"Severus, it's all we have from you proving your innocence," she said. "Besides, I already knew. I saw Dumbledore's hand, and I knew that whatever crippled him was spreading up his arm. I also know that you tried to help him, save his life, possibly prolonging it while trying to stop the effects of the curse poison what ever caused it. I know about the Unbreakable Vow you made to Narcissa, and I believe you had one with Dumbledore regarding his life. He wanted you to be the one to kill him instead of Draco. I understand why."

"Then enlighten me," he said.

"I think it was because he knew he was dying anyway. Harry said Dumbledore had consumed a potion, one that made him really weak, and that was possibly reacting with whatever was already destroying his body and it was killing him faster. I saw Harry's and Draco's memories of what happened on the Astronomy Tower. Dumbledore was dying; you could see it in his eyes. He couldn't even stand up any longer," she explained, hoping to make him understand he wasn't as guilty as he made himself out to be. "Kingsley and Holden Goldstein think it was a mercy killing and that Dumbledore pleaded with you to do it. He looked like he was in a lot of pain."

"Enough," Snape snarled, jerking his leg out from under her hand, dropping it to the floor. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Please talk about it," she pleaded, moving closer to him.

Snape turned on the cot, leaned forward and placed his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees. "Don't you understand, I killed him; he truly accepted me, trusted me, and I killed him. He was more than my employer, he was my friend, mentor and confidant, and he asked me to kill him, to spare Draco from actually going through with it. And I had no choice! Everything I did for Dumbledore or for the Dark Lord I had no choice."

Hermione was shocked to hear such a confession from him. She placed her arm across his shoulder and leaned forward to try to look at his face. "I know that. I know you had to do some terrible things. I can't even begin to imagine all of it, but you changed. You did what you could, what you had to, to bring Tom Riddle down. We won because of you." He scoffed at her. "For seven years, possibly longer, you've been protecting Harry. All through school, you tried time and time again to protect Harry, Ron and me. You even repeatedly tried protecting our friends in Dumbledore's Army when you were Headmaster. Your actions have been brought to light regarding your efforts to keep the students safe this last year."

He sat up and looked at her, his usual sneer back on his face. "I am no hero, Hermione. I abandoned the school..."

"As Harry recalls, Dumbledore told you to be near Tom Riddle at the end, to make sure Harry had time to find all the Horcruxes and destroy them. We had one more to find, and it was in the castle. It was the end, and it was up to you to try and thwart him," she said. "Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick have said the same thing Harry wasn't ready and Riddle had to be stalled." He scoffed at her again. "According to witnesses, you bought the professors the needed time to secure the castle, evacuate the students and prepare for a fight. It also gave Harry the time we needed to destroy the Horcrux Riddle hid in the castle and get reinforcements."

"That is not what happened and you know it," he sneered.

She smiled at him. "That's the official report."

"You are daft if you believe it," he said, leaning back against the wall.

"Who do you think the wizarding world is going to believe? Harry, Ron, me, Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, and Luna, or the Carrows and a bunch of students that had no idea what was going on?" she asked, placing her hand on his leg again. "They have already testified, all of us, and your leaving the castle has been explained."

He looked down at her hand, his expression guarded. "So why are you here?"

"You know why to get you to cooperate with Holden, verify the facts and end this," she replied. "I came to convince you to clear your name." She hesitated, then looked up at him imploringly. "I also need to know what you want to do about us."

"What I want?" he asked, smirking.

"Yes, what you want," she repeated. "I still have to decide what I want as well. Now thanks to my stupidity, we are now in this together. I want to know what you want me to do. Do you want to try and see if this Bonding will work, or should I go ahead and request an annulment? I was as surprised as you were, I think, that the Moon-song Spell matched you and me, but it must have done so for a reason everyone says so! According to everything I've been told and what I have read on the spell, it's a true matchmaking spell. It bonds soul mates. I find it hard to believe, but you and I must have things in common or at least be compatible enough..."

"You expect me to believe for one minute that you want to make this Bonding work?" he sneered at her.

"I don't know! It matched you and me as utterly unbelievable as that is it did!" She tried to keep her focus on his face, in hopes that she could read him, but his intense stare made it difficult to do so. "I suppose I believe it could if we both wanted to give it a go... Which is completely ridiculous since you can't even stand me," she said, feeling her cheeks warm up. *Great I'm probably blushing like a schoolgirl.*

"Prove it," he said silkily, watching her.

"What?" Now she knew she was blushing. "How?"

"You came here as my Bonded wife, to provide for your husband," he said, all traces of his snarl gone. "So if you intend to be my wife, prove it."

"Prove it?" she asked, suddenly quite unsure of herself.

"Yes, Hermione, how difficult could that be," he said smoothly. "If you really think for one minute I'm supposed to believe you have any intention of remaining my Bonded mate, *my wife*, prove it."

She scooted up on the cot, rising up to her knees and leaned toward him for a kiss, but he didn't move toward her, remaining still as he watched her. It was awkward and she nearly fell on top of him, grabbing his shoulder to steady herself. He smirked at her and she got off the cot, moving to stand in front of him. "Okay, if you don't want to kiss, what do you want?"

He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. "This is your show you're here to convince me. So far you're not very convincing."

Hermione sighed. She actually didn't have much experience with sex, or boys for all that matter *Not that he's a boy he's a man and experienced! Shite, now what?* She'd read a few romance novels, but they all had the man doing the love making while the woman lay there and moaned and groaned. *Think... What would he like?* She stepped closer to him and knelt down between his knees. *Well... guys masturbate. I read that in Cosmo, and they talk about giving head all the time... But will he let me touch him?* She placed her hands on his legs and slowly slid her hands up to the string at his waistband. Snape merely raised an eyebrow as she loosened his trousers and tried to slip her hand inside. Snape lifted his hips and pushed his trousers down, exposing his stiffening penis.

She wrapped her fingers around it and stroked him, watching his face for any sign that she was doing it right. Except for the cock of his eyebrow and a curl of his lip on one side of his mouth, his face remained a mask of indifference. *Merlin, I wish I'd paid better attention to those articles!* She adjusted her hand, trying to find a more comfortable position for her wrist and tried stroking him again. This time he almost smiled at her.

"You've never done this before have you?" he asked, his voice low and throaty.

Hermione stopped, still waiting for some indication of what he wanted her to do. "Er, no. Am I doing it wrong?" she asked, trying rolling her fingers as she moved them up and down.

"Not exactly. Use more pressure, you aren't going to break it," he suggested.

She did, tightening her fingers around him, and he closed his eyes. Not too sure why she did, and hoping he wouldn't hit her, she leaned forward and tentatively licked the tip, and then trailed her tongue down his length as she slid her fingers on him. She thought she heard him moan and took that as a good sign, so she repeated it, noticing that he responded louder when she reached the base of his penis and the soft skin of his sac.

Encouraged, she licked his sac with her tongue as she stroked him, and he nearly jumped. She looked up at him to see a look of shocked surprise on his face before he schooled his expression once more to ambivalence. Hermione did it again, and he squirmed slightly as if she was tickling him. Emboldened, she continued, sucking softly and rolling her tongue on his sac as she stroked his penis, enjoying the fact that she was making him squirm, she hoped with enjoyment.

Leaning up, she ran her tongue up his full length and around his tip, eliciting an inhaled hiss from Severus. His hands were by his sides, gripping the blanket as she took him in her mouth. She could only take so much of him before she began to feel the gag reflex. As she lowered down on him again, Severus gently guided her hand to her lips as she took him back into her mouth, and moved her hand down again as she lifted her head up. Hermione smiled inwardly, recognizing his silent instruction and continued as he'd shown her, occasionally using her fingers or fingernails gently with each movement of her head. He groaned when she used her fingertips, hissed when she used her nails and moaned when she gripped him firmly. She cupped him with her other hand and copied the same experiment on his sac, noting quickly fingers and soft strokes with her nails were definitely preferred to firmness and that his sac was extremely sensitive.

"Good... Mother of Merlin..." he groaned more than once. "Oh, Merlin's... ah..." His hand was in her hair, gently caressing her, but not forcing her head or directing her movements, just simply stroking her scalp. It felt good.

Suddenly, he grabbed her hand. "Stop. Stand up," he said softly, nearly an order. She stood and he pulled her closer, his fingers unfastening the buttons of her robes. "Quite convenient that you wore these," he said and smiled as he exposed her bra and flicked open the front clasp. His hands slid down her body and eased her knickers to her knees.

Hermione removed them, laying them beside him on the cot. She stood before him, uncertain of what she should do next. In all the dreams and the times they'd been together, he had taken charge and directed her. She started to kneel again but he stopped her, pushing her back so he could close his legs. "Come here, you silly witch," he said, pulling her forward to straddle his lap. "Touch me," he said, as his fingers stroked her skin.

Hermione reached down and curled her fingers around his shaft again. "Like this?" She slid her fingers down him, letting its length rub against the palm of her hand until she reached the bottom and glided her hand up, tightening her fingers as she did.

"Yes," he replied, his gaze on her hand.

She did it again, careful with her fingernails. He simply watched her, his dark eyes meeting hers each time his gaze flickered up to her face. She enjoyed the feel of the skin on his penis; it was soft and velvety, while the organ itself was stiff and hard. *A little like the Snape in my dreams...*

"Put me inside you," he said after a while.

"Okay," she replied and moved herself up closer on his lap. She held his penis as she angled it toward her opening, wiping the tip of it around before she tried to insert in her. It took a few tries before she was able to ease herself down on him. This part she knew. Once he was fully inside her, she rolled her hips, making her body glide on his shaft. Severus simply watched her, his dark eyes taking in everything as his gaze roamed from her groin as she moved herself on his penis, to her breasts and occasionally to her face. "Touch yourself. I want to see you pleasure yourself," he said, taking one of her hands and placing it on her groin.

She knew what he wanted, although she felt slightly guilty pleasuring herself while he simply watched her. In a few more minutes, she stopped caring as she began to get into what she was doing. She angled her body lower and flicked her finger in rhythm with her movements, feeling the sensations grow inside her. Her breathing became ragged, and she felt the beginnings of her orgasm. Snape's fingers covered hers on her nub, and she looked at him, amazed to see lust in his dark eyes. *He's getting excited watching me?* she realized as her climax began to course through her. She lost her tempo as the sensations grew, not quite able to get her orgasm to come, feeling frustrated as the sensations began to ebb away, unable to keep control of her movements and concentrate on the feelings inside her at the same time. His fingers took over and he seemed to thrust into her, but all she could concentrate on was the rising surge of her climax as she came on him, falling against him as her orgasm rolled through her.

Suddenly, Snape grabbed her tightly to him, turning them to topple over onto her back, crushing her into the cot as he took over, his fingers stroking her clitoris in tempo with his thrusts. The sensations she thought were fading increased. She tried to meet his movements, urging him to move harder. She felt her body climax, and she grasped onto him, trying to pull him as tightly into her as she could. He pushed himself up to watch her, still plunging deeply with each inward stroke. Even when she began to relax, shivering in her post climatic bliss, he was still thrusting himself inside her in hard, pounding strokes, riding her. Hermione ran her fingernails down his back, scratching eight long lines into his skin, and he growled as his climax overtook him. She dragged her nails down his back again, down his arms, and he collapsed on top of her, sweaty and breathing hard. Hermione watched him, counted his breaths, feeling sweat drip onto her chest and waited for him to open his eyes. When he finally looked at her, there was a look of satisfaction in his expression that made her smile, and she leaned up to kiss him.

He shifted himself, straightening her legs as he lay down, partly on her and beside her, then kissed her. She slid her hand into his hair, feeling the silky strands between her fingers, and opened her mouth to encourage his tongue, teasing his lips with the tip of hers.

He pulled away from her and looked at her, his expression unreadable. "You really do like being with me this way, don't you?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"Yes," she replied.

"Why?" he asked, looking at her as if puzzled by her response.

She brushed the hair from his face. "Is that really so hard to believe?"

"Yes," he replied. "I'd have thought you'd have left me, that my actions toward you would have turned you away by now."

"Look, Severus, if you don't want me, then fine. I'll request an annulment. But you need to get out of here. You don't belong in Azkaban. Please let us help you. Please, talk to Holden or Kingsley. From what I know they are willing to give you a pardon for killing Dumbledore. The rest you can be acquitted from." He turned his head, sighing impatiently, and she tried to make him look at her again. "I know I sound like a broken record, but please, you deserve a life, a real life: one without masters or bars. That's all I'm asking. Give yourself a chance."

"And what about you?" he asked, nearly a growl.

She tucked his hair behind his ear. "What about me?"

"What do you get out of this?" he asked.

She nearly giggled but suppressed the urge. "I'm a Gryffindor, Severus, not Slytherin. I'm not doing any of this *toget* something. All I want is to see you free. That's all I want."

His eyes narrowed. "So you use a match-making curse to bind me to you, and yet all you want is to see me free?"

She sighed, her hand falling to her side. "Yes, all right, I made a mistake. I bound us together. If you don't want me, I'll ask for the annulment. I'm told that if, and I mean if, you are convicted, I'll get my annulment anyway. But damn you, why won't you stand up for yourself? Do you want to live out your life here?" He turned away and rose to get off her. Hermione sat up, grabbing hold of his arm. "Clear your name. Accept the acquittal and the pardon. Then you'll have your life back. You'll be able to do whatever you want to do. But I can't stand to see you in here."

He looked at her, staring at her intently, then rose, pulling his trousers up. He leaned against the wall, staring at the floor. Hermione stood up and tried to get him to look at her. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

"Get dressed and go," he said, his tone hard and cold. "Don't come back here."

"I'll keep coming as long as it takes to talk some sense into you!" she snapped at him.

He glowered at her. "Why are you being so stubborn? I told you to leave me. Get your annulment and leave me be. You have no future with me."

Hermione backed up, hurt by his words. "Not with you locked up in here I don't." She opened her arms and glared at him. "Take a good look! This is what you're giving up. All I want is for you to have your freedom. Instead, you want to rot in here, martyred, sulking and miserable. Fine." She started closing her clothes, backing away when he reached out to touch her. "Here I am throwing myself at you, and you're too much of a coward to... Oh, I give up."

"Don't call me a coward," he snarled.

"Then stop acting like one," she snapped back.

"I'm not a coward," he said. He lunged for her, and she backed up again until he'd cornered her against the wall, saying, "Don't call me a coward again," enunciating each word with each step.

"Then prove it," she challenged him. "I dare you to prove it!"

He stepped away from her as the cell doorway opened. "Go," he snarled.

Hermione turned and left, wanting to cry, but refusing to allow the tears to come. *Damn him.*

~MoM~

A rough draft of a manuscript for Rita Skeeter's book sat on Kingsley's desk, and he stared at it with contempt, keeping his anger in check. His contact at Dust and Mildew had brought him the rough draft, only half of Skeeter's book, to his office, wanting to verify some of the facts presented in the notes and validate Skeeter's claims. Hillard Hobday, an editor at Dust and Mildew, once an old school mate and member of the Order, was concerned by the fact that so much information was collected on an official investigation when the actual investigation hadn't even been set for trial yet. Kingsley had immediately set a meeting with Hillard and had spent his morning reading over the manuscript. There were too many quotes from too many resources from inside the Ministry for Kingsley's comfort, which had infuriated him to the point of investigating these leaks himself.

Ralph Lerman's and Galen Darthmyer's were quoted frequently, and both Holden Goldstein's and José Aladama's notes seemed to be repeated word for word in the manuscript as well. Even Oswald Grunthyme's dispatches and notes were apparently uncovered and read by Ms. Skeeter. Kingsley had confronted each man about his involvement with Ms. Skeeter, and all five declared no knowledge of how she got her information or admitted that they had spoken to her except in the most general of terms. Each of them swore that they definitely did not confide in the reporter. The problem is that Kingsley believed them. *Their outrage was too convincing, the swearing and venomous anger too realistic.* Each man behaved as Kingsley expected him to, and each looked him in the eye as they spoke. Kingsley was a fair Legilimens, but he hardly needed to use Legilimency to know his staff wasn't lying to him.

*The best that I can do about the book is to request, no, place an injunction on the manuscript until after the trial of Severus Snape. Thanks to that insipid reporter, there is no way I can allow the matter regarding Severus to remain an internal investigation. It is now going to have to be set before the Wizengamot, whether I wanted to or not.* He quickly drafted a note requesting that Ralph Lerman and Galen Darthmyer meet him in Oswald Grunthyme's office immediately, grabbed the manuscript, and walked out of his office, headed for the lifts. *Somehow that witch managed to acquire a lot of classified and personal information on Severus, and I'll be Horntail flamed if I will not find out how.*

~ T B C ~>

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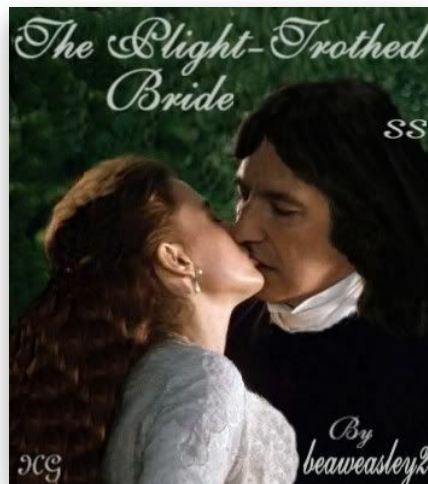
Author's notes:

*Thank you Amsev for taking on this story and helping me to make it readable. Without your help I'd never get accepted on the site!*

## Announcements and Tidings

Chapter 12 of 63

Luna and Neville announce they are getting married. Severus' investigation is underway. Kingsley makes his intentions known, and Hermione is dealing with the pressures of everything around her.



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Announcements and Tidings

~S~

Once again, Auror guards roused Severus from his cell and pulled him roughly up the stairs to the interrogation room. He sat in the chair facing the door to await his visitor and wondered who had arranged to see him this time. He could rule out Hermione, although seeing her again had been the focus of several dreams he'd had lately.

He was rather bemused to see when Harry Potter and Kingsley Shacklebolt walk in through the door. "Well, this is an unpleasant surprise. Come to gloat, Potter?" Severus asked, leaning back in his chair.

"No," Harry stated, shaking his head. "I don't care whether you believe me or not, but I want to see you freed from here."

Severus crossed his arms, regarding Potter warily. "Really?"

Harry pulled out a chair, turning it as he did to straddle it, resting his arms on the back of the chair. "Yes. Look, Snape, we've done all we can for you. We've had all the evidence Dumbledore saved from his memories and have taken extensive notes from his portrait. The problem is that you have to change your plea and confirm the statements in order to get out of here."

"Severus, please," Kingsley pleaded, sitting down. "My friend, Holden Goldstein, has informed me that you have not been cooperating with him. I personally asked him to oversee your case. José Aladama is so far impartial, but he's a good man, too."

"And I'm to believe that having an MLE that thinks I should be locked up for life is a benefit?" Severus asked with a smirk.

"Holden is a good man, Severus, although truth be told, he was uncertain of your loyalties," Kingsley explained. "I chose him because he has personal reasons to want to see you remain here, locked away for life, as well as to have you freed. He didn't want to take the case at first because of his uncertainty. Remember his sister, Melissa Bennett, mother of two?"

Severus nodded, remembering the raid well with a sense of regret. He'd sent word, but knew that he was too late to save the woman and her two children.

"Holden and I intercepted the owl warning us about her attack, but as you know, we were too late to save her," Kingsley said, echoing his thoughts. "He blamed you for her death, and for Charity Burbage's demise. However, he also knew that you saved Marilyn Brodie and her husband, and that you sent the warning about the attack planned for the Kinderfields. José is only going by what evidence we've gathered, but he's a fair man and very thorough."

"You don't get it do you?" Harry said, sounding every bit as arrogant as he did when he'd been in school. "We've convinced them, all of us, Me, Hermione, everyone from Dumbledore's Army, the Order, and even your colleagues at Hogwarts. There is enough evidence to prove your loyalties, and to prove that you fought against Riddle from the inside."

"And just like that, I walk out of here." Severus looked away to hide the anger in his eyes. "Forgive me if I find this hard to believe."

"All you have to do is corroborate the evidence, Severus. We need you to declare yourself innocent, and take down your deposition," Kingsley stated. "Holden and José will be here soon, and I have a Wizengamot recorder coming as well. We can take your statements, enter them in the preliminary findings report, and this can all end. You'll be free. I can assure you that."

"Can you?" Severus asked.

"You said you were guilty, Severus," Kingsley roared, hitting the table with his hand. "Even as Minister of Magic, I cannot grant you a pardon as long as the accused declares himself guilty. I *know* what you had to do in this war. *I know* sacrifices had to be made. I know you had harsh choices. But the collative evidence shows that you were fighting *against* Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle from the inside, from within his inner circle. We would not have won without you."

"I was never given the opportunity to say I was guilty!" Severus said angrily with a sneer. "Your Aurors arrested me, booked me in, asked a few questions, and locked me up. Everyone I've spoken to is under the assumption I'm guilty so I'm guilty. Isn't that how the system works?"

"No, you're responsible, not guilty," Harry said, obviously trying to control his temper. "There is a difference."

"Of the list of crimes I'm being accused of, which are untrue, Potter? I killed Dumbledore. I allowed innocent people to be tortured and killed. I created poisons and potions that killed and destroyed lives. I allowed Death Eaters to run the school and torture students. I'm guilty of everything they accuse me of and more..." He found he was having difficulties maintaining the usual control of his emotions.

"Let the Wizarding community forgive you," Kingsley said fervently. "There is a lovely witch out there that loves you, that wants to see you free."

"Snape, look! Yes, you killed Dumbledore because you made a promise to kill him. He was dying anyway, and he didn't want to fall into the hands of the Death Eaters, especially considering how weak he'd become from the curse that was eating him alive. He also drank a potion that day; one he made me feed him, which was also killing him. So, you *and* I killed Dumbledore, and like you, I have to live with that," Harry said, sounding impertinently in Severus' opinion, as he apparently tried to make him see reason.

Severus ground his teeth as Potter continued. "Yes, you allowed innocent people to be ~~tortured and killed~~, but your actions, and your warnings, saved hundreds of lives. Yes, you created poisons and potions that were downright bloody evil but you also created antidotes and restorative potions to counteract their effects again, saving lives. We have the statements in the records from your contacts within St. Mungo's. And I have statements regarding how you tried to protect students from the Carrows' tortures."

"So why you, Potter? Why are you in on my investigation? I'd have thought you'd be glad I'm in here." Severus sneered venomously, not at all surprised to see Potter's hands clench as he tried to rein in his temper.

"Severus," Kingsley said softly. "I've brought Harry in on the case."

"You've handed this case to an Auror trainee," Severus snarled.

Kingsley started to laugh. "I asked the boy who defeated Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle to join the case, yes. Harry's support will work in your favor, believe me." Kingsley watched Severus scoff as Harry looked back at Severus with a smug smile, laughing at the exchange with a knowing smirk. "Harry isn't the only one I hand-picked for this investigation, Severus," Kingsley continued, making Severus turn his attention back to him. "Holden lost a sister and several friends to the Death Eaters, and yet the evidence swayed his opinion of you. Oswald Grunthyme lost family and friends in this war, and in Riddle's first rising, yet he's reviewed the evidence, and he is willing to consider accepting a pardon. Rolf VanBuren is going to be second chair, and you know him from the Order. I cannot make this any more favorable without actually coming out and saying I personally want you found not guilty. And I do, Severus. I want your name cleared, and to have you reinstated back at Hogwarts."

"They will not reinstate me back at Hogwarts, I abandoned my post," Severus replied, looking at Kingsley as if he'd lost his Gobstones.

"The way I heard it, you had a job to do," Kingsley said with a grin. "I believe Dumbledore told you to get close to Tom Riddle when the end drew near; that when the day of the battle came, you were to help Potter in any way you could."

Severus nodded. "Yes, but..."

"I hadn't found the last Horcrux, and you knew it," Harry interrupted him. "I needed time to find it, and destroy it, before the battle, or all would be lost. Your leaving, joining Riddle, slowing things down, gave me time to find the Horcrux and destroy it, and saved lives."

"You're glamorizing what happened," Severus sneered. "That's not what happened and you know it."

"Yeah. It was a no win situation. You couldn't expose yourself to the Carrows, and you had kept the other professors ignorant of what you and Dumbledore had planned," Harry said. "Even while dying in the Shrieking Shack, you were more concerned with fulfilling your vow to Dumbledore, giving me your memories so I'd know what to do, than in saving your own miserable neck." Severus scoffed at him, but he continued. "You can't deny it, I've got the memories. They're in evidence now, the ones with you and Dumbledore. We've also seen Luna's memories of that day. She knew what was going on, knew that the Carrows couldn't know which side you were really on, and even she testified that your leaving, however misconstrued, bought us time."

Kingsley shook his head, smiling. "Believe it or not, once we showed Minerva the circumstances, showed the evidence Harry put together of what happened, your actions, and Dumbledore's request, even she agrees, albeit reluctantly, that you had to stay with Riddle in order for us to have won. She admits that she and Filius weren't privy to all that you and Dumbledore had planned. She said that if she had been, she wouldn't have tried to stop you. Your leaving to join Riddle did give Harry Potter time to destroy a Horcrux, and allowed the staff ample time to prepare the castle for battle and evacuate the students. It's called hindsight, Severus, and it's all part of the bigger picture. It's what people will come to believe." There was a knock on the door, and Kingsley turned, motioned and then faced Severus again. "That's Holden and the recorder. Please, Severus, will you cooperate with us?"

~H~

Hermione woke up and quickly dressed, intent on joining Harry and Ginny for breakfast, but Harry had already left for the Ministry.

Kreacher placed a pile of crumpets and bacon in front of her and then promptly left. Ginny smiled as she poured her a cup of tea. "How about you and I go shopping for our school supplies? What say you?"

"Did we get our lists?" Hermione asked.

"No," Ginny said, shaking her head. "But it gives us an excuse to go shopping at Diagon Alley. I for one would love a new robe and a new quill. Besides, Harry gave me some spending money."

"Don't you have to give depositions today?" Hermione asked as she sipped her tea.

Ginny picked at her crumpet, smiling. "Nope. So, we have a day to ourselves."

"Miss, Kreacher bring in your mail," Kreacher said, bowing stiffly to Ginny and handing her several letters and two *Daily Prophets*. Ginny passed one paper over to Hermione as she glanced at the front page of her own.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she stared the article on the front page. "Oh, this is rubbish! 'The Ministry of Magic is conducting secret hearings regarding the involvement of several known Tom Riddle supporters, including the infamous Death Eater, supposed spy for the deceased Albus Dumbledore and notorious killer, Severus Snape. It is well known that Severus Snape killed Dumbledore, but what is not known is why the Ministry is trying to cover up the hearings and interrogations in the Snape investigation... Could the Ministry be trying to let loose this dark and dangerous killer?' Bloody hell!"

"This isn't any better. Guess who's back on the *Daily Prophet* staff. Rita Skeeter. She claims the Minister of Magic set an injunction on the manuscript of her book... exposing the facts surrounding Severus Snape," Ginny read and then looked up at Hermione, gobsmacked. "She's still going to write a book about him?"

"Apparently," Hermione said grimly, turning the page. "Listen to this rubbish. The Malfoys are under house arrest pending the conclusion of their investigation. 'At the end of the final battle, Dark War II, the Malfoy family was seen sitting together in the Great Hall with the victors of the battle, mourning the losses of so many fallen friends and relatives...' Oh, that's rich. 'They were huddled at the end of the Slytherin house table,'" she sneered and continued to read, "looking grief stricken and remorseful... Their present situation is on shaky social standing, but I've been privileged to know that the Malfoys have been providing funds for the victims of the war, and providing much needed financial aid to St. Mungo's..." They bought their way out of Azkaban!" Hermione slammed down the paper. "The Malfoys are living it rich in their huge manor, waited on hand and foot by their house-elves, and Severus is in Azkaban!"

"From what this article says, they have had their wands snapped. Wait, only Draco has had his wand snapped," Ginny said, scanning the article. "But this clearly states that the family is wandless."

"Harry took Draco's wand from him before we escaped Malfoy manor," Hermione replied. "I think Draco said he took his mum's wand with him to school. I don't know what happened to Mr. Malfoy's wand." Hermione looked at Ginny, although her thoughts were on Severus and the fact that the Ministry might snap his wand.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Ginny asked.

Hermione turned her attention to her friend. "Gin, do you think we could have a rain check on going to Diagon Alley?" she asked thoughtfully. "I think I'd like to spend the day away from the Wizarding world."

"What did you have in mind?" Ginny asked.

"Harrods," Hermione said definitively. "How would you like to get away from all this and see how Muggles shop?"

"Are you kidding?" Ginny exclaimed, smiling. "I'd love to! What's Harrods?"

~S~

When the guards brought Severus into the interrogation room, Rolf VanBuren was standing next to Kingsley and Harry Potter. The older wizard looked Severus up and down before nodding and taking his seat. "Severus," he said calmly. "Knew this day would come. Hoped it wouldn't, but nevertheless, here we are."

Severus nodded. "Rolf. How are your boys?" Rolf had been in the Order, but kept a low profile. He worked in the Hit Squads before joining the MLE, warning Dumbledore to what was happening in the Ministry. Severus had sent him several owls following Dumbledore's death of impending Death Eater attacks, knowing he'd at least follow up on them quickly. Rolf's two eldest boys had stayed to fight at Hogwarts in the final battle and Severus knew that the younger boy had died.

Rolf smiled. "No better for wear. Miss their brother, but I'm right proud of my sons. The war toughened them up, made them stand up for what was right. Konrad died fighting for what he believed in. Rommauld has decided that he wants to go into the MLE like his old man. The youngest will start Hogwarts when it reopens."

"You must be proud," Severus stated amiably. He watched as the Auror guard conjured three more chairs as Holden Goldstein, Oswald Grunthyme, and a rather prim looking witch entered the interrogation room. As expected, the room seemed to adjust to the needs of the occupants as everyone settled into chairs. The room had magically stretched, neither seeming crowded nor having been filled up at all, remaining with just enough space for everyone to be comfortable. *Even the table stretched in length*, Severus noted.

"Ahem. Sorry. Right. Shall we proceed then? I, Holden Goldstein of the Magical Law Enforcement and lead investigator into the case of the Wizarding community vs. Severus Snape, and Oswald Grunthyme, member of the Wizengamot, do hereby acknowledge that today, the twenty-second of June, we are accepting a change of plea for the defense." Holden opened his file, and the Quick-Quotes quill hovered in anticipation. "Whenever you're ready, Mr. Snape."

Severus smirked inwardly at the moniker 'mister.' He hadn't been so addressed in over nineteen years. "I'd like to change my plea to responsible, but not guilty due to extenuating circumstances," he stated, and held up his hand before Potter spoke and interrupted him with more contrite babble. "I cannot in good conscious say that I'm not guilty, because I did do these things I am accused of. However, many of these were unfortunately unavoidable; some acts even essential, either to maintain my position as a Death Eater in order to assist the Order of the Phoenix or under oath to Dumbledore... Even the act of killing him. I am not proud of the things I have done, and will carry the weight of the regrets and guilt the rest of my days. Nevertheless, I request that..."

"Yes," Mr. Grunthyme urged him to continue, "go on."

"I request that my plea be changed accordingly." It was the best Severus could give them, knowing he'd have to repeat what he said now under Veritaserum when this came to trial.



Mr. Grunthyme nodded and made a notation on his parchment before looking up at Severus. "Very well stated. I for one am glad you have come around. You are showing true remorse for your actions, and I realize that you'll face the consequences of your actions the rest of your days. Your plea has been accepted and is so noted. Now as chief investigator of your case and member of the Wizengamot, I have a few questions I'd like to clarify..."

Severus nodded, knowing that his expression was one of well practiced indifference, belying the turmoil that he felt inside, and waited for the questions to begin with a sense of dread. He hated confessions, hated being questioned even more, but this was inevitable.

"Right then," Mr. Grunthyme said, looking at his notes.

~H~

Since the final battle, things had yet to slow down. The first few weeks were made up of numerous funerals and wakes, superimposed with the needs of the living, investigations and reconstruction. The Ministry had been extremely busy with tracking down the last of the Death Eaters and filling in positions, which had been vacated due to arrests or deaths. St Mungo's had recruited anyone with a Healer background or even a desire to help the wounded and suffering from the war. The general public wanted things wrapped up quickly, and everyone suspected of being a Death Eater or associated with one to be sent to Azkaban or given the newly discovered Death-Kiss potion that left the victim a mindless shell similar to the Dementor's kiss.

Kingsley absolutely refused to allow the use of the potion except for the truly hardened criminals, insisting on giving everyone a thorough investigation and a fair trial, but even his resources were limited.

As members of the Order and Ministry personnel, Mr. Weasley and Percy were very busy, spending long days at the office, and Mrs. Weasley was still volunteering at St. Mungo's as a Healer. George's defensive line was still booming, but he was having a difficult time keeping up with demands on his novelty items as well, eliciting help as frequently from family and friends as he could.

Hermione, Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Ron, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and even George had all received subpoenas from Oswald Grunthyme and Rolf VanBuren. The committee had viewed nearly every one of their memories involving Severus, taking extensive notes regarding the events seen, and then had the memories copied and returned to them. All three days Hermione had returned to Grimmauld Place from the Ministry, Ginny had been waiting for her with a cold flannel and a Headache Potion.

As was becoming a habit ever since Fred's funeral, and those of friends and comrades, the Burrow was full of people on Sunday afternoon. Although the gatherings still carried the shadow of those lost, and the stress of the added responsibilities many of the family had taken on, the atmosphere was one of loving support and hope. Each person was trying to be caring, compassionate and supportive of each other. It wasn't uncommon to see Angelina Johnson and Lee Jordan attending, and Neville and Luna had become regulars as well.

This particular Sunday, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny had offered to make a detour on the way Ottery St. Catchpole to pick up Mrs. Tonks and Teddy. Mrs. Tonks, Hermione, and Ginny were all lounging in the sitting room, watching Harry play with Teddy on the floor, while Mrs. Weasley busied herself in the kitchen, making lunch. Fleur and Bill were sitting with Mr. Weasley, Ron, George and Angelina in the shade of the oak tree in the back garden, and Luna and Neville were now sitting at the kitchen table, holding hands as Percy recounted his latest attempts at standardizing cauldrons. His new girlfriend, Audrey, listened to him with rapt attention, although no one else was.

Hermione nudged Ginny and pointed to Luna and Neville discreetly. "Look at Luna and Neville. They are so into each other, I bet they haven't heard a word Percy's said all afternoon."

"Know what Luna told me?" Ginny asked, and Hermione shook her head no. "They're going to go on an exploration hike in the Alps for two weeks before she starts school. Neville wants to find some rare flower that only blooms in August, and Luna wants to take pictures of a moongoloth."

"What's a moongoloth?" Hermione asked, scrunching her nose when Teddy repeated, "Moon-goo-loth."

Ginny laughed at Harry's confused expression. "Careful, Teddy repeats everything. I don't have any idea what a moongoloth is, but we're talking about Luna. It may be real, or only real to her."

"Neville, would you be a dear and go tell everyone in the garden that lunch is almost ready?" Mrs. Weasley asked and then turned to the sitting room. "Girls, will you please set the table that Bill and George put up outside?"

"Lunch ready, lunch ready," Teddy started chanting as he threw himself into Harry's lap, making Harry's eyes suddenly widen and tear up.

"Sure, Mrs. Weasley," was echoed with, "Sure, Mum," and "Okay, Mrs. Weasley," as Neville, Ginny and Hermione all sprang to their feet.

Ginny walked over to give Harry a hand up. "You all right?" she asked.

Harry struggled to get up. "Foot in the wrong place," he groaned, moving gingerly.

Hermione turned to hide her laugh, collected the plates, and followed Luna outside. "You and Neville are really getting on well," she said to Luna as they set the table.

Luna looked over at Neville and smiled. "Yes. It was inevitable."

As everyone came to find seats around the table, Neville pulled out Luna's chair, stroking her hair before he sat in the chair next to hers. Hermione had to admit, Luna was looking far better groomed now that Mrs. Longbottom was on about Luna's appearance. Her once dingy hair was now smooth and glossy, at least on the weekends.

The conversations at the table bounced from Mr. Weasley asking Harry and Ron about Auror training, to Neville's hopes of working in a nursery specializing in magical plants, to Mrs. Tonks and Fleur's random motherhood comments as Bill balanced Victorie in one arm while he ate. George announced that he was once again considering expanding Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and was looking at the old Zonko's premises in Hogsmeade. Mr. Weasley asked Hermione what she intended to do, and she told him that she wanted to return to Hogwarts in September.

Ron quickly swallowed and looked up at her, gobsmacked. "What for?" he asked. "You were given honorary N.E.W.T.s, like Harry and me."

"I turned them down, Ron," Hermione stated. "I want to earn my N.E.W.T.s."

"I think it's great," Ginny declared. "Of course, that means that you and I will be seventh years together, have classes together, and even share a dormitory!"

"What about your husband?" Bill asked. "What does he think about it?"

"I'm not sure what he thinks about it actually," Hermione worried the napkin in her lap. "He wasn't surprised when I told him. I think he still expects me to request annulment."

"Are you?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Hermione turned to look at him and caught Ron's eye. "I don't know yet. I want to wait until Severus' case is concluded and he is freed; then he and I will discuss it."

"If he's freed," Ron said sullenly.

Fleur quickly turned to Angelina and asked her what she had planned to do, and Angelina announced that the *Daily Prophet* offered her a job as a Quidditch correspondent,

which Ron thought was 'wicked,' and Harry declared as 'cool.'

"So I get to go to all the games and meet all the players," Angelina said excitedly. "And, yes, when the Chudley Cannons play, I'll get you autographs, Ron."

Ron face lit up. "How about tickets?" he asked hopefully, and everyone laughed at him.

"I'll see what I can do," Angelina replied smoothly.

"Since this seems to be a day of announcements," Neville piped up from the other end of the table. "I'd like to say something. Luna and I are getting married."

"About bloody time," George stated.

"When?" Mrs. Weasley asked, ignoring George. "Luna, I thought you were going back to school?"

"She is. Felix Marchbanks is leading a three-month expedition of the northern Mediterranean mountains, leaving in mid September, and I've been accepted on the team. If I'm lucky, I'll be included in his winter expedition in January. I'll have loads of rare plants! It'll be great. But Gran just doesn't want us to wait for a whole year to marry considering... well, since Luna..." Neville tried explaining, but he turned bright red and looked down at his hands in embarrassment.

"She's worried I'll get pregnant, so she insisted on a proper wedding. It's gong to be on the sixth of September," Luna stated as she laced her hand with Neville's, smiling at him, and obviously very happy. "Besides, it's a full moon on September sixth, so we are going to have it outside in the garden."

Ginny clasped her hands together, beaming at her friends. "Oh, that would be wonderful, an evening wedding!"

"Yeah, Luna wanted to pick a date corresponding with the full moon," Neville said. "And it's the Friday before I leave for the expedition."

"Probably because you were matched with the Moon-Song Curse," Ron said, a little bitterness edging his tone of voice.

"Spell," Ginny corrected Ron, frustration evident in her tone. "The Moon-Song~~Spell~~."

For some reason, the girls were far more excited about the announcement than the guys and began asking Luna all kinds of questions about what she'd like for her wedding. After lunch, Ron managed to get Bill, Angelina, George, Neville, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny to agree to a game of Quidditch in the orchard, although Luna and Fleur went along simply to watch. After two rousing games, they all returned to the house for Mrs. Weasley's lemonade.

Harry excused himself, disappearing briefly and, returning with a sack, walked determinedly over to Luna and Neville. Hermione watched him from the front stoop as Harry handed the sack to Neville. "I want you to take this and start your own nursery."

"What is this?" Neville asked, as he looked at Harry, confused. Ginny looped her arm around Harry, beaming at them, and Luna looked at her friends, puzzled.

"Consider it start up funds," Harry said. "It's the money I won from the Triwizard Tournament. I gave it to Fred and George to start up their shop, and George paid me back. So now I want to give it to you to start up the nursery you've always wanted."

Neville looked into the sack, then up at Harry and Ginny, gobsmacked, and Hermione smiled, watching his face light up. "Harry, I can't take this... there must be a thousand Galleons in here. It's too much." He thrust the sack back at Harry.

"Consider it a loan if you want," Harry said, shoving the bag back into Neville's hands. "It's blood money to me I only got it because Tom Riddle killed Cedric Diggory. So, I'm using it for good causes; and you're a good cause."

"Harry, I don't know what to say," Neville said, his voice hitched with emotion.

Ginny smiled at Neville and gave him a one armed hug. "Don't say anything then. But I expect you to make good on this and have a smashing good nursery."

"Oh, he will," Luna said, beaming. "Thank you, Harry."

Hermione walked down to her friends, never feeling more proud for this gesture than any Harry had ever made before. Neville turned to look at her as she approached. "I'm going to have my own nursery."

"I'm glad, Neville. You'll be a smashing Herbologist," she said proudly, giving him and then Luna a hug. "I'm so happy for both of you."

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I realize that I have distorted a few of the facts from canon. My father was on Iwo Jima during the infamous raising of the flag (the second time) and he used to tell me that the facts of that battle were not quite how historians recorded it, although later all the facts did come out. 'History is recorded by the victor and sometimes the facts are distorted' my father used to tell me. Harry and Kingsley are working together to free Severus, and if a fact or two is bent slightly, oh well. As Kingsley stated, Severus had a role to play and he did it, even if that meant jumping from a window. Professor McGonagall's and Professor Flitwick's reasons for going along will be explained later... I promise.*

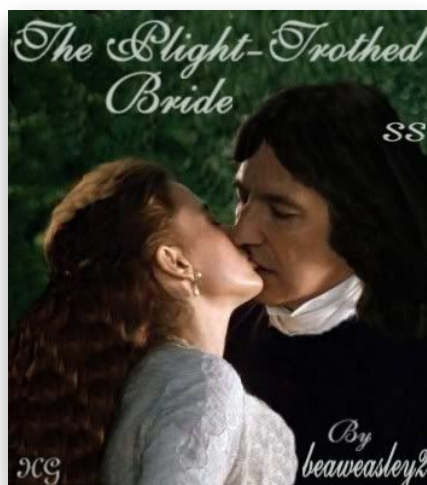
*For anyone with a real calendar, yes, the full moon in September 1998 was on the sixth, but it was in fact on a Sunday, not on a Friday. I didn't want it to be a Sunday; I wanted the wedding on a Friday night. Therefore, I'm pulling a JK and saying it is a Friday night for the purpose of my story, because I wanted a date Neville could remember easily (69) and made some adjustments. Hope that explains things acceptably.*

*Thank you, Southern\_Witch\_69, for my beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!*

*I also want to thank my new betas, MadBrilliant and Smo, for picking up this story and helping me clean up my typos. I really appreciate it very much.*

## Question of Freedom

Hermione struggles with the turbulent emotions and public opinions of Severus's trial. However, even after the verdict is read, new questions arise and she's still uncertain about what the future will be for them.



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Question of Freedom

~H~

Harry and Hermione were eating breakfast when Ginny arrived. "You didn't wait for me?" she asked, collecting the mail from Kreacher and joining them at the table.

"Sorry, couldn't," Harry said. "I've stealth today, and I want to stop by and see your dad before training."

Kreacher set a plate of eggs in front of Ginny. "Going to ask Dad for my hand, are you?" she teased him.

"Done that. Just waiting for the confirmation and approval owls from all of your brothers," Harry replied, grinning. "So, anything for me?"

"Hermione, Hermione, Hermione and Hermione..." Ginny rambled as she sorted out the mail, handing each one to her. "Here's your *Daily Prophet*, Harry, Hermione's *Daily Prophet*, and another letter for Hermione... Four more letters for Hermione... a Howler for Hermione..." Ginny held up the last letter just out of Harry's reach. "And, yes, you got one!" Harry jumped up and grabbed the letter from Ginny's hand, smirking at her.

"Why are they still sending me letters?" Hermione groaned, checking the envelopes.

Harry had opened his copy of the paper, scanning the first article, and looked up at her with a stare that told her that the news was bad. "I think you should read this."

Hermione set her letters down and picked up her copy of the *Daily Prophet*. A picture of Hermione and Severus arguing in his cell graced the front page; the occupants of the picture were apparently unaware that there had been a photographer present. "What the...!" she screeched as she quickly read the first article. "Interesting discovery of the investigation into the criminal activities of Severus Snape has been exposed. As concerned citizens, we may rest assured that the remaining Death Eaters are being rounded up and secured behind the walls of Azkaban. This reporter has unearthed the fact that our newly appointed Minister of Magic is personally overseeing the investigation of former Death Eater, spy, murderer, and ex-Headmaster of Hogwarts, Severus Snape. Wizengamot members and long-time friends of our new Minister, Oswald Grunthyme and Rolf VanBuren, have been assigned to preside over the hearing while another friend of our Minister, Holden Goldstein, has been named as chief investigator from the Magical Law Enforcement with José Aladama as assistant investigator, also from the MLE. Aurors Ralph Lerman and Galvin Darthmyer apprehended Mr. Snape in his attempt to abduct..." This is utter rubbish! *He didn't abduct me!*

"Hermione, I know," Harry said, reading the same article and looking every bit as angry about it as Hermione was. "They have a lot of the facts right though; although, they aren't exactly right about everything. They've twisted a lot of it around... but it's all here. There's a leak, there has to be." He slammed the paper down and rose. "Kingsley is going to be furious. I better go."

"Harry, wait," Ginny said, reaching for the paper and flipping it over. "You'd better read this." She had been reading the back of his paper and pointed to the article that caught her eye. "The trial date for Severus Snape has been set to begin the first of July. The question is why so soon and why the hurry? A Ministry official close to the case stated attendees will be hand-picked and will be restricted to Ministry personnel and approved members of the press and public in order to protect the rights of the witnesses and accused. Inquiring minds should wonder why the Wizengamot should grant Severus Snape such considerations when his actions and activities during the war are a concern to us all? What is the Ministry trying to hide?" She looked up at Harry. "It's written by Rita Skeeter, and she mentions the injunction against her book. I think she's been riding on Mr. Darthmyer's robes again."

"Shite! I'd forgotten about that! Ginny, you're brilliant," Harry said as he turned and ran from the room without another word.

"You're welcome," she yelled, turning to Hermione, who was glaring darkly at the *Daily Prophet*. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Listen to this rubbish," Hermione sneered, reading from the paper. "Will Hermione Granger-Snape stand by her wizard? The question regarding Hermione Granger's annulment from Severus Snape, the famed Death Eater, supposedly turned spy, and the murderer of beloved Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, is still pending. Marvin Maretbell of the Magical Reversal Office stated that should Miss Granger request a dissolvent of her Bonding, the Ministry would be happy to oblige, although such an annulment hasn't been granted in over six hundred years. Neither Miss Granger nor Severus Snape have yet to announce their decision to either confirm their recent Bonding or denounce it and request an annulment. According to Maggie Whitmire of the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department, Miss Granger has been given an extension for filing her annulment pending the outcome of Mr. Snape's trial. The Department will automatically grant the annulment and reverse the Bonding Spell once Mr. Snape is declared guilty. However, curious witches and wizards are wondering what kind of spell is keeping Miss Granger-Snape loyal to her Bonded mate."

"Isn't that the old biddy you met in Kingsley's office? Luna said she couldn't stop staring at Harry's scar," Ginny said.

"Yes, she is." Hermione turned the page and let out an outraged yelp. "How did they get these pictures? This is the second one of Severus and I in his cell! What if it had been taken when Severus and I were... intimate?" she asked, going slightly pale, and Ginny leaned over to see the picture. It was a picture of Hermione and Severus in the

room with the plank wood table, obviously taken during her second visit. "Sources at Azkaban have stated that Miss Granger-Snape has visited Mr. Snape on several occasions for Ministry approved conjugal visits..." I only went there twice! 'The magical license registration ledger recorded the Bonding of Severus Snape and Miss Hermione Granger, hailed defender and hero of the Wizarding world during the You-Know-Who war, best friend and confidante of Harry Potter, last May. How did such a foul and dark wizard entice Miss Granger? What is this hold he has over her? Can she be saved?'" Hermione smacked the paper on the table with such force, she broke her plate. "This is utter rubbish! How dare they print this?!"

Ginny quickly repaired the plate and pushed it aside. "At least now we know why you received so many owls this morning. Would you like some help with these?"

Hermione drew her wand and carefully examined the first envelope. "Sure, you might as well, only please be careful. I got one with bubotuber puss in it once, and I'd hate for you to break out in boils. It was miserable."

"I'll be careful," Ginny promised.

\*

For the third morning in a row, Hermione stumbled out of bed, refreshed herself in a long hot shower, and made her way down to breakfast only to find more Howlers waiting for her. It became a morning ritual; she and Ginny spending the morning hours opening letters and growling over the articles in the *Daily Prophet*. So far, none of envelopes had contained anything dangerous, although Hermione had received plenty of marital advice and offers to match her up with sons, nephews and grandsons.

Kreacher crossed her path in the entrance hall and shoved her mail at her, complaining about owls and nosey letters in the same grumbling growl he used to use before Harry had given him Regulus' locket. Ginny was already in the kitchen and looked up at her with a smile from the table as she entered. Hermione figured Ginny had Flooed over early again to have breakfast with Harry. Hermione had just sat down when Kreacher appeared, handed her more letters and hurried out of the room, still grumbling about owls. "What's got Kreacher all tied up in a knot?" She dropped the mail on the table, grimacing when she spied a few red envelopes.

"You've gotten quite a few owls this morning," Ginny said as she pushed a pile of letters toward Hermione, three of which were in crimson envelopes. "Go on, open the Howlers and get them over with first."

Hermione opened the first and instantly the letter began to offer her advice to leave Severus and find a nice respectable bloke, suggesting that her nephew was available. The second announced that she was barkers to stay Bonded with Severus Snape, wanting to know why she was waiting to get the annulment, and that she should marry Ron instead. The third started in on a rant of accusations and chastisements.

"I'm glad my brother didn't hear that second one," Ginny giggled as Hermione opened the last Howler.

"How could you be so daft? You dated Harry Potter and Viktor Krum and then go and Bond yourself to a wizard like Severus Snape?" the Howler roared. "What in Merlin's name are you thinking?"

"Miss," Kreacher said, trying to be heard above the Howler. He was covering his ears the best he could with her mail. "You has more noisy letters."

Hermione tried to thank Kreacher, but he was already running from the kitchen, covering his ears. "Don't think he likes Howlers," Hermione yelled as the last one continued ranting.

"Nope," Ginny shouted back just as the Howler stopped and tore itself into pieces. "Bloody horntails! That one was long. So how about the rest? How many are there, five? Six?"

"Blimey, six. Should I simply open them all at once and get it over with?" Hermione asked.

Ginny nodded and grabbed an envelope just as Harry entered the kitchen. "Hey, what's with all the yelling?"

"Howlers," Ginny replied, smiling. "Here, open it." Harry looked at her dubiously and opened the red envelope as Hermione and Ginny did the same. All three Howlers began at once, all sounding judgmental in their accusations, delivering the writer's opinion in a confused jumble of noise. Hermione and Ginny started laughing as the last screaming Howler tore itself up.

"Now, what was the point of that?" Harry asked, looking at the girls, confused.

Hermione handed Ginny another red envelope. "Fan mail. They usually come after you've gone. Sorry about them. Kreacher hates them, too."

"Nice way to start a morning," Harry replied sarcastically, giving Ginny a quick kiss as two more Howlers began screeching. "Well, I'm off to training. You girls have fun."

\*

The *Daily Prophet* announced the following in their Monday morning edition:

*The trial for Severus Snape's crimes began under much curiosity and speculation last week and continues into this week. Many prominent witches and wizards are still scheduled to appear as witnesses into the actions, associations, and activities of Severus Snape, including several members of the Hogwarts staff and presumed members of the Order of the Phoenix, for which Mr. Snape is said to have acted as a spy. See page three.*

Just below the article was a picture of Kingsley Shacklebolt with the caption: Minister of Magic taking a personal interest in the case of Severus Snape.

*Although unable to attend, this reporter has discovered several facts regarding the accusations levied against Severus Snape. Are any of them true? For more details, see page two.*

The picture showed Rita Skeeter winking cheekily at the reader with her Quick Quotes Quill hovering over her pad of parchment.

*Mr. Harry Potter, Miss Ginevra Weasley-Potter, Mr. Ronald Weasley, Miss Luna Lovegood-Longbottom, Neville Longbottom and several students claiming to be members of Dumbledore's Army are scheduled to testify in Severus Snape's trial this week. Miss Hermione Granger, who testified last week, has been attending the hearing on a daily basis. Still no word on whether Miss Granger will accept her Bonding to Severus Snape or if she is still planning on filing for an annulment at this time. For the latest comments from Maggie Whitmire, see page five.*

The picture under the caption showed Hermione sitting behind Severus in the witness stands, surrounded on either side by Luna, Neville and Ginny, all four watching the events attentively and occasionally whispering quietly to each other. Sean, Dean, Lavender, Padma and Parvati were sitting in the row behind them.

*Wizengamot members, Oswald Grunthyme, Rolf VanBuren, and Griselda Marchbanks are presiding over the hearing of The Wizarding Community vs. Severus Snape. Holden Goldstein has been assigned as chief investigator from the Magical Law Enforcement with José Aladama as his assistant investigator from the MLE and will thus be representing Severus Snape as his defense team. Aurors Ralph Lerman and Galvin Darthmyer are assigned to handling the prosecution... For more details, see page four.*

Beside the article was a picture of Maggie Whitmire, an elderly witch with short, curly grey hair and glasses hanging from a chain, smiling and waving.

Another article read:

*Elena McMullen, Master of Healing and Head of the Poison and Potion Accident Ward of St. Mungo's talks about the potions and poisons used by Death Eaters and Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle. Did Severus Snape have any involvement in the conception of these dangerous potions? Who created the mysterious antidotes, antivenin, and restorative potions sent to St. Mungo's? Continued on page three.*

In fact, except for the weekly garden tips from Tilden Toots, the horoscope, crossword puzzle, and the birth, marriage, and death announcements, most of the edition centered around Severus' trial, his known activities, and the interviews of witnesses who were willing to speak to reporters. Many of the interviews seemed a bit odd, as if possibly taken with a Quick-Quotes Quill.

~H~

Severus Snape's trial began on the first with a great deal of interest, mostly stirred on by Rita Skeeter's articles in the *Daily Prophet*. The atrium of the Ministry was full of people wanting to be in the visitors' seats. Thankfully, Minister Shackbolt restricted access to only those either called to testify or those granted official permission. Aurors Darthmyer and Lerman had sat at the prosecutors table while José Aladama and Holden Goldstein had sat for the defense. To Hermione, it seemed that the members of the Wizengamot were trying to find Severus guilty, regardless of the reassurance from Harry after each of her interrogations. Of course, Lerman and Darthmyer were trying to get Hermione to testify about things that she knew were hearsay at best. Harold Goldstein, on the other hand, seemed to be focusing on things Severus had been forced to do, on both sides, and to explain why Severus had been unable to prevent innocent deaths, destruction, and attacks of the Death Eaters from occurring.

Hermione found herself defending countless statements of mistreatment, harassment, and personal attacks Severus had made during her years of school, most provided by other students. These had been easy, since she could repeatedly state that he was simply being snarly, snide, or curt, as was his known attitude toward students, and that, as a spy, he couldn't very well have shown favor toward her since she was, after all, one of Harry's best friends.

Throughout it all, Severus sat stiffly, his face a controlled mask of indifference, as he listened to what was being said about him. There had been a slew of witnesses against him, people who came to testify about his character. Many of whom had come forward to provide statements were never actually called to take the witness stand because neither Oswald Grunthyme and Rolf VanBuren apparently wanted to take the time to hear personal grudges. The Wizengamot called every surviving member of the Order, Hogwarts staff, and several Healers from St. Mungo's forward to testify as every accusation, personal opinion and speculation were questioned and interrogated by his defense and prosecutors.

Severus was unwaveringly calm, his demeanor cool and polite but reserved whenever he was asked to defend or comment upon the issues and statements raised by witnesses. Hermione knew that his statements were true and factual, even admitting and confirming many of the accusations and witness statements, only denying what statements were false and giving his account of what had transpired. He rarely shifted blame, only occasionally accusing one of the other Death Eaters. His signature smirk and sneer appeared occasionally, briefly, but his dark eyes showed little emotion, which did very little to dispel the general opinion of the public regarding his character. The pictures of him in the papers were so still, the facial expression indifferent and controlled, that they may as well have been Muggle snapshots of him.

And through it all, Hermione continued to receive owls and Howlers, offering all sorts of advice, admonishments, and scolding for standing by Severus, even though her friends were sitting with her for support as well.

~S~

Severus stood facing the bench as Oswald Grunthyme read the Wizengamot's decision with a sense of relief. He could hardly believe that the panel, which had deliberated for days, had come to a unanimous decision and was letting him go. So far, thirty-seven charges had been read, and with each verdict, he was declared either as non-contributory, not guilty, or awarded an acquittal. As Oswald Grunthyme read the remaining twelve, more major, criminal charges, there had been a buzz in the room. With each declaration of the Wizengamot's finding, absolving Severus of the more heinous crimes, the general chatter in the room became louder until finally Oswald Grunthyme had to demand silence in the courtroom.

"And finally, on the charge for the murder of Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore on the fourth of June, 1997, by use of the Avada Kedavra," Oswald Grunthyme said. The courtroom was completely silent as if everyone in the room was holding their breath. Even the reporter's quills had stilled in anticipation, increasing the dead quiet as Oswald Grunthyme checked his parchments. "Due to testimony given by Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, and Severus Snape, as well as the affirmation given by the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, and upon review of both evidentiary and suppositional evidence, we find the defendant guilty of murder with extenuating circumstances." Gasps and sighs could be heard throughout the room as people began to mutter to their neighbors. Mr. Grunthyme continued, paying little heed to the response in the room. "According to memories found in Albus Dumbledore's personal Pensieve, his personal diary, and records from the Hogwarts medical files, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore had been severely cursed on the eighteenth of August, 1996, and consumed a poisonous potion of unknown origins on the fourth of June, 1997, prior to the casting of the Killing Curse."

Only the sounds of the reporters' quills could be heard as Oswald Grunthyme paused before continuing, "Evidence shows that Severus Snape did, by every effort he could, assist Headmaster Dumbledore to reverse this aforementioned curse, and tried undauntedly to extend Headmaster Dumbledore's life during the school year, up until his death. Furthermore, there is conclusive evidence in the magical autopsy report that Headmaster Dumbledore was nearly dead at the time the Killing Curse was used, resulting from an unknown potion. Testimony from Harry Potter states that he was the instrument in administrating this unknown potion to Dumbledore, also by Dumbledore's adamant instructions, and that this potion would have been the cause of Dumbledore's death that very night had the Killing Curse not been cast."

"It is the finding of this court that, although Severus Snape did use an Unforgivable against Headmaster Dumbledore, he did so, apparently, according to Headmaster Dumbledore's personal request, given to Severus while he was pledging an oath to the Headmaster," Oswald Grunthyme paused briefly, allowing those in the courtroom to take in what he'd said. "Therefore, this court will accept a pardon presented by our Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shackbolt, and hereby reinstate Severus Snape to his own recognizance. In addition, due to his actions concerning the welfare of the students during the Death Eater occupation of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, this court approves the reinstatement of Severus Snape as Headmaster of Hogwarts, pending the approval of the school governors. Severus Snape, you are hereby free to go."

The people in the courtroom burst into shouts, in all ranges of exuberance, anger, dissatisfaction and astounded disbelief. Severus was in shock, still coming to the realization he'd been absolved of all his crimes, just as Kingsley had promised. He stood rigid, his mind awl as those present in the courtroom began to move about. Severus himself was stoic, standing calmly as many different people came down to shake his hand. Still, his eyes sought out the only face in the crowd he really wanted to see and was pleased to see her exuberant smile as she tried to weave her way through the crowd. Unfortunately, Harry Potter was leading her, making the crowd move out of their way as they approached him.

Griselda Marchbanks and Kingsley drew his attention, both offering their congratulations when Hermione suddenly threw herself at him and kissed his cheek. "You did it! You did it! You're free!" she repeated over and over.

He gripped her tightly with one arm to keep her from toppling him over in her excitement, still reeling from the implications of what the Wizengamot's decision would mean for him. "Yes, Hermione. Now please calm yourself," he chided her to no avail. Hermione flung both arms around him, burying her face in his neck. He was surprised to feel tears wet his skin. Others were touching him, patting his shoulder and back. Several voices were congratulating him, and asking him questions asking him how he felt.

"Severus, please come up to my office," Kingsley stated, then turned to Harry. "Maybe you could help me escort them, Harry?"

Several security wizards began trying to move the crowd out of the courtroom as Harry and Kingsley maneuvered Severus and Hermione through the throng. Once they appeared in the corridor, flashbulbs went off as photographers tried to get pictures of Severus and Hermione. Aurors were trying to get control of the throng of people who filled the atrium as the small group forced their way to the lifts. Only once they were safely in the lift did Severus really take in what had occurred.

"So, how does it feel to be free?" Harry asked as he leaned against the wall of the lift.

"As one would expect, Mr. Potter," Severus stated noncommittally, watching Hermione fidget nervously and chew on her bottom lip from the corner of his eye. For some

reason, it struck him as adorable.

As soon as the lift doors opened, Kingsley ushered them all quickly into his office. He conjured several more chairs in a semi-circle by his Floo and started passing out glasses of amber liquor. "I hope you don't mind a brandy. I'm rather partial to the drink, and I'd like to toast the release of a friend." There were two surprised looks as both Hermione and Severus lifted their glasses in a toast. "Congratulations, Severus. May you never have to look back, except to receive the accolades, thanks, and gratitude of all those you've helped these past dark years. We could not have won this without you, and I, for one, am proud to call you friend."

"Here," Harry said, grimacing slightly when he sipped his drink.

"So, now, Severus," Kingsley stated. He rose and pulled a long thin box from his shelf just as Arthur Weasley entered the office. "I'm pleased to return your wand to you. Arthur here has collected all the items taken from your house and will return them to you as well. I have given you special Ministry recompensation regarding your more questionable and restricted items, since I know you used them to our benefit." He smiled at Mr. Weasley and then sat down.

"Not all of them," Severus mumbled. "Thank you," he said louder, feeling a sense of awe that Kingsley had saved his wand from being snapped.

If Kingsley had heard his comment, he didn't show it. "Now, I know you and Miss Granger have some things to discuss. However, before you go, I'd like to ask you what you intend to do. Have you given any thought to your future, Severus?"

Severus exhaled as he looked at the fire in the hearth. "No, not really. To be truthful, I never thought I'd survive the war, and when I'd been arrested, I never thought I'd be pardoned." He looked up at Kingsley. "Why did you go out on the tail like this for me?"

"Because you kept sending me owls, informing me of Riddle's plans even after you killed Dumbledore," Kingsley stated with a warm smile. "I know you sent owls to Arthur and Molly as well. I thought it odd enough, and a bit incongruous, so I visited a certain portrait and had a nice long chat. Dumbledore's portrait told me everything. It was why the governors didn't protest when you were appointed as Headmaster. I secretly and privately vouched for you. I can honestly say that I would do so again should you decide to return to Hogwarts as Headmaster this year. It's an option I think you should seriously consider."

"Headmaster?" Severus repeated, surprised. *Free, fully acquitted and pardoned for everything I did, and to be reinstated as Headmaster? Next thing they will tell me is that I'll be acknowledged as a war hero...* It was still a bit surreal to him.

Hermione smiled as she held her drink. "You should do it," she said softly.

Snape turned his head slightly in her direction, not exactly looking at her, but just enough to see her fidget with her glass from the corner of his eye.

"If that is what you want to do, you should," she added, tilting her head as if trying to get a better look at him.

Severus turned his head back to the fire dancing in the grate.

"You don't have to decide right now, of course," Kingsley stated. "You have until the end of the month to make up your mind, not that it gives you much time. But I'd like to have your decision as soon as possible if we are forced to replace you." He rose and walked over to his Floo. "I'm sure Minerva will fill the post should you decline."

Mr. Weasley walked over and handed Severus a folded piece of parchment and a key. "There are a couple of large crates in my shed with your things in them. Molly knows which ones. She's home and expecting you. If I know my wife, she'll want to feed you both. If I might be so bold, stay at my house for at least an hour or more as long as you need. It will give you a diversion from the reporters and some time to yourselves. None of the kids will be there, so you'll only have Molly to contend with."

Severus looked at the key in his hand, wondering what possible motives Arthur had behind his offer. "Thank you, Arthur, Kingsley," was all he could think to say.

Mr. Weasley smiled warmly. "You're welcome."

"You should go, Severus, before my office is overrun with reporters," Kingsley stated, indicating the Floo. "I can only hold off the vultures for so long. Good luck and congratulations. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

Severus nodded, shook hands with Kingsley, Mr. Weasley and even Harry before entering the huge Floo. "The Burrow," he said, and the green flames rose up and swept him away.

The minute he stepped from the Floo at the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley was waiting for him. Just as Mr. Weasley had warned him, the smells of her cooking permeated the air, and he suddenly realized just how hungry he really was. "Severus, how good to see you," she said. "You've a while yet before the food is ready. Would you like to wash up before you eat?"

Severus wanted to laugh, but refrained. "They cleaned me up before bringing me to the Ministry."

Mrs. Weasley looked at him with concerned eyes. "If you're sure. I've a bath drawn, and I placed a set of robes on the counter in the loo. It might make you feel better to clean up after that place and change robes? You've all the time you need."

Severus nodded. *That is definitely true.* Mrs. Weasley was well known for her mothering, and a hot soak did sound good to him. He nodded silently and followed her to the loo. It was small without feeling cramped, and he knew that the room was magicked to accommodate whoever occupied it. The tub, which appeared small, was actually large enough inside to allow him to fully stretch out in the hot water and soak. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about much. He had decisions to make, whether or not to accept returning to Hogwarts as Headmaster, and what do about Hermione for starters. Neither was a decision he wanted to make right away.

~H~

Hermione watched Severus leave the office in a swoosh of green flames. He'd all but admonished her at the end of the trial, and had hardly looked or spoken to her the entire time in Kingsley's office. He hadn't even looked at her in the lift. She sighed heavily, staring at the Floo pot Kingsley was holding, unsure of what she should do. *Should I follow Severus to the Burrow or simply return to Grimmauld Place and wait?*

It was the touch of Harry's hand that pulled her from her thoughts. "Hermione, are you okay?"

She didn't know what to say. She felt blank, empty, void. She simply looked at him, unsure how to answer his question.

"Hermione," Mr. Weasley said in a deeply concerned and fatherly tone.

"Harry, maybe you should escort Miss Granger too..." Kingsley started to say and then paused.

"I don't really want to go to the Burrow just yet," she said and then turned to Mr. Weasley. "I'm sorry. You're being so kind to us, but I think I... I need to think."

Mr. Weasley smiled, knowingly. "It's not a problem. Molly will understand."

Harry stroked her arm as if trying to be reassuring. "How about if I just take her home?"

Kingsley nodded. "I'll inform your instructor. I think she needs her friends right now."

Hermione allowed Harry to guide her into the Floo. She laid her head on his shoulder as he said, "Grimmauld Place," very clearly, while still keeping an arm across her

shoulders. She clung to him as the Floos flashed by, nearly tumbling them both when they arrived.

Harry was looking at her expectantly, waiting, until Hermione realized she was still clinging to him. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said quickly, releasing him and backing away. Now that she was here, she realized she wasn't sure that this was where she wanted to be.

"Hermione, do you want... some tea?" he asked cautiously, still watching her.

Hermione realized that he was feeling at a loss as to what to do for her. She tried to smile, to reassure him, but gave up and simply shook her head.

"I've got stronger stuff," he suggested. "There are bottles of liquor in the cellar. Are you hungry? I could ask Kreacher to fix you something."

She shook her head. "No. Thank you." She looked at the doorway and saw Kreacher peek around the doorframe, waiting to hear whatever she decided.

"Do you want to be alone?" Harry asked.

She looked at him and shook her head. "No, not really. But I don't really feel like talking either." He crossed his arms, standing there but not actually staring at her. "Harry, I'm fine. I just don't know what I want. I've been so focused on one thing, helping Severus get free. Now that he is I just don't know what to do. Nearly all my life I've focused on something, school, our multiple adventures, the fight against Riddle, staying alive, helping you stay alive, finding and destroying the Horcruxes and... The only thing I know for certain is that all of that is over, and I have no idea what I want to do except finish school."

"You feel lost? I can understand that," he said, stepping closer and pulling her into a hug. "It'll be all right. Everything will sort out. I'll be here for you, just like you've always been there for me." He kissed her cheek. "I'm going to go see if Ginny's home."

"I'll be in... the library," she replied, following him into the hall. She watched him go up the stairs before turning to her usual sanctuary.

She paced the library, picking up then discarding one book after another, not really interested in reading. She drew back the drapes and stared out at the street, her mind restless and unfocused. She honestly felt that the decision to remain with Severus wasn't entirely her own, but he'd already expressed his desire to be done with her. Still, she was raised to take marriage, even a magical marriage, seriously, and she simply couldn't make up her mind about him. Hermione had never known anyone who'd claimed to have met and married their soul mate not to have had a fantastic marriage.

In one month, she would return to Hogwarts, finish her seventh year and graduate. That was the only thing she knew for certain about her future; she wanted to finish school. Besides, having a year with Ginny and Luna, sharing classes with her friends appealed to her. But Severus might be at Hogwarts, too, as Headmaster.

She left and headed up to her room, staring at the bed. The covers on the bed were the ones she'd taken from her childhood bed the week she'd emptied everything from her parents' home and sent them to Australia. The familiar coverlet reminded Hermione of just how young she really was to have been through so much in such a short amount of time. *Seven years. All of this happened in only seven years hardly a lifetime. And now I'm married to Severus Snape* Regardless of how much she'd admired him in the past, or the fact a Pairing Charm had matched him, she was beginning to think it was all a mistake. *At eighteen, a married woman, war hero, and I haven't even finished school yet! I'm still a student! His student.* She fell into the bed, turning to face the wall. "He doesn't want me," she moaned into her pillows. "I might as well give him his freedom and end this sham of a marriage." The thought made a huge lump in the void of her chest. She rolled onto her stomach and cried.

~ T B C ~>

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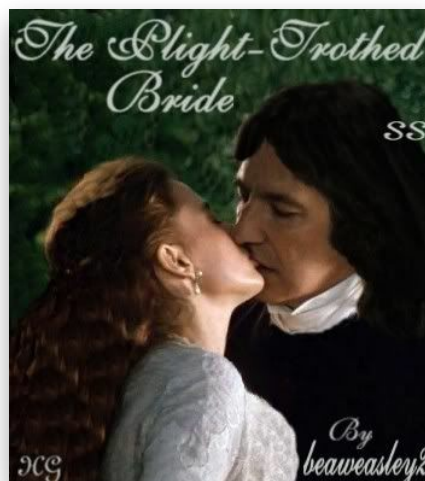
Author's notes:

Thank you MadBrilliant and Smo for taking up this story and helping me hunt down all my typos. Thank you so very much.

## Troubled Decisions

Chapter 14 of 63

Hermione struggles with the decision regarding her Bonding to Severus, while Severus gets a bit advise from Lucius.



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## Troubled Decisions

~H~

Hermione could hear Ginny's footsteps stop just outside her door for the third time that morning. Kreacher had popped in at least six times, exchanging the tea and peeking at her before leaving with another pop. Still, Hermione didn't want to get out of bed. She wasn't ready to face the day. More importantly, she didn't want to face anyone. She didn't want to be in the library or anywhere.

When she thought about yesterday, the last day of Severus' trial, she felt a tight knot in her gut *After weeks of standing by him, weeks of interrogations and testimony, letting him use me as his his personal whore! And when it was all over he pushed me away at arm's length and told me to calm myself as if I was a child! I was happy for him, thrilled that he was free, and he admonished me for showing a bit of excitement for him!* She'd tried hugging him, only to be set firmly on her feet as he'd turned to follow Kingsley. *He didn't even look at me in the lift and gave me only the briefest glance in Kingsley's office when I congratulated him on being offered the Headmaster's position at school.* She had been hurt by his lack of response; his eyes had been distant, cool, and his expression blank and indifferent *Severus simply left through the Minister's Floo without even saying anything to me: not a look, nor a nod, or a scowl nothing! I trapped him into this, forced him, Bonded him magically, and he hates it. Oh, he likes the sex I think but it's me he can't stand.*

*Ginny said it was exactly the same as in her dreams with Harry well, except for the tips I gave her. Everyone keeps saying that this spell always makes a good match that he'll come around and things will be fine. Only it isn't fine! Even George was sure it would work out. But it's not getting better at all! I know that magically aligned unions can go through a rough period, but how much time does Snape need to adjust to this? He isn't even trying to get to know me any better... We just shag and then I leave.*

*If this was one of the Gryffindor girls or a friend telling me that their boyfriend was treating them like this, I'd tell her dump the sod. Maggie Whitmire sent me an owl as soon as the trial was over asking me, yet again, what I intend to do... What am I going to do?* Hermione sat up, looking at the room. She took in her childhood furnishings with its white paint and bright cheerful colors, set against the old, flocked, dark burgundy wall covering, antique wardrobe, and grimy landscape painting in the room she'd claimed as hers, and sneered. *A little girl's boudoir in a dark cave... It's time to grow up and decide what want to do.*

She opened the wardrobe, choosing an old school blouse and her jeans. She grabbed a robe and her boots, stowing her wand in her pocket as she finished dressing and quickly braided her hair. She needed a mother and knew only one woman who would be impartial with her. She ran down the steps and Disapparated from the front stoop, appearing at the Apparation site for Diagon Alley. Hermione strode quickly and purposefully to her destination.

~S~

Severus appreciated Molly's hospitality, but more so, he greatly appreciated the escape from the Ministry that Kingsley and Arthur had arranged for him. However, he could only take Molly's crying, when she didn't realize anyone was around to witness it, or the proverbial Mollycoddling she tried to bestow on him, for so long. Severus wasn't comfortable with such constant hovering, motherly attention. Even his own mum never coddled him or hovered over him in such a way. So, after a leisurely bath and scrumptious lunch, Severus left the Burrow with as much graciousness as he could muster for the quiet sanctuary of Malfoy manor, sending the crates of his belongings ahead of him.

Severus knew that since Lucius and Narcissa had managed to keep him reasonably concealed while he recovered from Nagini's bite, it would be his safest retreat until he could think of what he wanted to do. And the wards and protective curses surrounding the manor might even keep reporters at bay, affording him relative peace to think. Besides, the Aurors had broken into his father's house, so there was no telling if the reporters knew where his home was, as well. Narcissa greeted him as he entered, welcoming him back and offering her congratulations.

The following morning, his first day of true freedom, Severus decided to take a walk through the extensive gardens of the manor grounds. He strolled leisurely on the garden paths, lost in his own thoughts, and ended up in the herb garden, wandering through the magical and medicinal plants. He broke off a sprig of rosemary, rolled the twig through his fingers, and inhaled the scent. As he continued through the garden, he tried to refrain from naming all the plants and listing their uses as well as in which potions they were a primary ingredient.

Instead, he needed to decide what to do about Kingsley's offer to return to Hogwarts as Headmaster *Hermione will be returning as a student my student if I accept. That complicates things. The charter states that, as a professor, I'm not allowed to conduct in illicit behaviors with my students; as Headmaster, it would be completely forbidden. Nevertheless, we are Bonded, and as such, it couldn't really be considered illicit, could it? In addition, it isn't unheard of for Professors to be married, and Hermione is of legal age for marriage. In the past, spouses were permitted to live in the castle or in Hogsmeade that's what's preferred currently. But Hermione will be in the castle as a student... She's a young actually an adult of eighteen and only returning because she was denied returning due to the Dark Lord and the war. Besides, she Bound us... I didn't pursue her.*

He needed the counsel of someone who'd understand and knew the bylaws well. The only person he could think of was Dumbledore *But he's dead by my hand unless I speak to his portrait. Would Minerva allow me to... Minerva, of course! She was Dumbledore's right hand and Deputy Headmistress for years.*

"Let me guess. Matching the names of Narcissa's herbs to your repertoire of potions?" Lucius said languidly, coming up to stand next to him.

Severus silently berated himself for being caught unawares. "Contemplating life," he said softly.

"And how is your dear wife?" Lucius asked.

"Life, Lucius," Severus corrected him, "not wife, and she's my Bonded mate."

Lucius plucked a Rudbeckia flower, examining the petals around the dark center. "Bright girl, top of her class. Witty, intelligent, clever. An uncommonly kind witch with the ability to see the best in others, always standing up for those less fortunate or weaker..."

"I know her qualities, Lucius, you don't have to spell them out for me," Severus stated, not really desiring to talk to his old friend about Hermione.

"Do you?" Lucius asked, looking up at him with a grin. "Then of whom do I speak?"

"Hermione," Severus stated, suppressing his annoyance.

"Oh, really? You, think so? I only actually met the girl briefly twice. But no," Lucius stated with a sly smile, "I was referring to the other one; the pretty redhead who married Potter. Her name was Lily, if I recall."

Severus was momentarily taken aback, not expecting this turn in the conversation. "You know very well what her name was. Why mention her? What's your point?"

"I never did understand your infatuation with that witch," Lucius stated off-handedly. "You were willing to throw it all away for her, begging the Dark Lord to spare her life. Therefore, I made inquiries, discreetly of course, to try and figure out her appeal. Do you know what I discovered?"

*He made inquiries about Lily? When?* "Enlighten me," Severus said smoothly, curious in spite of himself.

"She was supposedly a very capable and brilliant girl. She was an avid reader, a know-it-all, and all the professors loved her. Prefect, Head Girl, captain of the Charms Club, member of the Slug club, and if I'm not mistaken, she won the Hector Dagworth-Granger award from the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers for some potion or



other..." he said with a flip of his hand.

"Langerfiled's Lethargy Potion," Severus stated automatically. "She solved Langerfiled's theory for the potion and improved it, making the potion viable. It helps strengthen those suffering from the effects of certain curses such as the Cruciatus."

"Ah yes," Lucius said with a sly grin that reflected in his grey eyes, which told Severus he was up to something and trying to manipulate him. "Still, she's quite a remarkable young witch, wouldn't you agree?" he said, returning his attention to the flower. "Who courageously stood up to us countless of times, quite brave and daring, and who showed a great deal of nerve each time? Apparently very loyal, a strong sense of justice, unafraid of hard work, enjoys incessant research, possesses a ready mind, and desirous of reading and learning everything she could get her hands on... or so I am told."

"I suppose so," Severus admitted. *Just get to your point!*

"Draco tells me that she organized this Dumbledore's Army and something called *spew* for house-elf rights," Lucius stated smoothly, turning the flower in his fingers.

"Lily did no such thing... You mean Hermione?" Severus asked, annoyed. *What are you up to old friend?*

"They are remarkably similar... same characteristics, similar interests, both rising for lost causes, standing up strongly for what they believe in... I do see why you are drawn to her," Lucius let the flower drop, "regardless of her inferior birth."

*I've known this for years and their differences* "It's not the same," Severus denied. "I wasn't drawn to Hermione she was simply a student." *Why is Lucius pointing out their similarities?*

"No? You never went out of your way to protect her, did you?" Lucius queried with a hint of sarcasm and a lift of an eyebrow. "Severus, I have known you for years. I helped shape you and brought you into the fold, even paved the way for your acceptance by the crème of pureblood society. And yet there is one fact that has eluded everyone who thought they knew you but obviously didn't know you as well as I do."

"And that is?" Severus said, crossing his arms. He knew perfectly well that Lucius had made the introductions, but he had ~~earned~~ the respect the others had for him. He'd even managed to maintain that respect even after turning spy for the Order. There were very few who hadn't respected him or fear him at least which had helped him gain good standing in the eyes of the Dark Lord, despite his blood heritage.

"You are drawn to strength of power, bravery, courage, defiance, and wit. You admire most a keen intellect, a clever mind, and loyalty over blood," Lucius stated.

Severus stared at the man, keeping his emotions in careful control.

"Oh, you've had your dalliances and enjoyed the favors of women, but not one of them could penetrate your hardened shell. And yet, when you finally fall for a witch, you pick one with the exact same characteristics and status as your first love."

"I didn't fall for Hermione I was trapped into this with a Matchmaking Spell!" he said, controlling the bitterness he still felt because of that. "I don't love Hermione."

"Yet you were furiously possessive when I mentioned sharing her in fact, you nearly hexed my head off." Severus opened his mouth to retort, but Lucius held up his hand. "You do have feelings for Mrs. Snape." Severus started to speak once more, but Lucius turned to face him squarely and continued, undaunted. "I think she offended your male ego, and you've been taking out your wounded pride on her. You are acting like she sought a way to trap you. But truly, Severus, do you really think she carried any type of crush on you while in school? Do you really think she was so desperately infatuated with you that she would do this to you on purpose? That isn't how this particular spell works, and you know it. If her intent was to ensnare *you*, there are far more successful spells that will do just that and much more effectively."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "No, as a student she was enamored with Viktor Krum, as well as the youngest Weasley boy. I know that she tried to gain my approval academically, always giving her utmost in her classes, but it wasn't personal. She strove for excellence in all her subjects."

Lucius nodded. "You know this Moon-Song Curse as well as I do it selects the match using the deepest of magic, some even say Dark Magic. It chooses the caster's mate regardless of age, social standing, blood purity, or previous knowledge or familiarity. That is the reason it is so seldom used it matches and binds soul mates, most often with horrible unpredictability, all wrapped up and presented in a pretty poetic disguise. I know that you're trapped in a situation you don't care for. But please, use your brain long enough to contemplate why the spell matched you in the first place. This is one of the strongest matchmaking spells known, and it has been the source of myth and legend."

Severus squared his shoulders as he listened to Lucius, pushing his ire at his friend deep down. "It's far more complicated than that."

"Enlighten me," Lucius said smugly.

"I was her bloody professor! I was abhorrent toward her at school. She has no reason to admire me or even like me. Bloody hell, I even killed her precious Dumbledore," he snarled. "She is very well aware of what and who I am, what I'm capable of, and I'm twice her age. I'm bloody old enough to be her father!"

Lucius smiled as if he had just made the decisive move at chess. "And yet, she was present throughout most of your trial and paid you weekly conjugal visits in Azkaban."

Severus wanted to wipe the smug look of his face. "It was only twice. She used sex to get to me, so she could convince me to confess to everything and succumb to a trial."

"Which you did," Lucius said smoothly. "Quite cunning actually for a Gryffindor." A peacock cried from across the grounds, and the elder Malfoy smiled. "You do know that even if she requests an annulment, you and she are Bonded for life magically bonded. The Ministry can approve and even dissolve the union, but it will have no more weight than a Papal dispensation. It will only have weight because she believes it does."

"Still, it would be best if she did," Snape replied, turning to leave. He would not be forced to listen to any more of this.

"If that's what you believe, Severus," Lucius said, not bothering to follow him. "But like I said, I know you, and I think that of all the young witches available, this one suits you. You'd be a fool to let her go regardless of her inferior birth."

Severus was fuming at Lucius's intrusion, especially because he was correct. There were just as many similarities between Lily and Hermione as there were differences. Actually, there were very few differences, and he'd focused on those distinctions purely out of self-preservation for the six years he'd known the girl. But the fact was, it was her similarities, the ones which Lucius so amiably pointed out, that had constantly grated on his nerves every time he saw her or spoke to her.

The fact of the matter was, Hermione had impressed him when she'd visited him in jail. She had stood up to him the way Lily used to for the first time since he'd known the girl. He was still amazed that she had come to see him, let alone under the pretence of a conjugal visit, and then actually wanted to have sex with him. He still carried her knickers in his pocket, simply to feel the soft silky fabric or to smell her musky scent, and for the images both actions afforded him. He'd been unsure as to why she'd left them behind, thinking at first that it was to torture him.

And now the insufferable little girl he'd known at Hogwarts was his Bonded mate. Apparently his soul mate if he'd read the spell correctly which he was certain of that, since he'd found the spell in no less than six of Lucius's books. However, the entries for the charm or curse, as it seemed to cross definition very clearly spelled out the consequences of utilizing it. Yet, somehow Hermione seemed oblivious to those very consequences, and that confused him. She was the most diligent and capable researcher he'd encountered as a student in many years and had always been extremely thorough. Her mind was literally a sponge for the written word. *Still, it looks like she had used that insipid curse without having any understanding of the intricacies and the consequence of the spell. And that's just not like her at all. And now, because of it, she is my mate.* The thought alone made the lower part of his anatomy react, belying any argument his mind made about ending things with her *She is mine. Lucius is*

*right; we have to talk about this, and I don't need him meddling in our decision either.*

Severus entered the bedroom and stared at the huge bed that had been his since Narcissa had brought him here. The expensive, tasteful furnishings with the well chosen, ostentatious adornments to the room, the opulent bedding, elegant drapery and curtains didn't reflect a lifestyle Severus could ever hope to achieve, nor truthfully did he want to. *But then again, Spinner's End is simply a place to brew potions and sleep. It hardly reflects the man I am either. Still, if Hermione is to make up her mind about me, she should see me as I truly am not this elegant and opulent presentation that I could never provide for her.*

Severus levitated his crates through the doors and down to the foyer so he could Apparate them to Spinner's End.

"Going somewhere?" Narcissa greeted him as she entered the foyer.

Severus nodded. "I wish to see the state of my house."

"I know that the home was raided," she said softly, although her voice sounded louder off the pristine marble. "If you need any assistance bringing your home to order, I'd be happy to lend you a house-elf or two. I do know the havoc Aurors can do in the pursuit of their searches."

"Thank you," he replied, giving her a slight bow. "I'd appreciate that if the house is still usable."

"Will you be returning for dinner?" she asked.

Severus looked at the crates. "It really depends on the state of things. I suspect I'll be gone the rest of the day."

Narcissa smiled. "I shall see you later then. If not, good night, Severus."

"Good night, Narcissa," he said and Apparated himself and his belongings to his sitting room.

The house was silent and had obviously been ransacked carelessly. The furniture had been overturned and several pieces broken, but it was not totally beyond magical repair. He'd learnt how to repair furniture at a young age, assisting his mum. Severus opened the large crates to see what, if anything, Arthur and Kingsley had been able to salvage from the Aurors.

~H~

George looked up, a questioning furrow on his face as Hermione stormed past him toward his backroom. "I need to use one of your owls," she said, not meaning to sound so demanding.

"Ah, er, okay," he replied as she passed him. "Hermione...?"

She found quill and ink where he handled his owl orders and quickly drafted a note, simply asking permission to visit and offering a brief reason as to why, then watched the owl fly way with it. She felt apprehensive, antsy, and restless. She could feel her energy surge in her. *I need something to do.*

"Er, Hermione...?" George asked as she scanned the backroom. It was clean and everything was in its place.

*Bollocks...* Her eyes fell on the inventory board, noticing there were items on the product list that were glowing. "I'm going to brew some of these," she replied, grabbing a cauldron from under the counter.

"Okay. Sure," George replied, leaning against the doorframe. "Who am I to turn down free help from one of Hogwarts' brightest witches? But I've only one question why?"

Hermione had been busily pulling out ingredients and setting them on her worktable. "Because I don't want to think right now."

"Oh, right. Makes perfect sense by all means. Sure. Brew potions *I* invented so *you* don't have to think," he smirked. "Just don't blow up my backroom."

Hermione glared at him before turning back to work. Soon she was lost in the process of creation, admiring the softly rising steam, the subtle changes in color, and consistency within her third cauldron. Setting it aside, she pulled out another cauldron and poured in firewhisky and salt to begin the next Weasley chew. When she finally noticed that the light had changed and that candles and lanterns lit the room instead of sunlight streaming in through the windows, she was setting the ninth cauldron on the cooling rack.

She was standing at the worktable, waiting for the steam from the Daydream Potion to change directions so she could finish that one too when she heard George speak up behind her. "Hermione, labor laws say you are supposed to take a break."

Hermione turned to see him still standing against the doorframe. "You've been watching me?"

"Oh, yes, I've nothing better to do than watch you brew ten potions," he replied with a smirk. "Are you hungry?"

"My potion is nearly done," she replied, checking it just in case. The steam still curled to the left.

"Angie and Courtney are meeting me at the Leaky Cauldron for dinner. You're welcome to come."

"I don't think that that would be a good idea," Hermione said hesitantly as she started tidying up her mess.

"It's not a problem; Angelina and I have dinner occasionally, it's not anything serious, and this time her cousin is coming along. I'm sure that they wouldn't mind," George said, confused. "Hermione are you all right?"

"No. Yes, I'm all right," she stammered. "I can't go with you," she stated. "Severus... He was so jealous the last time I slept here. I thought he was going to curse you or something."

George smiled and crossed his arms. "He was jealous? Of me?"

"He was right mad that I spent the night here. Accused me of sleeping with you, and I think he wanted to use Legilimency on me," she stated, gripping the counter, waiting for the curl of the steam to turn to the right. "I didn't tell him that Ron kissed me."

"Good. I'd hate to know what his reaction would be if he knew what Ron did that night," George said with a chuckle.

She set the sink to start scouring the used cauldrons. "It's not working out you know. Despite what everyone says... he hates me."

"I think things are better than you think they are," he said, and Hermione turned just in time to see him back out of the room.

"George," she called out, and he turned around in the doorway. "I wish you were my brother. In fact, I wish I had a brother. It's nice to have someone to talk to."

"You are like a sister to me, Hermione. I've always thought of you like that. Fred was better at relationships than me, but you can always talk to me if you need to. Or if you ever feel like not thinking again my workspace is always available," he said, smiling. "But you've become a Weasley. Even though you wised up and broke things off with Ron, you're like one of the family now. We Weasleys are a tight lot. There is always one of us you can come to if you need advice or even if you don't."

"Thank you," she replied, turning back to her potion before the tears in her eyes fell. "Thank you for everything."

"No problem," he said. "I close up in a half hour. Will you be done by then?"

"Yes."

As Hermione was leaving the shop, the owl she'd sent swept through the door, depositing a folded note into her outstretched hands before flying toward the back room to roost. A small metal hairpin lay in the folded parchment, which read:

*Hermione,*

*I am so pleased to hear from you and do so hope you are well. I've heard the rumors and was very surprised by the recent gossip. I do hope some of it is a fabrication. If not, I'd be happy to assist you in any way I can, although I don't know what I could do.*

*Your note sounded urgent, so I hope nothing is amiss. Regardless, I would be most happy to speak with you.*

*I'd love to have you over for tea tomorrow or the day after, depending on your schedule.*

*Affectionately,*

*Minerva McGonagall*

Hermione sighed as she pocketed the note and the Portkey.

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Hermione arrived at an adorable stone cottage surrounded by a rock wall. The garden had highland heather, lavender, and a lilacs mixed in with various shrubs, and the path was lined with Gerber daisies. She knocked on the red door and was immediately greeted by Professor McGonagall. "Hermione, I wondered if I'd see you today."

Hermione felt a little intimidated seeing Professor McGonagall standing primly in her crisp blouse and tartan skirt. "Thank you for agreeing to see me," she said in a small voice. "I hope that this isn't a bad time?"

"No, it's fine," Minerva said, opening the door wider.

"Thank you for the Portkey," Hermione said, handing back the hairpin. "You've a lovely home. Where are we exactly?"

Professor McGonagall smiled, and her expression turned warmer. "A stone's throw from the River Tweed near Dryburgh. I didn't know if you'd be able to Apparate here. This was easier," she said, pocketing the hairpin. "Come in, come in," she said, stepping aside. The smell of fresh baked bread filled the house as Professor McGonagall guided Hermione to the kitchen area. The table was set for a formal tea for two. "Please, have a seat," she said. "So tell me, what is troubling you?"

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, but as I stated in my note, my mum is still in Australia, and I don't think Mrs. Weasley would be a good choice considering... And well," Hermione said as she sat down, "you're the next closest person I have to a mother figure."

"I'm quite flattered, Miss Granger, or should I call you Mrs. Snape?" Professor McGonagall's posture became slightly straighter, but a soft blush graced her cheeks. "I don't usually invite my students to my home. However, for you, I chose to make an exception."

"Thank you," Hermione said, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. "Please, for now, will you simply call me Hermione? I'm not all that sure about the other designation. We haven't confirmed the Bonding, so I'm not sure if I really am..."

"Of course, Hermione." Professor McGonagall smiled as she carried over a silver tea service with a tray of a little tea sandwiches and fruit floating along behind her and settling on the table. "Maybe you'd like to tell me what is bothering you, dear."

Hermione nodded and began telling Professor McGonagall all about the Moon-Song Spell, how she had been so certain it would connect her to Ron but that it had connected her to Severus instead.

She told her how different Severus had been from the spell-induced dream, to their first night together and each visit after, and how used she felt by his actions toward her since the dreams. She described the events of his trial, how he'd ignored her each day, then all but admonished her at the end of his trial, and how he'd pushed her aside. Finally, she confessed how each time she'd visited him in jail, he'd insisted she procure the annulment, and tried to explain her reason for delaying but now thought she was simply forcing him into a relationship he resented and certainly didn't want to continue.

Professor McGonagall interjected questions and listened to Hermione's answers attentively, even adding queries regarding her relationship with Ron. In the end, after a brief silence, Minerva set her cup down. "Hermione, I'm rather disappointed in you. Using a spell, especially a matchmaking spell for fun, would not be the kind of behavior I had come to expect from you. It's certainly quite reckless for the brilliant, responsible young witch I taught at Hogwarts! Be that as it may, you now have to face your consequences. This really is a matter between you and Severus Snape."

Hermione felt slightly crushed by the reprimand, but knowing her professor, she hadn't really expected anything less.

"I don't think I have to remind you that you are no longer a child. Therefore, young lady, in personal decisions such as this, you can't expect someone else to make your decisions for you now that you are legally an adult," Minerva continued, then paused again as her expression softened. "But if you'd like my opinion, I'm afraid that I don't know what to tell you, Hermione. I wish I did. I do realize we are discussing Severus Snape, the evil, greasy git, and the snarky bat of the dungeons?" she asked with an amused smile, and Hermione blushed. "Yes, I do know what the students say about him they've been calling him that for years. The thing is, I've known Severus since he was a boy, and he has never really been a very romantic, solicitous type. I know he was deeply enamored of Lily Evans as a boy, but they had a horrible falling out, and since then he hasn't been involved with a young lady not seriously at any rate."

"What was he like when he was my age?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Shorter, thinner, and less particular about his grooming," Professor McGonagall said with a smirk. "At least he's more particular about the cleanliness of his clothes as an adult, but I suspect that's more a compliment on the Hogwarts house-elves than his own inclinations." She paused as she sipped her tea. "I think you'll have to follow your own heart and listen to what your logical mind tells you. But you've not exactly painted a promising image from what you've told me. Usually, arranged or magical unions are taken very seriously in the wizarding world, and the couples are expected to work things out. Annulments are rare and divorce is nearly unheard of. Severus is well versed in the social ethics and mores of the wizarding culture, and he strictly adheres to them, not counting his darker years, of course. But it doesn't seem as if the two of you have spent any real amount of time together, and that is unfortunate."

"I really don't think he wants to. He picks me up except the two times together in Azkaban and when he's, er, done, he takes me right back. I'm nothing more than a convenient call girl to him!" Hermione exclaimed and then blushed. "Oh, sorry, I don't mean to be crude. But he's doesn't seem to want to talk or spend any more time with me than what it takes to you know, shag. If this is marriage with him..."

"But you haven't really had any time to spend with each other, not really," Professor McGonagall pointed out. "First he was in hiding, then arrested, and then on trial. Maybe you should stand up to him and force him... But I do see your dilemma. Severus isn't the type to be forced into anything he doesn't consider his duty to do. Only Dumbledore could make Severus do what he didn't want to, and You-Know-Who."

"Exactly. And he still intimidates me so," Hermione stated. "Do you know if Severus is going to accept the Headmaster's position?"

"I've yet to be informed, but I have told Minister Kingsley I will be happy to fill the post for a few years." She smiled at Hermione's surprised expression. "I had hoped to retire in four years, when Albus... He was going to retire as well. But if Severus does, and you choose to remain Bonded to him, the nature of your relationship will have to be clearly defined and carefully concealed if that is remotely possible from the rest of the students. If you choose to annul the Bond, things will be far less complicated. But the decision is yours."

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Despondent at failing at her first marriage, Hermione poured herself a glass of Firewhisky, unsure of how much she should allow herself since she'd seldom drunk liquor before. She only knew that she didn't want to think about Severus Snape, or Ron Weasley, or her failure in her Bonding. She pulled out a large potions book and sipped her drink, trying to focus on the Potions and not contemplate her options. But the liquor eventually made the pages seem blurry, and her mind wandered to Severus Snape and each time they had been together, especially the recent times. She was humming while floating the tome in front of her when Harry came home.

"Hermione?" Harry said loudly, and the book fell to the ground.

"Harry, don't startle me like that," she snapped and then giggled.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Why are you still up?"

"I can't get off the sofa," she replied, giggling so hard she toppled over.

Harry approached her and scowled at the half-empty bottle on the floor. "Been drinking? Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," she replied, struggling to straighten up. "Did you know that you can't drink away your problems? Firewhisky only makes you think on exactly what you're trying to not think about."

Harry shook his head. "C'mon, let's get you to bed," he said, pulling her up.

Hermione was leaning against Harry, mentally comparing his height to Severus. "You're shorter than Severus, you know that?" Hermione observed, noting also the similarity of Harry's shoulders as compared to Severus'. She stumbled, and Harry picked her up to carry her.

"A bit, the man is nearly six feet," he replied.

"And he's like you are," Hermione stated. "Long, lean, strong muscles..."

"I never really wanted to know that," he said, kicking her door open.

"Why aren't I attracted to Ron like I am Severus?" she asked as he carefully dropped her on the bed. "Why can't Ron kiss me like Severus can?"

Harry was slipping her shoes off and setting them on the floor. "Geeze, Hermione, I don't know never kissed either of them, so I couldn't tell you."

"Severus is a really good kisser," she said wistfully. "And oh, Merlin, he's got good hands."

"Again, I didn't need to know that," Harry said, trying to pull off her robe.

"But he doesn't want me, and Maggie says I have to annul him, and Marvin wants to reverse us." Hermione said, babbling uncontrollably. "I just need someone to talk to who would simply tell me what to do so I can decide. And Kingsley he wants me to tell him what I want to do? I don't know what I want to do. How can I know what to do? He hates me!"

Harry laid her robe across a chair and sat down next to her. "Hermione, I don't think he hates you."

"Oh, yes he does! He hates me. We never talk, only shag," she confessed, feeling her eyes well up with tears. "He's harsh and distant and doesn't care at all. It's not nice, and I feel like... like a whore."

"Hermione, you're not a whore," he said patiently.

She pointed a finger at him. "Ginny and Luna told me he'd come around, start to like me. He doesn't. I trapped him you know forced this on him and... and... he hates me for it."

Harry brushed her hair off her shoulder and leaned closer to look at her face. "Is it that bad?"

Hermione nodded and began to cry.

"Hermione?"

"I don't know what to do. We never talk. He doesn't want to talk. He only wants to shag. I liked shagging with him when he was in jail, and in the dreams he was incredible it was really good, but in real life he's he's not." Tears ran down her cheek unchecked. "Everyone says he's going to come around and we'll work out but what if he can't come around? What if he's just too mean and hateful and wants out? He keeps saying he wants the annulment then he wants to shag! And he was really mad when I slept at George's! George said things are better than I think they are but they aren't! I tried to be loving, do what he wanted, be supportive but what if it... I failed!" At this, she started to cry again.

"You didn't fail, Hermione. It takes two to make a relationship work." Harry sighed and held her, letting her cry on his shoulder. "I knew things would take a while to sort out, and he's been in prison, going through his trial and everything. I suppose you two haven't been able to have the time to..." He handed her a handkerchief, and Hermione blew her nose. With a flick of his wand, it was clean again. "... sort things out properly. Of course, we are talking about Severus Snape. I don't suppose he'd be amiable to anyone."

"Did you know I've always respected him? I kind of looked up to him. I thought he was stoic and brave doing all that for the Order but he's really just cold and snarly and mean." She looked up at Harry. "I'm married to him. My snarky professor, the greasy git, the bat of the dungeons... and that spell matched me to him!"

"I know. I was really shocked when you told me. But Ginny told me about this Moon-Song Spell and how it works and all..." he said. "I dunno why you girls did this, but you did. It worked out great for Gin and me, and Luna and Neville maybe it's Snape who's failing you. Did you think about that? He's being a git, hurting you, making you feel bad about yourself when it's his fault. Instead of trying to get things straightened out he's making you feel miserable." He tipped her chin to look at her face. "If you like, I'll have a word with him."

"No, he'll hex you." Hermione hugged him. "You're right, Harry. Thank you. You're right."

"I'll have Kreacher bring you Headache and Hangover Potions when you wake up, okay?" he asked, rubbing her back. "Things will look better in the morning."

~MoM~

That Monday, Maggie Whitmire paced in her office. Her request to speak to the Minister had been denied, again! Her job was a very important one. She kept the files of all

unions, marriages, and Bondings, recorded all magical births and deaths in the United Kingdom Wizarding world. Without her, there wouldn't be a proper record at all. She walked past the elegant gilded table that held the Marriage and Magical Unions ledger, the Birth Registration ledger, and the Obituary and Life Termination register. The quills, red, green, and black, hovered over the pages, the green quill writing down the name of a newborn child presently, while the black quill stilled after recording the passing of a Melissa Isabella Carothers. Maggie sighed as she read the noted cause of death. "Cessation. 124. Home, with husband and daughter present. Poor old dear."

She wrote out a nice letter to inform Hulbert Warrington of the *Daily Prophet* and Xenophilus Lovegood, editor of *The Quibbler*, of the unfortunate demise of Melissa Isabella Carothers, being sure to get the exact time of death in her letter. It was required of her to be precise in her line of work. As soon as the green quill stilled over the Birth Registration ledger, Maggie wrote another letter to the journalists. That delightful part of her duties done, Maggie flicked her finger over the files still pending on her desk.

Of the thirteen files, only one had a red ribbon binding it and a ministry seal, the paperwork still pending. The registration of the Bonding was still under the Minister's 'hold' and was waiting for the conformation from Mrs. Hermione Granger-Snape and Severus Snape. Maggie scowled. She didn't approve of hyphenated names. The extension provided Mrs. Granger-Snape an undefined period of time to either request the annulment or for signing the appropriate forms. Maggie hated loose ends. *This should have been resolved weeks ago. Just because Mrs. Granger-Snape is a war hero and a friend to Mr. Potter and the Minister shouldn't mean the insipid girl can simply do things whenever she pleases. There is a proper time for things to be done. Such insolence!*

She picked up a letter that had arrived that day, smiling at the beautiful penmanship of Rita Skeeter. Maggie was delighted to be a personal acquaintance with such a respected and renowned witch. *Now here is a witch that truly understands the importance of my job.*

She pulled out her quill and drafted another note:

*Dearest Rita Skeeter,*

*I have read your request, and unfortunately I have nothing to report to you at this time. However unusual the circumstances are, the file on Mrs. Hermione Granger-Snape and Severus Snape still remains magically sealed by the Minister himself.*

*Hermione and Severus Snape have yet to confirm their Bonding. There is still no news if Mrs. Hermione Granger-Snape will be filing her request to procure an annulment from Mr. Severus Snape. I can only assume the darling girl will come to her senses now that the trial is over and she has had time to consider her options.*

*The Minister's extension for the request of annulment or signing the necessary confirmation is still in effect. Regardless of my latest inquiry, I have heard nothing new regarding the decision of either Mrs. Hermione Granger-Snape or Severus Snape. She simply states that she and Mr. Snape have yet to make a mutual decision. Apparently, for whatever reason, the girl is still being rather elusive and doesn't respond to my owls, except to write that a decision hasn't been made. So for now, I can only assume that the 'unusual circumstances' for the reason of the hold have yet to be resolved.*

*I will, of course, inform you immediately when this matter is finally decided.*

*Until then, I remain your faithful servant,*

*Maggie Victoria Whitmire*

*Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department*

Maggie checked the table with the ledgers again before leaving her office to head to the owlery to make sure there wasn't another important announcement to be drafted. The three quills hovered quietly. Shrugging, she turned to go.

~H~

Late the next morning, Hermione returned from a visit with Kingsley in his office, carrying the annulment forms from Mr. Maretbell of the Magical Reversal office in her pocket. She hurried across the house, running up the stairs, and threw herself onto her bed to cry. Moments later, there was a soft knock on her door. "Hermione?" Ginny asked, entering cautiously.

"Well, I did it," Hermione stated after turning her head slightly. "I picked up the forms..."

Ginny walked over and sat on the bed. "Are you sure about this?"

"No." Hermione rolled onto her side, feeling downcast. "But I think it's best don't you?"

"I dunno? I mean, I've never known the spell to go this wrong before," she admitted.

"You've never known anyone who got stuck with Severus Snape, either," Hermione said, feeling a huge ache deep in her gut.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*Thanks to MadBrilliant and JunoMagic for doing a read through and catching my typos and for Shug for cleaning up my comma mistakes.*

*Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*I do know it's not exactly canon to state Lily was captain of the Charms club or that she received the Potions award but since her wand was good for Charms and she was such a wiz at Potions, I thought I'd add it to her list of achievements. Why not?*

*To any and all Catholics I truly mean no disrespect in Lucius's statement of the Pope and his Papal authority. I'm merely referring to an opinion that Lucius might have, being a pureblood wizard, and after years of excommunication and persecution due to their practices and self-segregation of wizards and witches. HE sees the Papal authority this way due to a long history of religious persecution of witches in the name of religion and inquisition, such as the Spanish Inquisition and Salem witch hunts, etc. My personal opinions of the Catholic faith, Papal authority, and that of the Pope, are NOT reflected here. If I've offended you in any way please, please accept my deepest apologies. You may, of course, flame me for it if you choose I'll humbly accept it.*

# Mistaken Intent

Chapter 15 of 63

Severus abducts Hermione and takes her to Spinner's End so they can, er, talk. Yeah, right, can you abduct the willing, and why did he feel he needed to abscond with her in the first place?



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Mistaken Intent

~S~

"As it was, it was all I could do to – enjoy my evening with her," Severus stated as he accepted the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* from the house-elf.

Lucius unfurled his copy, looking at Severus as he did so. "You're not accustomed to sharing your bed, Severus. You're well known as a passionate and skillful lover but not exactly a caring and giving man. I don't believe any woman has ever shared your bed for more than an hour."

"That's not true," Severus said, controlling the inflection of his voice.

"All right, two hours," Lucius stated as he casually turned the page. Narcissa entered the dining room and gracefully sat down, acknowledging both men with a polite greeting.

Severus smiled graciously at Narcissa before turning to Lucius with a scowl and opening the paper with an agitated flick of his wrists. Lucius chuckled softly, but Severus chose to ignore him. He scanned the front page, furious about the articles in the *Daily Prophet* that morning. He nearly choked when he read that Hermione had been seen requesting the annulment papers from the Accidental Magic Reversal office and then scowled as he read the next article, apparently written by Rita Skeeter, stating the same information along with her insipid gossip. "If that's her decision, fine," he snapped, slapping the paper on the table.

Narcissa looked up from her shopping list, not even flinching at his outburst. "You haven't exactly given her time to get to know you..."

"I've known the insipid girl for seven years," Severus hissed, controlling his outrage.

"As her snarly, sneering, condescending professor... You have quite a reputation from your teaching years," Lucius stated, turning the page of his paper. "It says here she respects you and even admires you, but has a deep sense of guilt for trapping you in this Bonding and feels like a failure... According to Rita Skeeter, the girl really thought it would work out. Imagine." Severus scowled and Lucius laughed at him.

Narcissa calmly observed Severus as she sipped her morning tea. "And I'm sure I can guess how you looked upon her? Draco told me how you treated her..."

"Draco knows nothing! She is a Gryffindor, Potter's friend, and she was a constant thorn in my side," Severus snapped, then carefully controlled the timbre of his tone. "I was sworn to protect Potter. Thus, by default, I had to protect her, and she did everything she could to make that nearly impossible to do!"

"Why didn't you keep her here with you when you went to retrieve her in the first place?" Narcissa asked, trying to keep her tone calm and serene.

"She is convinced that you loathe her and that you would kill or torture her," Severus replied, looking directly at her.

"Severus, I won't lie and tell you I am pleased with this match, and I would never approve of her under any other circumstances," Narcissa said with a sly smile. "But as she is your Bonded mate, I would have been hospitable toward her. She would have been shown every courtesy my station and obligation as her hostess would have demanded. Who knows, I might even have come to – respect her in time."

"Very magnanimous of you," Severus said with a slight sneer, pushing his plate aside, suddenly having lost his appetite. "Please excuse me." He rose from his seat. Lucius made as if to rise as well but was stilled by a gesture from Narcissa.

"Don't get snarly with me," Narcissa said with an inflection of controlled anger coloring her voice when she caught up with Severus in the foyer. "It would be expected of me to be polite. To do anything less toward someone *invited* to stay in my home would be unheard of. I could – and would – make her feel at home. I may have been... If you intend to remain Bonded to Miss Granger, I promise to be gracious towards her."

Severus wanted to laugh but thought better of it. "And she would see right through such pretences."

"You didn't when Lucius first brought *you* into our home all those years ago," Narcissa stated with a cunning smile. "I knew of your blood status, as well as your love for that Mudblood. I was furious, at first, and resentful. However, in time I grew to like and respect *you*."

"Thank you," he said, hiding his surprise behind a subtle sneer. Narcissa had never given him any such indication that she'd ever looked down on him.

"Severus, if you think you could grow to like this girl, you must win her back. If you are truly meant for each other, as I suspect you are, it will not be as difficult as you seem to believe. Remember, I was matched with Lucius under such a spell, and if you hadn't assisted me with the potions I needed to conceive... I owe you so much. You've always been a dear friend, and you were always there when I needed you. Let me do the same in return." She handed him a small, dark brown book that Severus immediately recognized. "It's Charmed. Lucius used this to – charm the young women he dated. If you need advice on a particular woman or need anything to help woo your witch, place something from her, like a lock of her hair, in the pages. Then when you write inside it, the book will answer you back. Once you reset the password, only you will be able open it with your wand."

Severus looked at the gift with a sense of awe. He remembered seeing this book a few times before. The title embossed in fine gold script was *Consigliare ab Hector Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac*. "I apologize for my rude behavior at breakfast, Narcissa."

"You have been through a considerable amount of misfortune these last few months. I have actually been waiting for another of your infamous outbursts," she replied, turning to go. "Just please refrain from taking your temper out on the furnishings."

"I promise," Severus said, watching her go. He fingered the fine dark leather of the magical book, thoughtfully *Win her back... I never had her in the first place. Still, the spell did match us, and she believed we were supposed to be compatible... and I can use the dreams...* He pulled a pair of Hermione's knickers from his pocket and shrunk them so they'd lie within the pages of the book. "Magnanimous," he stated, touching his wand to the cover, watching the books cover glow slightly then fade.

He felt restless, frustratingly annoyed, and he needed to think.

Severus paced the foyer a few times, turned and wandered around the manor for a while before deciding to enjoy the extensive grounds and gardens. Once outside, he followed the path through the rose garden, chagrined by the sheer number and the myriad of fairies that flittered in and among the blooms. He could smell the night jasmine and rosemary in the air that made up the hedges around Narcissa's garden. As the warm breeze carried the scents to his sensitive nose, he was overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu.

He followed the path until it split at the pergola, turning either left or right. Just to his right he knew he would find a bench between two pillars of the pergola, shaded by the climbing clematis and wisteria vines that grew over the old stone. He headed toward the bench, stopping before a familiar pillar wrapped in thick, twisting branches of the wisteria vine. One knurled branch caught his eye, and he couldn't help smiling. It was the branch from his dream, the one he'd propped Hermione on when he'd made love to her here.

He scoffed at his musings. *Not love – sex*. His head dropped, and he sighed loudly as he recalled his actions toward her since the consummation of their Bond *If I am to win her back, this is not going to be easy – unless her mind is already made up. I'm simply going to have to get her alone and access her feelings. But not here... I'll take her home*. He laughed at the idea. *That will make her mind up for sure*

~MoM~

Kingsley entered his office and picked up his interoffice notices. Maggie Whitmire was once again inquiring regarding Hermione's decision *That woman could strain anyone's patience!* he snarled angrily to himself.

Marvin Maretbell informed him that Mrs. Snape had in fact come by his office to pick up the annulment request forms *So she's decided to file for an annulment after all* He sighed, setting the parchment aside. *Bollocks, I'd hoped they'd have worked it out. But I suppose it was not meant to be. I can't see her with Weasley, but Hermione is Muggle-born and independent – hell, Severus is the independent type, too. They would have been a good match.*

He picked up the next packet of parchments. Lawrence McDonough, Administrative Officer of the Hogwarts School Governors, wrote to inform him that Severus Snape had been approved as Headmaster and that Minerva McGonagall would resume her role as Deputy Headmistress, unless Severus declined, in which case she would be more than happy to fill in as Headmistress until her retirement. Kingsley was surprised that Minerva had apparently announced a retirement date. He wondered briefly how much longer she would remain at Hogwarts. *It's well known that she's been at the school during its most difficult time, but she is still a spry seventy-something* or so he thought. *Well, maybe she just wants a quiet life after all she's been through lately. I don't blame her*

Professor Slughorn had reluctantly agreed to teach one more year of Potions and that Kenneth Brandstone would be teaching Muggle Studies. John Dawlish had finally decided to retire as an Auror since his injuries from the war had never truly healed properly. He had been asked to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Kingsley was very pleased to see he'd accepted. Kingsley signed each sheet and set the packet in his tray to have his secretary forward his approvals to the governors. The rest of the messages dealt with the reorganizational suggestions for the Ministry, new department assignments, and new hires. Kingsley weighed each proposed appointment, deciding on which he needed more information on before approving and which he considered appropriate and signed. If the growing stack was any indication, he'd have meetings the rest of the week regarding these appointments. At the bottom of the pile was his *Daily Prophet*. Kingsley nearly swore as he perused the wizarding paper.

*Severus Snape: war hero or lucky*, one headline read, expounding on the highlights of Severus's trial and the judgment of the Wizengamot. He was hardly surprised. The journalists and commentators were still milking it for all it was worth.

***Will Hermione Snape, formerly Hermione Granger, finally come to her senses and request an annulment?***

News that Mrs. Snape was seen once again in the Ministry of Magic came as no surprise to this reporter, however the reason of her visit seems suspect. After a brief meeting with Minister Shacklebolt, Mrs. Snape was seen in the Magical Law Enforcement and Accidental Magical Reversal offices that same morning...

Kingsley swore softly and scanned the next article, swearing again.

***Hermione Granger-Snape may once again be known as simply Hermione Granger in the very near future, and yes, for all you single wizards out there – she will be available again! A lucky catch for whoever catches her eye, I'd say!***

Sources in the Accidental Magic Reversal office have confirmed that Mrs. Snape has, in fact, procured her forms for the annulment and has been asking questions regarding the dissolving her Bonding to Severus Snape...

Word from Maggie Whitmire in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department has kindly confirmed that neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger-Snape has confirmed the registration of their Bonding as of yet, however it's only a matter of time after all, my informed sources tell me.

The Minister's extension for the request of annulment or signing the necessary confirmation is still in effect, regardless of the department's inquiry into the status of the extension. No reason has been given regarding the continuation of the hold, assumed to have been initiated pending the outcome of Severus Snape's trial. However, the hold on the file is still in effect and the extension still...

Kingsley's eyes narrowed in anger. He knew he'd have to say something to keep Maggie Whitmire from stirring up trouble, but this article proved that she was, in fact, supplying information to Rita Skeeter. *I will have to redefine exactly what information she will be allowed to reveal to the press in the future or have her dismissed. But somehow I have to curtail that woman's incessant need for spreading gossip. There has to be a way to force her to mind her place... Maybe a new secretary in the office wouldn't be a bad idea – someone young or one of the pool who'd like a change of position. I'll ask Maybelline to inquire discreetly or see if she has any suggestions. And if I can't get her to behave – I'll fire her!*

The next article, however, made him smile, even if the article reported the new assignments he'd just signed approval for that very morning. *So the Ministry isn't the only one with eavesdropping reporters and internal leaks.*

## *Hogwarts board of governors has announced the assignments for the vacant positions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

After careful consideration and extensive investigation of Severus Snape's conduct and actions during his first year as Headmaster, the governors have decided to clear Severus Snape of abandonment of the school on the first of May and have voted to reinstate him as Headmaster of Hogwarts...

Kingsley picked up his quill to draft Lawrence a quick note, suggesting he apply an Insect-Trapping Hex and Animagus Identifying Jinx on the meeting chambers of the school governors as well as their private offices. To aid his friend, Kingsley wrote out the spells and wand movements carefully. His smile was almost wicked as he added his note to the appointment approval packet for Hogwarts. *That should curtail a certain beetle quite nicely. I wonder who will trap the pest first, me or Lawrence. I hope it's me. I want to get her – oh, how I want to get her...*

~S~

Severus waited outside Grimmauld Place under a Disillusionment Charm and surrounded by Anti-Muggle and Avoidance Charms as he waited for Hermione to return home. His Polyjuice Potion had worn off a while ago, but he knew that the elf hadn't lied to him. There was no reason for the elf to have lied to Arthur Weasley, and there hadn't been any resentment in the elf's tone of voice. Therefore, Severus sat comfortably on the bus bench, watching the street where the door to Harry's house would appear, waiting patiently, staring at the pavement, and glaring at the passersby.

As the sky darkened and the street lamps turned on, Hermione arrived, carrying two large bags and several packages all bundled together as she confidently walked up the steps, obviously having done a lot of shopping at Diagon Alley. Severus moved quickly, coming up behind her before she opened the door. He simply said, "Hello, Hermione," before he took hold of her arm and Disapparated with her. Her scream filled the room the instant they appeared in his sitting room, and her packages fell to the floor, several of them landing on his feet.

He waved his hand and the single candelabrum illuminated the room. The sitting room still smelled of old parchment and dusty books, but at least he'd been given back all of his family's heirlooms. She drew her wand the instant the packages fell, but Severus, having anticipated that reaction, merely snatched it from her hand, handing it back to her the moment she realized who she was with.

Still the outrage in her eyes didn't dim any as she backed away from him while she tried to assess her surroundings. "You – you... How could you?" she stammered, stamping one foot petulantly.

He smirked at her childish action, but didn't take his eyes off her face. *Angry, she's actually rather pretty, although not as lovely as when she's in the throes of passion* "Easily enough," Severus replied in a languid drawl, then simply smiled and waited, enjoying the display of her natural tendencies of self-preservation. She has honed her instincts well, he thought with a sense of admiration. *So far so good – no apparent display of temper or childish tantrums*

"Why am I here – where is here?" she asked, clearly frightened. She was looking around quickly, and Severus knew she was taking in everything: the well-worn rug, a few rickety tables, some threadbare furniture, and that the room was completely lined with bookshelves. The only aspect of the room appealing to her, if he judged her expression correctly, was the books.

"This is our home, Mrs. Snape," he said with a sweep of his hand, indicating the single room. "Since you were so nervous and uncomfortable in my friend's home, I decided to bring you here instead. Unless you wish to copulate on the ground somewhere – like the orchard perhaps, a park, or a phone box, or any other location of your choice?" he asked with a sneer.

For a few heartbeats, Hermione was silent, possibly overwhelmed by the sheer number of books in the room or taken aback by the shabbiness of his furniture. Severus couldn't be sure, unable to judge the lack of expression. Suddenly she turned on him and yelled, "You mean you brought me here – abducted me off the street – to have sex with you?!"

Severus had initially taken her silence to mean the room disgusted her, but her outburst infuriated him. "All things considered? Yes. And to talk, since apparently, if I'm to believe what the *Daily Prophet* prints, you've yet to make up your mind about us. Oh, yes, wait – you did procure the annulment parchments, did you not?" he asked, still sneering at her. "However, dear wife, I also believe that you've yet to submit them. I thought that I could possibly make the decision a bit easier for you," he said, the edge of his resentment barely evident in his tone, but his attempt to control his emotions made his words sound a bit harsh. *No matter, she's made her decision. Seeing this place will only cinch it for her.*

He waited until she lowered her wand and slipped it into her pocket. "So, wife, let me show you *your new home*," he said. Taking her by the hand, he opened a concealed doorway in the bookshelves. "This doorway leads to a kitchen and dining area and my potions lab," he stated as he dragged her along, giving her barely enough time to assess the small kitchen, dirty Floo, and worn mismatched chairs around a small scrubbed wooden table. He opened the door to his lab, and her eyes grew large as her gaze swept the room, taking in his efficient layout, ample workspace and storage shelving.

He pulled her back into the dining area of the elongated kitchen. "There is another room off the kitchen area, just a few crates and old trunks that leads into a converted sunroom, although all the plants died long ago." Severus quickly pointed to a door across from the Floo. "There is a back door; however, I strongly suggest avoiding the back garden unless you wish to become plant food. It's completely overgrown, and the plants have grown quite wild."

"There's more." He grabbed her hand, dragging her back into the sitting room and through another door that opened to expose the landing of the narrow staircase, pulling her to follow him to the upper floor.

On the stairs, she finally found her voice again. "Why are you surprised that I was uncomfortable at Malfoy manor? They hate me. They tortured my friends and me when we were taken there. They killed Dobby and..."

"They consented to allow me to bring you there since that is where I have been living since my near fatal snake bite. Lucius was most amused, but he granted permission for me to bring my *wife* there," he said coolly. "You would not have been tortured. Unless you consider copulating with me torture?"

Hermione fell silent, possibly not wanting to offend him by answering, and he glowered at her silence.

There were three doors on their right and one on their left as they entered the upstairs hallway. "A box room, my old room, loo," he said, pointing to the doors on her right before he tugged on her arm to follow him into the room on the left. "My parents' room," he said, shoving her slightly to make her enter the room, then closing the door behind him. There were two windows, a large bed that sat across from a small fireplace, two small chairs, and two crates he'd enlarged as bedside tables, as well as two plain wardrobes. The available walls were covered with dusty bookshelves that also held grimy jars and bottles at random intervals. The room had the look of not having been used in quite a while. The huge bed was properly made, although it still had that unkempt look, and the dusty hangings were tied back. Hermione turned around to look at the room, her face impassive. She watched, her expression turning to apprehension as Severus casually removed his robe and kicked off his shoes. "So now you've seen the house."

Hermione simply nodded, intimidated by his casual stare as he continued to undress. She turned to face one of the bookshelves, biting on her lip nervously.

"Well," he said, moving to stand close to her. To her credit, she turned her head to look at him but didn't back away. He reached out to touch her face, but stopped when



she flinched and dropped his hands to his side. "I'm not going to rape you, but I would rather you gave yourself freely. It's more enjoyable that way."

Hermione lowered her gaze as she slowly removed her robes, letting the garment fall to the floor, and slowly unbuttoned her blouse, then stripped off her jeans. Finally, she stood before him in only her knickers and socks.

With a wave of his wand, the covers on the bed pulled back on their own, revealing old sheets and flat pillows. He indicated the bed, and she sighed as she walked over and sat down. He reached out to cup her face and leaned down to kiss her, pushing her down to lie beneath him. She barely moved as he caressed her, until his mouth covered her breast and his fingers found her clitoris. He slid two fingers inside her as he savored her breast and then waited for her to relax. Using his thumb, he stimulated her, pleased when she began to whimper and moan. Soon she was writhing, her breathing ragged, and he raised himself up to watch her as he brought her to climax, enjoying the expressions she made during her orgasm.

His penis twitched, painfully engorged as he continued to stimulate her. She began to protest, trying to shove his hand away, but he laughed softly and lowered himself to stroke her sensitive clit with his tongue. She cried out and grasped his head, clutching his hair painfully in her fingers, but he continued. He reveled in the fact he could elicit such a response from her. Feeling her clench around his fingers, he hummed against her clitoris, sending her beyond control, giving her another orgasm. He rose and positioned himself, entering her in one smooth thrust, feeling her clamp down on him again. She was so tight that she was nearly painful and so wet and hot he could barely control his own body's reactions. His balls were so taut and his penis so hard that it didn't take long for his own release to come. "Miss – Hermione, I – I can't... I'm... sorry," he gasped suddenly as his release came, feeling like he was emptying everything he had inside her. He collapsed on her, feeling completely spent. He rolled onto his back and fell asleep in only a few minutes.

\*

Severus woke up and saw Hermione curled up in a chair, reading. Several of his books were piled up on the bedside table next to her. She watched him above the book in her lap, as if trying not to stare. "I couldn't get out," she said, breaking the silence. Severus made no attempt to cover himself, smirking when her eyes darted down to his growing erection and back to his face.

"My wards," he said casually, amused that his nakedness seemed to intimidate her. "I've had to reinforce them since the Aurors were in the house, ransacking my belongings." He leaned on one elbow. "So, do I take you back to Grimmauld Place, the Burrow, or the manor?"

"The manor?" she asked, alarmed. "I cannot go there."

"There is no food in the house, so unless you wish to dine on potion ingredients, I suggest we eat somewhere else," he stated casually, watching her nose crinkle at his suggestion. "I haven't been here in a long time."

"I noticed. I tried to – tidy up in the loo, but..." she said and then blushed.

He noticed that she fidgeted with her toes under his watchful stare. "Sorry about that, I don't own house-elves, and I'm a true bachelor – clean only what's necessary and then usually by wand. The last time I was here was just after your sixth year."

"So this isn't really your home," she said, shifting in the chair.

Severus never really liked seeing people, especially the students, sitting with their feet in the chairs, but with her, the pose was almost adorable. At least she'd had the courtesy of removing her shoes. "I lived at Hogwarts nearly ten months out of the year and wherever the Dark Lord needed me to be the other two and a half. I am currently staying with the Malfoys, although I will have to decide what to do with this place," he said with a wave of his hand.

She looked surprised. "You've another option?"

He smirked wickedly. "I always have an option," he stated smoothly. "I am very frugal and have little need for things. I have few expenses besides my potions ingredients of course, and many of those I can find or procure myself. And, as you can see, my affinity for books. Besides books and potion utensils, I have few personal possessions."

"This house has potential if you cleaned it up some. The sunroom would be nice and bright..." she said, her voice trailing off when he raised his eyebrow.

"But it smells like death," he said, and she nodded. "I won't tell you why." He shifted his legs to alleviate the pressure on his lower anatomy. The move wasn't lost on Hermione. "Actually, if I had any reason to, I suppose I could fix the place up."

"Why haven't you?" she asked, trying to keep her gaze on his face and failing, much to his amusement.

"This was my father's house," he said more sharply than he intended. "It was magically altered by my mother to suit our families' needs." He decided to change the subject to avoid uncomfortable questions about his family. "So what do you plan on doing?"

"I'm returning to school," she answered with a tone that challenged him to deny her right to go.

"I know that," he snapped. "I meant about *us*?"

"What do you think I intend to do about us?" she answered his question with her own.

*So you want to dump this decision on me, do you?* "I think you should know that under the circumstances, you have no future with me," he said sharply. "I may have been pardoned, but I will carry a stigma the rest of my life that will reflect on you should you choose to remain in this Bonding. Although I'm sure that with your war status and being Potter's friend that may or may not impede your career in whatever field you choose to pursue. But I am also twice your age, and as you can see, I have little to offer you," he stated harshly. "You'd be a fool to want me."

"Do you want me?" she asked, worrying her lip.

The question surprised him even more than her earlier remark about his father's house. He watched her bottom lip as it slipped out from under her front teeth as she slowly released it. It made him want to nibble on it as well, which only made his penis twitch again, reminding him of his irrefutable physical attraction to her. "I have you, Hermione. You made the arrangement, which we consummated. In regards to wanting you, I am inclined to say yes, but I'm still deciding," he stated coolly, but his lower regions were clearly demonstrating the exact extent of his attraction in opposition of his tone. He chose to ignore that fact as he continued. "Technically, the decision was made the moment we came together in the pond, although I was under the influence of your spell. I would have taken on the entire Weasley clan and Potter to get to you. If you'd read any of the books on the spell you'd have known this." She blushed, and his eyes narrowed. "Where did you read about the spell in the first place? You are terribly ignorant of what you have done."

Her head snapped up, and her expression was angry. "I am very well aware of my ignorance of the spell at the time when I cast it. I'm not sure exactly why we thought it would be a good idea. I suppose after all the fighting, the loss of life, the realization I could have died, too... It hit me rather hard. I suppose I wanted something good to look forward to. I wanted love in my life – well, I had that, sort of, but I wasn't entirely sure. I suppose I wanted it confirmed. To know I had someone I could really connect with, someone who loved me with the same kind of love my parents have. The thought that the spell would show me my soul mate sounded good at the time. I didn't think it would link us – I thought you were *dead*! I saw you *die*! I wouldn't have left you there if I thought you were alive. I would have tried to help you, get help, get you back to the castle... Something other than just leaving you there! But Harry said you'd died – I thought you'd died. I'm sorry. I should have checked, or something, since we were so obviously wrong."

"You stupid girl! If you had taken me back to the castle, you would have alerted the Dark Lord and his followers you were there! If you'd tried hauling me though that crawl

space of a tunnel, I'd have only slowed you down and you might have been captured. I'm assuming you were using Potter's cloak? It wouldn't have covered the three of you while you tried to drag or carry me – you would've been seen! And even *if* you had managed to get me to the castle, I was a traitor in everyone's eyes," he snarled. "I would have been left to rot until after the final battle or killed. Lucius knew where I was, and, apparently, he sent Narcissa to help me. He simply had to wait until the Dark Lord left the shack. You have no idea how close you and Potter were to the Dark Lord – he was right outside the door!"

She honestly looked abashed, and he momentarily regretted being so harsh with her.

"How did you survive, if I may ask?" she asked softly, almost a whisper.

"The Dark Lord started using Nagini to kill anyone who displeased him. I assume he grew tired of the Killing Curse. He still enjoyed using the Cruciatus and had even been perfecting a variation of it, the Atrociatus. Lucius, I found out, had come to the realization he'd been wrong about the Dark Lord, especially after living with him in his home. He grew wary, witnessing the Dark Lord's dementia and fearing daily for the lives of Draco and Narcissa. We made a plan to protect ourselves – not only against the Atrociatus, but from Nagini's bite."

"What is the Atrociatus?" she asked, and he looked at her annoyed.

"I thought you wanted to know how I survived?" he asked, annoyed by her question. He didn't want to talk to her – or anyone about the Atrociatus Curse. Luckily, only a handful ever saw the curse used and, of those, only two surviving Death Eaters knew about it – him and Lucius Malfoy.

"No, I'm sorry – please continue," she said, blushing, holding his book on her lap with both hands.

"We knew we had only a slight chance of surviving the Atrociatus Curse, so we focused on the Dark Lord's other favored way of dispensing with those who angered him – Nagini's bite. Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco were given my antivenin, and we all carried a vial of it, as well as a dose of Draught of Living Death at all times. What you saw was the effects of the potions. I would take the antivenin whenever I was summoned unexpectedly to the Dark Lord just in case. I used a Muggle technique of a capsule, shrinking a full dose of the Draught of Living Death into it, which I held in my cheek. When Nagini bit me, I bit the capsule, swallowed the potion, and let it seem as if I was dying. I barely had enough time to tell Potter what he needed to know, so I forced my memories from my mind. That is what you saw."

"But how did you do it – give Harry your memories without a wand?" she asked.

"The same spell used to remove memories with a wand, *Divelliexponere*. Only without a wand the memory just leaks out of any orifice of the head," he explained. He could tell she was impressed, and he felt a twinge of smugness. "So, either come here," he said, patting the bed, "or if you're hungry, we'll leave."

Hermione dropped her feet to the floor, placing the book on the pile next to the bed, and for a moment, he thought she would actually choose to come to him. "I'm actually hungry," she said softly, and he felt a wave of disappointment.

"Fine, I'll dress." He rose and wandlessly summoned his clothes. He dressed slowly, watching her from under the shield of his hair. She was watching him and wasn't even trying to hide her curiosity. "So which will it be, dinner with me at the manor or returned to Grimmauld Place?"

"Grimmauld Place," she said with absolute certainty.

He forced his face to assume his usual mask of indifference to cover his disappointment. "Fine." He walked past her and down the stairs, opening the concealed door to allow her into his sitting room. He levitated her packages and helped her collect them. "I can manage them," she said as she reached out to take the ones he held. "I just have to Apparate back to the front of the house, and Kreacher will help me."

"You cannot Apparate from my home, Hermione," he said softly, keeping his tone neutral. "I will take you back." He wrapped his arm around her waist, and in a few seconds had her standing on the stoop of Harry's home. He pulled her tighter to him and kissed her, nearly making her lose her balance. "I want to see you tomorrow. We apparently need to come to a decision. I'll owl you when I will come to get you."

"I've already made arrangements with Ginny and Luna," she replied.

"What time?" he asked, handing her her packages.

"All afternoon," she replied.

"I'll be here at six, and I expect you to be ready. You and I still need to talk – about a lot of things," he said and left before his urge to hex someone – anyone – became an unfortunate accident.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Shugg, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Atrocitas is Latin for: frightfulness, cruelty, harshness, and barbarity.

Consigliare is Italian for: advise.

Divello is Latin for: to pluck apart, tear asunder, break up, destroy, interrupt; to distract, pull away, remove, separate.

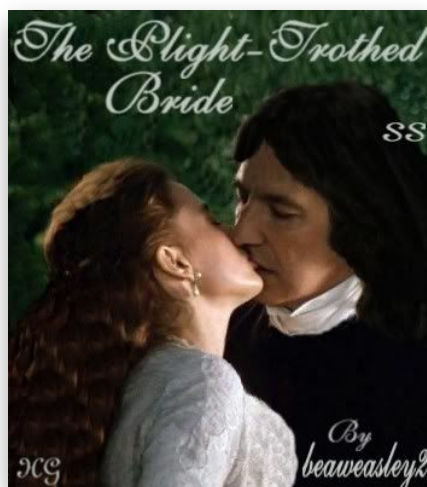
Exponere is Latin for: to put outside, cast out

As usual, my favorite site for Latin wording is: <http://www.freedict.com/onldict/lat.html>

*Consigliare ab Hector Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac is the full name of the infamous Cyrano de Bergerac. Yes, all right, I figured Severus might need the help of a professional. Besides, Narcissa didn't think he'd had a lot of experience wooing a witch, and Hermione is a bit unusual in that the usual most likely wouldn't work.*

## Friendly Intervention

Narcissa contemplates on Severus' Bonding with Hermione, Severus contemplates what he wants to do about Hogwarts and his wife, and Kingsley takes action. Hermione, on the other hand, prepares herself for her date with Severus.



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#### Friendly Intervention

~N~

Narcissa passed the sitting room, paused, and then stepped back into the doorway. Severus stood at the window, staring out at the back gardens. She watched him for a few seconds and then smiled as she walked away. She honestly hadn't minded having Severus in her home. He was usually the perfect houseguest. He was neat and inordinately tidy when he used her workroom or the manor's potions lab, and he hadn't brought multiple trunks and steamers of belongings either. Narcissa laughed, remembering how apologetic he had been after bringing in the crates of his personal belongings from the Weasleys', asking her where she would least mind their intrusion. In less than two days, the crates had been removed, again with his most sincere apologies for cluttering her parlor.

She entered her parlor and casually inspected the floor where the rough wood crates had sat, knowing that not a trace of their existence, not even a scratch would be seen in her pristine marble floor. She sat down in her favorite chair, and immediately a house-elf brought her a cup of tea as she stared out the window at the same view Severus would be staring at from the other room. He'd been sullen at breakfast. Probably something to do with the letters from the Ministry or the school Governors, but he hadn't wanted to talk about it, so she'd let it drop. He was dealing with so much lately, his life thrown open like a book, forcefully Bonded to that Granger girl... It was no wonder he was surly. Severus had always been a private man.

Previous to this, he'd been his normal self; even while sick and fevered, he'd been somewhat amicable. She could see how the stress of his situation was wearing on him. It was the like the last time Severus had stayed in their home. *Just last summer to be precise, when the Dark Lord had begun using the manor as his home* she thought angrily.

Severus and Draco had had a falling out of sorts in Draco's sixth year, but after spending the summer and Christmas hols with the Dark Lord in their home, Draco had changed. He'd become sullen, quiet, and reclusive. Narcissa was relieved, truthfully, now that the Dark Lord was gone. The constant threats, reprimands, and the harsh chastisement they'd had to endure from that minatory potentate, as well as the malicious satisfaction of the other Death Eaters for her family's misfortunes, had been nearly unbearable. And she could bear a lot she'd had to over the years. Moreover, the constant fear for her family had worn heavily on her. Even her sister had become a complete zealous harriidan before her death.

Narcissa still believed in the superiority of purebloods over Muggle-borns only because they just didn't understand the wizard culture, its ethics and social mores but those were not taught to the young ladies and boys who entered society today. No, everyone was conforming to them the Muggle-borns and it was an outrage. Still, if Miss Granger chose to stay united with Severus, Miss Granger would have to learn their customs and ways. Although, Narcissa was doubtful that *she'd* have the patience to teach the girl or that the girl would want or accept her help. There would have to be another way. The Weasleys were hardly the epitome of social grace, and the witches and wizards the girl associated with were so uncouth.

Regardless, the child had performed the Moon-Song Spell and was now bound magically to Severus, Bonded to him for life. Whether she admitted it or not, it could never be broken, and as such, since Severus was associated with the pureblood elite, or what was left of them, Miss Granger would have to learn to fit in.

She'd overheard Severus and Lucius talking about Severus' last date with the girl, and apparently it hadn't gone well. Actually, Narcissa wasn't surprised. She'd taken the opportunity during lunch to pointedly ask Severus where he planned on taking the girl for their next outing, telling him about the first dates she'd had with Lucius. Lucius, ever so clever, had picked up immediately on her intentions and told a few amusing stories of the outings he'd most enjoyed. Severus had listened with mild interest, but the idea was set in his mind. Narcissa was sure of it. If he was going to have this girl in his life, as a partner and a wife, their time together couldn't be all about sex.

Thinking of which, Narcissa recalled the state of Severus' home from two years ago. Even though she'd only seen the sitting room, it had shown years of neglect and disuse. Misuse if that pestilence Wormtail had lived there. Even the tray Wormtail had carried in had looked tarnished, and the glasses had water spots. Narcissa smiled. *Now that is something I can do for the couple*

"Sheton," she said softly.

A soft pop announced the arrival of the house-elf. "Yes, mistress," he said, bowing so low his snout-like nose smeared her floor.

"Take another house-elf and go to Severus' home. I want the place cleaned up, top to bottom, and brought up to a respectable livable condition as if was going to be staying there. If anything is beyond repair, come and tell me so I can have it replaced."

"Yes, mistress," the elf replied, bowing again, his nose pressing on her floor. She scowled at the smudge he was making, and he quickly wiped the spot with the dishtowel he carried on his arm and disappeared.

*My Bonding gift to you, Severus, and for everything you've done for me and my family. I hope someday you'll forgive me* she thought, grinning.

~S~

Severus stared out the window, contemplating a lot of things.

He received an owl from Lawrence McDonough, Administrative Officer of the Hogwarts School Governors, asking Severus to meet with him and Elaine Prevatt, Clerk to the Governing Body, the following day to discuss Severus' reinstatement as Headmaster. They wanted to present his answer on Tuesday, the fourth of August when the Governing Body convened. That only gave him one day to decide on what should be a very easy answer. He'd sent back his reply that he was unavailable on Friday and proposed they meet on Monday instead. Elaine Prevatt had owled back immediately with her confirmation stating that they would expect him at the office at two. That, at least, gave him three days to make his mind up about returning as Headmaster. He didn't understand the rush actually. *At least I'll not be teaching. That is one consolation* But he knew that he would be searching for an acceptable Potions professor soon. Horace Slughorn wouldn't be keeping the post for long. *No, don't concern yourself over the dragon until the egg hatches.*

The other thing occupying his thoughts was his relationship with Hermione.

Her reaction to his house hadn't been one of horror. Instead, she'd commented that the place could be cleaned up and made livable. He didn't agree, but considering that she had been living in Grimmauld Place and the Burrow, his father's house probably wasn't too off the scale. He wondered briefly what her parents' home must have been like if his father's house was acceptable to her. She'd obviously wandered around the place while he'd slept since she'd commented on the sunroom. He'd noticed that she'd even tried to clean the loo, which amused him.

Truth was he hated his father's house. It served his purposes over the summer when he wasn't at the castle, but in all honesty, he hadn't done much to the house since his mother had died. Killed herself, actually. When Severus had come home during the summer after completing Hogwarts, he could tell that his mum had been deeply depressed, but she'd been so happy to see him... until she had seen his Dark Mark. Severus had tried to explain why, but she hadn't believed him. In her rage, she had thrown him out, telling him to go live with the ones he'd chosen. Severus had been heartbroken, but he'd packed his book bag, magically enlarged inside to carry everything he wanted, and left. For a while, he'd stayed with Avery, then Rosier, and finally moved in with Malfoy for a spell. Unfortunately, word was that the Dark Lord was furious that his mum had made him leave. His friends considered his mum a blood traitor.

He'd tried to warn his mum that she'd been marked by the Dark Lord, begging her to hide, but in his heart, he had known that few survived once the Dark Lord marked them for death. She was the first person he'd pleaded with the Dark Lord to spare. The Dark Lord had simply laughed and promised that she wouldn't be touched. When his mum didn't respond to him, no owl, not one letter, Severus had assumed she'd left. But after the death of his father, his mum had fallen into poor health, and after Severus' decision to join the Dark Lord, she'd apparently lost the will to live. It had been a simple matter of a quick-acting poison. Eileen Prince had died quietly in the sunroom, the poison providing her a simple and painless release. She'd been there for months before he had been able to return to the house. Severus had never stepped foot into the sunroom again after that morning when he'd found her.

Severus shook his head to clear the memory from his thoughts and forced himself to think about Hermione. His last visit with her hadn't gone well. He'd been annoyed at having had to wait so long for her to show up, nearly having given up when she had appeared. He knew he should've been more solicitously mindful when he'd shown her around the house, taken more time to allow her to look and take in her surroundings. But he'd been anxious and concerned that she'd hate the house as much as he did. That and he'd been too desirous for her, much too eager to get her upstairs and in his bed. Still, she had responded to him just like before. That had to be a good sign, even if she had been eager to go back to Grimmauld Place. Well, Lucius thought so, even if Narcissa didn't.

The conversation at lunch had him thinking. The subtle jibe Narcissa gave him in directing the conversation had annoyed him at first, but he began to see her point. He was in a magically Bonded union, and as such, he was expected to try and make the union work. He couldn't deny that Hermione had been trying, but he had not.

He'd see Hermione that evening, and this time they would talk. He had no idea about what, but he'd try engaging the girl in conversation, even if it killed him. At least she would be able to hold an intelligent conversation. Of that he was certain. *The only question is, where should I take her? She won't come here to the manor, that's for sure, and I don't really want to sit in my kitchen and talk.*

*The Leaky Cauldron is out too public. The Greengrass Pub no. Madeline's Bistro is out of the question. The Botanical Gardens... again, too public. Nowhere magical I want privacy.* He tried to think of some private place, with chairs, nice, quiet and secluded. He was drawing a blank. *could always conjure up chairs... Maybe Lucius will allow me a bottle of wine. I could ask Narcissa for a packed dinner. But where should I take the girl?*

~H~

Luna had arrived at Grimmauld Place to have a late breakfast with Hermione and Ginny before they went to the Magical Botanical Gardens in Suffolk. Of course, Luna and Ginny were curious to know how her relationship with Severus was going. Hermione sighed and told them what had happened the night before.

"HE DID WHAT?" Ginny screeched.

"Severus abducted me right off the top step and took me to his house." Hermione looked at Ginny and actually smiled from the look of horror on her friend's face.

"Quite impetuous of him, but really it's a little romantic," Luna said dreamily while looking at the fireplace as if she was watching some mystical magical creature buzzing around inside it.

"If you say so," Hermione replied. "It was actually rather scary. I mean there are still Death Eaters out there it could have been one of them!" Hermione felt a chill down her spine at the thought. "Yaxley has been in the house, although he hasn't been back since that day... Anyway, Severus scared the snot right out of me."

"Harry was really concerned when you didn't show up for dinner," Ginny admitted. "He wanted to have everyone go searching for you when you were over an hour late even began organizing who should go where. I had to remind him twice that Flourish and Blotts closed at seven. It was Mum who suggested asking Kreacher to find you."

"When I came home I just didn't feel like doing anything but take a bath and read before bed. Kreacher walked in on my bath to tell me Harry had summoned me," Hermione said with a smile. "He was nice enough though to make me a sandwich."

Kreacher set three plates on the table, mumbling.

"He's such a good house-elf," Luna said.

Kreacher froze, turning to look at her, holding the goblets he'd just removed from the dish cupboard.

Ginny took them and set them on the table. "He did come and tell us you'd fallen asleep in the tub," she stated. "Harry and Ron were going to run right on over to check on you. Mum stuck their trainers to the floor, telling them to leave you be. It was hilarious to watch."

Kreacher bowed slightly. "Is misses ready to eat now?"

"Sure. Thank you, Kreacher." Ginny turned back to Hermione. "So give, what is his house like? Dark, dingy, a rack, and chains on the wall a huge potions lab with all sorts of gross things in jars..."

"It's a tiny house," Hermione said. "I can tell you I was really surprised by the state of everything. It's not that the place was filthy, but there was a layer of grime and neglect everywhere, except the lab. It took me a half an hour to clean the loo before I could use it."

"Oh, I'm sure it's not that bad," Luna said dreamily as she scanned sparkling copper bottoms of the pans. "I suspect that he simply hasn't been there much, what with all

his teaching, Death Eater activities, and spying for the Order. But I'd be careful of Doxies, Bundimuns, and Weremiflens if the place has been left unattended for long. If he has any Chizpurples, I wouldn't take your Pygmy Puff or quills they'll get infested."

"It's Harry's Pygmy Puff, and don't worry. I'd be afraid Snape would zap it," Ginny said, emphasizing her words with a jab of her finger.

"Oh, stop," Hermione chided her friends.

"So, what is his house like? I'm dying to know," Ginny persisted.

Hermione shrugged. "It's small. There is a narrow sitting room and an elongated room behind it that serves as eating area and kitchen. I think there was a pantry, but the door was stuck, and an old washing machine with a hand-crank ringer that your father would love! There is a potions lab, a box room that's basically a storage area, and a room that's been magically transformed into a sunroom," she said, wrinkling her nose, remembering the smell. "The sitting room is like a library there are bookshelves on every wall."

"Oh, I know you like that!" Ginny interrupted, winking at Luna as Kreacher could set the platters of eggs and bacon on the table.

"Yeah, the books are great loads that the library at Hogwarts doesn't have." Hermione shifted in her chair. "I think the lab, sunroom, and box room were added onto the house magically. Oh, and upstairs there's another tiny box room, the loo, and two bedrooms. His old bedroom smelled horrible, like a rat's nest. The master bedroom smells musty and is full of books." She turned to Ginny grinning. "And yes, loads of jars of creepy stuff," she added, wrinkling her nose. Ginny giggled as Kreacher started serving them fresh scones and tea. "The place is so neglected and dingy. If I didn't know better, I'd say it had been abandoned years ago."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "And he said it was your new home? Maybe Mum and I could come and help you clean up?"

"He said he hadn't decided if he was going to keep the place. He said that he had options." Hermione sighed heavily. "One can only hope."

"I'm sure it's not that bad," Luna said, turning to look at her.

Hermione shook her head. "You didn't see the place. It was all I could do not to sound disgusted. I told him it'd be nice if he cleaned the place up, but I was being polite. It's very depressing to think of living there."

"But if you get the annulment you won't have to," Luna said pointedly, checking the bottom of her scone.

Ginny set down her teacup, smiling broadly. "Yeah, stay here with us. Harry and I have loads of room."

"Not jealous that I'll steal your fiancé?" Hermione asked teasingly, picking at her eggs.

"Not a chance," Ginny said, laughing. "So, how was it? Was he, you know, better?"

Hermione shook her head. "Nope, like before grab, shag, and send me on my way. He did ask me if I wanted to have dinner with him at Malfoy manor."

"No!" Ginny exclaimed, looking up at her aghast.

Luna tilted her head questioningly. "I suppose that wasn't the brightest suggestion he could have made, considering."

"Yep," Hermione agreed. Telling her friends about it made her feel better. "He jokingly suggested the alternative was to dine on his potions ingredients because he didn't have anything edible in the pantry, which in my book would have been preferable."

All three girls had a good laugh, Luna laughing harder than either Ginny or Hermione. "I always did enjoy his sense of humor," Luna gasped between bursts of laughter.

"But are things improving any?" Ginny asked. "I mean, if he wanted to see you bad enough to abduct you from in front of the house maybe he's coming around some?"

"A simple owl asking me to meet him or calling my name out from the pavement would have sufficed. I haven't turned him down so far. But it's still the same. It wasn't too bad far from romantic or anything," Hermione sighed with a wave of her hand. She brushed a strand of her hair off her forehead. "It was better." She wasn't sure she really wanted to elaborate. "He was attentive at least, but he fell asleep right after."

"You're kidding!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Neville does that when he's been working in the greenhouses all day." Luna was staring over Hermione's head at the wall above the dish cupboard. Hermione turned around for a moment to see what she was staring at. "They make him haul all the pots and dragon dung deliveries. I like to massage his back and shoulders, but that makes him fall asleep, too."

"So, have you decided what you want to do yet?" Ginny asked

"I'm so tired of everyone asking me that!" Hermione said with a moan. "No, I haven't decided. I just can't make up my mind. Part of me is kicking myself in the arse for staying with him, the other half believes in what you all say that this is a magically aligned union and they always work out great. But I feel like a fool. If one of you were asking me if you should stick it out under the same circumstances, putting up with the same treatment I'd be trying to help you find a way out of it. Did I tell you he expects to see me again tonight? Supposedly to talk. Yeah, right."

Luna looked at Hermione thoughtfully. "It sounds to me as if you like him," she said. Hermione looked at her incredulously, and Luna smiled. "No, it does! If you didn't, you'd have filed for the annulment the moment the Minister of Magic offered you one." Hermione opened her mouth to disagree and Luna held up her hand. "Part of you likes him. I know you respect him, and that is as good as any reason for marriage. Like and respect are a good foundation to start from. Keep in mind that arranged marriages are still practiced among some wizarding families, and in pureblood society, the couples are expected to work it out."

"I've tried!" Hermione said, exasperated, and Luna tilted her head and smirked at her. "Okay, we haven't tried."

"I think you should spend some time with him to really get to know him," Luna said. "The best thing to do is for *you* to take *him* somewhere out in the open where you can talk but he wouldn't expect you to shag him."

"It's not like I had a choice!" Hermione said stubbornly. "That's really hard to do when you're being abducted off the front step!"

"But the next time he makes an offer to take you to Malfoy manor, *you* suggest somewhere else. Don't leave it all up to him," Luna stated. "You could have suggested going to... Hebridean Point or some place."

"Harry loves Burger King," Ginny said, giggling. "I can't imagine Severus Snape ordering a Whopper."

"I can't imagine why not. We just don't know what he'd like; we don't know him very well," Luna replied off-handedly. "Oh, before I forget, the wedding is being moved up to the eighth of August."

"Really? Why?" Hermione asked.

"Gran is concerned about my getting pregnant. Neville and I are not exactly keeping apart," Luna said dreamily with a wide smile. "She doesn't know that I make a

Contraception Potion and drink wild yam and wild carrot juice. Plus Neville uses the Contraception Charm. We don't really want kids yet. But I think his Gran wants us to have a honeymoon before I go back to school and Neville leaves for his expedition. Besides, I don't want to wait."

"You must be so excited?" Ginny asked. "I wish I didn't have to wait."

"I am, but it will be nice to be allowed to sleep in the same room instead of sneaking in to see each other. Although, I like the game it makes it exciting," Luna said without a trace of blushing. "The wedding will be nice. Gran promised to make sure that all the Nargles are removed."

"I like the fact that I can come here and have breakfast with Harry, but Mum forbids me sneaking over at night. She has a trace on the Floo. But Harry and I manage," Ginny said, grinning.

Hermione laughed. "Oh, you are so like Fred and George."

"Thank you," she replied, looking smug. "So, Luna, are you planning a big wedding?"

"My friends, a few family, and Professor Flitwick," Luna listed off. "Although, Gran is inviting everyone she knows. She loves Neville like a son and wants him to have a big wedding."

"Harry and I are going to have a small wedding at the Burrow," Ginny stated. "He doesn't want anyone we don't know personally to be invited. His list is really short."

"I don't blame him. Can you imagine?" Hermione asked rhetorically. She swept her hand in an arch as she added, "The-Boy-Who-Destroyed-Voldemort Twice, gets married. It'll be on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*!"

"Everything he does lately is in the paper, right under, 'Will Hermione stay with Severus Snape!'" Ginny said, mimicking her by sweeping her arm in the air in the same manner.

Hermione grimaced and covered her face with her hands. "Ugh, don't remind me!"

~MoM~

Maggie had tried once again to meet with Kingsley in regards to the Snape's delinquent filing. Once again, she was reminded that he was still honoring the extension for Mrs. Snape to file her forms and that Marvin Maretbell in the Accidental Magic Reversal Office was quite happy to allow the couple time to work things out.

Maggie had left his office in a huff.

Kingsley then called Maybelline into his office. "I've had enough of that woman! Please tell me we have someone anyone who would like to work in that office," he asked as soon as Maybelline sat down with her pad and quill.

Maybelline opened up her small notebook. "Victoria Chase is available, as is Deloris Wallace."

Kingsley didn't know Miss Chase, but Mrs. Wallace might not be appropriate for his needs. "Does either strike you as the type to encourage gossip?"

"Mrs. Wallace might be; she's been known to spread information occasionally. I don't know about Miss Chase. She is the daughter of Ralph Chase in the Muggle-Worthy Excuse office, and I know how strict he is about International Secrecy. Victoria Chase seems like a sweet, quiet girl, but I've only met her a few times. She was a shop assistant in the Magical Menagerie until last summer. She has recently returned with her mother from Morocco. I haven't seen her since she and her mother came home," Maybelline suggested, pausing a moment for him to respond. "But her application is on file with the clerical pool."

"Isn't she only nineteen?" he asked, vaguely remembering Ralph introducing him to his daughter during a Ministry party a few years back.

"I believe she is twenty," Maybelline stated, checking her notes. "The girl and her mother, Regina, had taken an extended vacation when the Death Eaters took over the Ministry, because Regina was Muggle-born."

Kingsley shook his head. "That would possibly send the wrong message to Ms. Whitmire. She would think she's the girl's supervisor. Any others?"

"May I suggest Roberta Shelton?" Maybelline said, sounding a bit more hopeful than when she suggested Miss Chase. "She was planning on retiring this year because things are too hectic for her in the Obliviator's office lately. She is a bit touchy ever since her neighbors, the Townsends, had the Dark Mark over their home. I think she would like a nice quiet office to work in. Robbie is a good friend of mine, and she's not usually a gossip. But she'd have to be replaced. Mr. Aguilar relies on her quite heavily."

After meeting both witches, Kingsley knew he was making a good decision. Victoria was a plain girl with a quiet, soothing demeanor, if a bit diffident, and Roberta Shelton was the typical efficient and impeccably dressed type of witch. After talking to Eduardo Aguilar in the Obliviator's office, he knew that Robbie was quite discreet and the perfect choice. Mrs. Shelton was to be transferred to the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office after training Miss Chase to replace her in the Obliviator's office. Robbie's duties would be to handle all press relations, as well as the new Muggle Marriage Assistance Program. Her duties would be spelled out more clearly when she relocated to her new office, but so far the idea of an introductory package for all Muggle spouses seemed like a good idea.

He'd schedule a meeting with the Department of Magical Catastrophes, Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the Improper Use of Magic Office to discuss the implications of his idea.

~ H ~

Hermione paced the drawing room as she waited. His note had said precisely what he'd told her on the front step the night before: he would be here at six, and he was taking her out to dinner somewhere to talk. That was it. No explanations, not hint as to where or even what to expect.

She'd chosen a butter-cream blouse with tiny buttons and brown pants for her date, but she was second-guessing her choice. She'd already changed once and had both casual sandals and walking shoes sitting next to the sofa. She intended to see what Severus was wearing, then Apparate to her room to change if necessary. Three options lay on her bed in case she was dressed too casually or if he showed up in robes.

Harry sat in the chair opposite her, grinning at her from behind a book.

"Oh, bollocks to him, bollocks to him..." she muttered under her breath as she sat down. No matter where he chose, she was not going to have sex with him. Of that she was determined. She was going to make him tell her if he wanted out, and whichever decision they came to, she was going to make him sign the forms.

Harry looked up at the clock and grinned, then lowered his gaze, pretending to read his book. The clock on the mantel said it was precisely five fifty-seven. Hermione watched the second hand sweep around the face feeling apprehensive.

"So, you still want *me* to answer the door?" Harry asked nonchalantly, turning the page.

"Yes," Hermione answered, trying to sound calm.

"Might not be the best way to start your date," he said, his smile getting larger. "You know how much *he* likes me."

"It's not a *date*," she snapped, getting up to look out the window again, and then turned to apologize. "We are only going to be discussing the annulment, whether or not to you know stay married. Oh, bugger! It's not a date."

"If you say so," Harry said, seemingly returning to his book but was actually still watching her over the top instead.

"I can't see the front step from here," Hermione said, trying to peek through the drapes without moving them. "How do I know if I'm dressed appropriately? I don't know where wizards take girls for dinner."

Harry sighed and turned the page. "Hermione, you look great. Calm down," he said for the twentieth time.

She sat down, but she had her hands clenched in her lap, and her legs were bouncing. She watched the clock on the mantel as the second hand swept around the face, mentally counting the seconds. The big hand jerked, first back two minutes, then forward, landing at the twelve. Hermione held her breath as the clock began to chime.

"Hermione, you look fine. Very pretty, actually," Harry reassured her again as the clock continued to chime.

When the last chime of the clock faded, there was a soft but discernable knock at the front door.

Hermione jumped to her feet. "Oh, my gods! He's here!"

Harry set his book down, rose slowly and walked toward the door. Hermione caught his arm just as he passed her. "Wait! What if he expects me to be wearing robes what if I'm underdressed?"

"Relax, will you? Go upstairs, and I'll have Kreacher go get you," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," she said, Apparating immediately. She paced the floor of her room, waiting. She opened her purse, making sure she had both Maggie Whitmire's confirmation forms and Marvin Maretbell's annulment forms, as well as a quill and tightly sealed ink well. She paused to listen if anyone was coming up the stairs, then checked her simple hairstyle as she passed the mirror and wondered if she should remove the hairclip.

Finally, Kreacher appeared, holding her shoes from downstairs. "You is to come down, miss," he said, making a slight bow while dropping her shoes on the floor.

"Kreacher, wait," she called out imploringly. "What is Professor Snape wearing?"

Kreacher turned around. "Clothes, miss," he said, confused by her question.

"Clothes?" she asked, expecting more information.

The portrait of Charis Black-Crouch snickered at her from the frame beside Hermione's wardrobe.

"Yes, miss," the elf said impatiently, "clothes."

"Do you mean he's in robes, a frock coat, or just plain Muggle clothes?" she asked, hoping he'd clarify it a bit more.

"Not robes, miss. Clothes," he said, waving his hand at her as if indicating her attire. "Like my master wears."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Kreacher," she said, slipping on her sandals.

Kreacher shook his head, mumbling as he ran out. Hermione picked up her small purse, checked her face and hair in the mirror one more time, and turned to go. She looked at the clothes on the bed, almost deciding to change into the pale blue oxford blouse, which would be more businesslike, but shrugged. "It's not a date. Were just going somewhere to talk. I have no idea where but it's not a date."

"If you say so, dearie," Charis Black-Crouch said as Hermione exited the room.

Severus was sitting across from Harry in the drawing room, wearing a deep blue shirt and dark charcoal-grey trousers, and his hair looked as if he'd actually washed it. She had to make a double take to assure herself of what she was seeing, but since he was sitting in the drawing room with Harry, it most certainly was Severus. Both men were sitting in silence, Severus with one elbow on the armrest of the couch and his other hand resting on his ankle, which was perched on the his knee. Harry was sitting back in his chair, hands clasped in a pose that was meant to portray a relaxed confidence. Neither man looked comfortable, regardless of their casual postures.

When Hermione entered the room, both men stood up quickly. Severus' gaze swept over her, from her heeled sandals to the way she'd done her hair. She had no idea if he liked what he saw; there wasn't even the slightest hint of approval or disapproval in his expression.

"Are you ready?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she said with a nod. He indicated for her to precede him to the door.

Harry called out just before Severus reached for the latch. "You two have a good time. Severus, be nice to my*friend*."

Severus' expression hardened momentarily. "We will," he replied, opening the door.

Hermione stepped through the door and turned to face him. "Where are we going?" she asked. If she didn't like his choice she'd prepared a list of options, each one a public place.

"Somewhere we can talk," he said cryptically. "I hope those are comfortable for walking," he amended, indicating her sandals as he once again took in her appearance.

"They're comfortable enough," she replied, still baffled by his demeanor.

He held out his arm, waiting for her to grasp it. Taking a deep breath, Hermione placed her hand on his arm. "You might want to hang on," he said with a smirk. She had only a few seconds to grip his arm more tightly before he Disapparated, taking her along with him.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

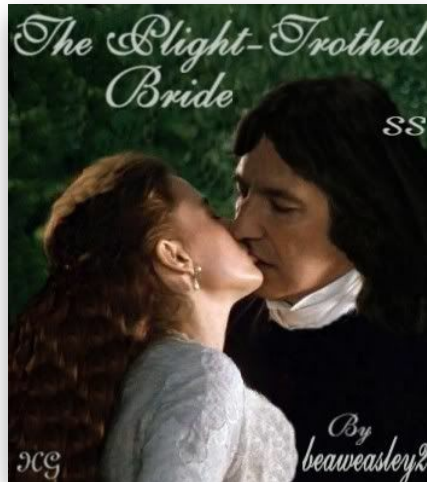
*Charis (Black) Crouch, according to HPLexicon, lived from 1919 to 1973 and was the daughter of Arcturus and Lysandra Black. She had two older sisters, Callidora and Cedrella, and was married to Casper Crouch. I thought she'd be a good one to hang in Hermione's room because not only did she have two sisters, but she also had three children: one son, two daughters. So seeing a girl readying herself for a date would have been a familiar sight. She also may have been slightly more friendly to Hermione*

than any of the other Blacks possibly. Her son may have been Barty Crouch Sr. Charis was a minor Greek Goddess and the Consort of Hephaistos in Greek mythology. In Greek her name means "grace or kindness."

# The First Date

Chapter 17 of 63

Severus takes Hermione on their first date.



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## The First Date

~S~

They arrived beside a potted palm between a building, a bush, and the support beams of a rollercoaster. The crack of their Apparation was covered over by the whoosh of the rollercoaster car overhead and the noisy uproar of families and young people. *Perfect timing*, he thought with a smirk. He made a quick assessment of the Muggles walking by and smiled. No one had taken notice. *Excellent*. Severus grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her along with him before the Ministry recognized the use of magic in the Muggle amusement park and came to investigate.

"What where? This is Adventure Island...? Is that the Barnburner?" Hermione stammered as she turned her head, making a quick assessment of her surroundings, although her expression clearly told Severus she did not believe what she was seeing. He led her out into the sun next to the Adventure Island Food Bar. "Are we eating here?" she asked as Severus maneuvered his way between the people milling around with Hermione in tow. The smells of popcorn, hot dogs, hamburgers, pizza, fish and chips, and cotton candy filled the air.

He started walking for the exit. "Certainly not," he replied, knowing he sounded insulted.*The audacity of her to think I'd eat here. No, I have other plans for this evening*He grasped her hand tighter, making her follow him as he quickly wove through the crowds past the Zamba ride, avoiding the little brats who were running around barely supervised by their parents. "As you have no doubt ascertained, we are in Southend-on-Sea in Essex," he replied, tugging Hermione's hand to make her keep up with him.

"Wait, where are we going? What are we doing here?" she asked as they hurried past another concession vender. "Oh, I used to love the Dodgems bumper cars... and Formula 1 Karting go carts," Hermione exclaimed, still following him compliantly.

He looked at her with a smirk without breaking stride.*Of course she loved these contraptions as a child* "We are going somewhere where we can talk," he said, tugging on her hand again to make her follow him out of the park. "Would you trust me, please?"

"Trust you?" she asked, hurrying to keep up with him. "When have I *evernot* trusted you? I have *always* trusted you."

He ignored her persistent questions as they crossed the street, careful to avoid the cars, and walked down the pavement. He walked more leisurely than they had before, he looking straight ahead or at her, she at the passersby, the buildings, the theme park and the ocean. In fact, Hermione's gaze seemed to take in everything. More than once he caught her eye, and she returned his look with a small smile. "So, where are we going? What made you pick Southend of all places?"

"I wanted to bring you somewhere we could talk somewhere neutral," he admitted, knowing that their last encounter hadn't gone as he'd planned. "There won't be any wizards here, and no chance of accidentally running into anyone we know. It's public but no one will pay us any mind. And I like the ocean."

"Do you know that is the first bit of personal information you've ever told me?" she asked, adjusting the strap of her purse on her shoulder.

Severus stopped at the curb to wait for a break in the traffic. "I'm a private man," he said simply, looking out at the water before checking again to see if it was safe to cross the street. "I've had no reason to be personal with you before."

"No kidding," she mumbled just as Severus entered the crosswalk.

He led her to a fairly large seafront pub with a warm yellow and natural brick façade and red awnings. The sign over the awnings read 'The Borough Hotel.' "This was originally called The Liberty Belle, but after the renovations, it was renamed," he said softly. Hermione gave Severus a quizzical look. He took her look to mean that apparently she didn't understand how he knew about the place or was wondering why he knew that bit of history. "My father would sit in here and get drunk while my mum



would take me walking on the pier." He looked at her, waiting for her to comment. She didn't. He sighed. *I always had good memories of this place*, he thought, although he just couldn't voice it. "They have decent food."

"You came here as a child?" she asked, apparently surprised that his parents would take him anywhere.

Severus nodded once and led her to the back to get their food.

"My family did, too," she added, before Severus could answer her. "When my relatives would come for a visit, my mum would bring me and my cousins here to play and have fish and chips."

He had assumed as much. The boy behind the counter took their order, and soon they were sitting at one of the outside tables. Severus sipped his ale, watching Hermione as she began to eat. "My mother would Apparate us here. It was one of the few times my father allowed her to use magic."

"Which ride was your favorite?" she asked between bites. "I loved Blackbeard's Pirate Adventure, Mr. Smee's Boat Ride, the Fantasy Dome, Jungle Safari, and Beelzee Bob's Trail..."

He'd assumed, knowing Potter, that the brat would have told her all about what he'd seen of his parents when Potter had invaded his mind during those failed Occlumency lessons and the memories that he had passed on to him in the Shack. Now, he was beginning to wonder if Potter had actually kept that information to himself. *Is it possible that Hermione doesn't know a thing about my childhood, after all?* "There weren't any rides when I was a child. The amusement park wasn't added until the redevelopment in the eighties, I believe. I had joined the Dark Lord by the time all of the rides were added."

Hermione pursed her lips, her gaze becoming unfocused and thoughtful as she apparently considered his words, and resumed eating.

After eating a while in silence, he tried again at starting up a conversation. "Your parents are dentists."

Hermione had just taken a bit of her food, nearly choking at his statement. She quickly forced the food down, then raised her hand to hide her teeth before she responded, "Yes, they were."

"Were?" he asked, confused. He knew that Dolohov and Travers had gone to her parents' house looking for her and that they'd been unsuccessful at locating either Hermione or her parents.

"They, er, sold their practice the summer after my sixth year," she finally said, after setting down her drink.

"And what do they do now?" he asked, between bites, more for conversation than for curiosity.

"They, um, moved."

*For a girl who is usually quite talkative, she is being unusually brief in her comments* she thought annoyed. Of course, Severus wasn't well gifted in small talk either, preferring the quiet corners and small gatherings of friends to the larger formal parties. "They moved?"

She set down her fork and looked at him pointedly. "I'm Harry's friend. I was terrified that the Death Eaters would attack my parents because of me, so I helped them go into hiding. I haven't had a chance to go and get them. But there are still Death Eaters out there at large, so I'm still waiting."

"Wise move," he admitted, taking another bite of his own food. "They would have been. When do you plan on telling them it's safe to return?"

"It isn't yet," she said, setting down her fork as she chewed. "Dolohov is still out there somewhere. I know he has a personal grudge against me, and Harry told me the Aurors haven't caught Rowle yet, either."

"Yes, they are. I don't know where," he said, although it was a half-truth. He had a vague idea, but not enough to alert Kingsley.

She nodded at his statement, and they ate in silence awhile.

"If you did know where any of the Death Eaters are hiding, would you tell the Ministry?" she asked, then took a sip of her drink.

Severus had to admit, she had very nice table manners. Either that or she was putting on airs for him. "No, I wouldn't." She gaped at him, and he smirked at her. "I am not trusted by very many in the Ministry, and if I did know the whereabouts of where one was hiding, I don't know where they all are. Considering all the publicity and my trial, I doubt I would be trusted enough to be given such information. Those in hiding are keeping a low profile and are living rough. *If I'm lucky to know when they will be somewhere*, it's not always with enough advanced notice or it's after the fact. Besides, for them it's generally a short excursion get what you need and get out not a leisurely day of shopping... or stealing."

"But if you're not trusted... they would avoid you. You're on their retaliations list as well, aren't you? It's not likely they will ever trust you."

"No, they don't," he said, smirking at the concerned expression in her eyes. "I, like you and your friends, have to watch my back."

Once again, there was an awkward silence between them. "Do you like living at Grimmauld Place?" he asked, changing the subject.

Hermione looked up, covering her mouth again as she swallowed. "It's a place to live. It's convenient, and I don't really have another option. I was staying at the Burrow until, well, us."

He wasn't surprised. He knew she had spent a good deal of her summers with the Weasleys, but with the current circumstances, that arrangement would seem awkward.

A moment later, she looked up at him. "How long are you going to stay at the Malfoys?"

"Until I can either fix up my father's house to be livable or relocate," he stated. He knew he'd have to talk about his house and her moving in with him, but at the same time, he didn't really want to know her answer. "What did you really think about my father's house? Don't lie to me."

Hermione took a sip of her drink and looked away. "It wasn't what I expected your house to be like," she said, turning to look at him as if hoping she hadn't offended him.

"What did you expect?" he asked, curious.

"A stone house with a basement for your lab. Some cottage in a remote area," she replied with a shrug. "I don't know. I suppose I never thought too much about it before."

He wasn't at all surprised. "Most students don't think their professor have lives outside of the castle."

"I'd assumed that since you were a Death Eater, you moved around a lot. Living where Vol..." she started to say then was cut short when he glared at her for using the Dark Lord's name. It was purely a reaction at this point, but he loathed hearing anyone say it. "You-Know-Who lived," she amended smoothly enough.

He was pleased at her tact. "No. Even Death Eaters have homes. Some had very nice homes. The Dark Lord lived in the best of his followers' houses," Severus stated, remembering how housing the Dark Lord had grated on Narcissa's nerves. But he was straying from the question he needed answered. "Could you live in the house?"

She looked at him momentarily as if he'd confused her, then the corner of her mouth twitched almost as if making half a smile. "It needs some work done to the place, a

thorough cleaning, new paint, the floor stripped and waxed, new drapes..."

Once again her expression told him volumes; *she hadn't liked the house and had expected more*

"It's been neglected. I'd have to inspect it for Doxies, Bundimuns, and Weremiftens," she stated.

He set his glass down a little too firmly on the table, insulted. *How dare she think he'd let his house become infested with...* "Weremiftens?" he asked, confused by her nonsense. "There is no such creature."

She laughed before taking a sip of her drink. "Not according to Luna." She set down her cup, and the smile faded. "Is that really where you want to live? You never call it home except when you were dragging me through the place before you took me upstairs to fu shag me."

Severus nearly choked on his ale. She had considered their last copulation as merely a shag, and that realization stung him. He didn't need to probe her mind; her expression said it all. It wasn't one of repulsion, but close, and her tone suggested she hadn't liked it either. The tables around them were starting to fill up as they finished their food. A man and a woman led a noisy party of six kids over to the table next to them. "Eat up," he said. When Hermione set down her fork and placed her napkin on the table, he rose. "Okay, let's go."

"Go where?" she asked, getting up to follow him. He held her hand as he strode back along the pavement, more to make her keep up with him than anything affectionate.

"For a walk on the pier," he stated. He let her hand go as they neared the Southend Pier entrance. Hermione was looking around, walking at his side. He slowed his pace to accompany her stride.

"What do you want out of life?" he asked as a way to learn more about her. Well, more than he already knew.

"To make a difference," she replied.

He looked at her and smirked. "You and Potter already did that."

She looked up at him and a soft flush colored her cheeks. "Harry did. There were a lot of people who made it happen, you included."

"Potter wouldn't have survived the year without your help," he stated, remembering the difficulty he had in trying to find Potter to give him Gryffindor's sword. Even when Phineas knew where they were, the wards around their tent made it impossible to find them. It had been pure luck when he'd spotted Potter in the Forest of Dean.

They walked in silence, stopping at the rail near the breakwater. Severus watched the waves roll in with a sad smile, remembering the times his mother and father had brought him to the shore. Hermione walked over and stood quietly beside him, staring at the water, lost in her own thoughts.

He studied her profile from the corner of his eye and the way her hair moved in the breeze. Thick strands of curly hair rolled on her back and shoulders, and long fly-aways danced against her cheek. She reached up to grasp her hair, twisting it and holding it to one side of her neck. "If I'd known we were coming here, I'd have braided my hair. It'll be all tangled."

Severus looked at her thoughtfully. *She has a point* He watched a pair of girls walk by, taking note of what held their hair as he slipped his wand out of his sleeve and conjured a hair band similar to the girls', being sure to make it stretchy. He handed it to Hermione, and she took it from him with a stunned look. He turned to stared out at the water. "I am capable of being considerate, Hermione."

"I never said you couldn't be," she replied, turning to face into the wind as she made a hasty braid. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. Shall we?" he said, turning his hand over as he held it up in the direction of the pier. "To reiterate my previous question... I meant to ask what you expect to do with your life."

"You mean home, kids, and a career?" she asked.

"Yes, that is what I meant," he replied, trying not to sound exasperated. He was trying to find the answers he wanted while making it seem like small talk, and the effort it took was daunting.

She watched a family pass them, walking in the other direction. "Yes, I want a home. I would possibly like to have a kid and, of course, I intend to work. I don't plan on being a housewife, barefoot and pregnant every other year."

"Thank Merlin," he said. He knew that she was an only child, but since she had spent her summers with the Weasleys, he didn't know how she felt about large families or if she ever regretted being an only child. He, on the other hand, was glad that he was an only child. Well, he'd had a sister, but she had died in her crib, and his mum had lost the child after that one because of a miscarriage. Still, with his dad's temper, it had been for the best.

"You?" she asked, interrupting his woolgathering.

"I never thought I'd survive the war, so I never considered having a family," he stated firmly, lest she think he wanted a large family. He didn't. "I'm not really the marrying type."

Hermione nodded, walking by his side but watching the other people on the pier. Severus likewise surveyed the ocean, watching Hermione from the corner of his eye, all the while being very aware of the strangers around them and what they were doing. It was a beautiful day on the coast, the wind not too strong and the sun warm but not scorching. A sailboat was making a turn and held Severus' attention for a spell.

He turned to look at Hermione and realized she'd been watching the boat as well. "What career do you think you'll pursue?"

"I don't know. I never really thought past finding the Horcruxes, defeating You-Know-Who, and surviving," she said, brushing an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

*She has cute ears*, he thought. *Not like mine. And a nice nose, unlike my large protuberance. In fact, she's grown up to be rather pleasant to look at* He was actually quite fortunate. This spell could have Bonded him with some unattractive dunderhead or someone far more annoying than she was.

"I had thought about joining the Ministry, but they seem so corrupt and inept at times," she continued, apparently unaware of his mental assessment of her face. "I was asked once if I'd considered pursuing a career in law. I suppose I just want to finish school, get my N.E.W.T.s, and see what opens up for me. See what offers I get."

*So we are both facing the same uncertainty. She didn't map out her life after the war either* He let the comment slide. They walked in silence as they strolled down the pier. He knew that the pier closed at dusk, but he planned on Confounding anyone who tried to make him leave before seeing the sunset.

"What about you?" she asked. He'd been distracted by a woman who was fishing as she cast her line into the water, and he turned to look at her again as she added, "What do you want out of life?"

"To be left alone. Paece, solitude, and a few good books," he stated firmly.

Hermione looked up at him, smiling. "And no one dictating what you should do, no masters, overlords, or hundreds of kids melting your cauldrons and exploding potions in your classroom?"

He smiled slightly at her assessment. "Precisely."

"What about family or kids?" she persisted.

"Never thought I'd marry. I never planned on having children. I've raised enough adolescents while teaching to last me a lifetime." He hated being asked, but this was something she needed to know if they were to decide to remain together.

"It's not the same as having your own," she replied.

Severus cringed. *Yes, she definitely wants kids. Still, her children have the potential of being bright and talented. Added with my abilities, they would be exceptional possibly if genetics worked in my favor for a change. Of course, they'd have to be if they got my nose and her hair and teeth. Maybe genetics might take our best attributes...* But the fates were seldom that kind where he was concerned. "I never considered siring any children. I'd hate to bestow this nose on anyone, least of all a child."

"It's not a bad nose," Hermione stated defiantly. "It's Romanesque. It's rather a classic nose."

He looked at her and smirked. "You don't think I know how other's see my features? I've been teased about my nose my entire life. I have my father's nose and his ears."

"I have my father's nose and his eyes, the rest is my mom's or more acutely, my grandmother's. I have the Wellington hair and teeth. Well, that was until Draco helped me get my teeth fixed."

"You could have fixed your teeth at any point," Severus stated. "You are a capable witch."

Hermione blushed. "This way I didn't break a promise to my parents or lie to them. They wanted me to have braces. I was able to tell them about the hex and getting my teeth fixed, and they didn't get as mad."

"Hogwarts sends owls to parents when their children are injured or in need medical attention. They would have known about the curse Draco used and that it was corrected," he explained, unaware if she knew that fact.

"I know," she said, laughing softly. "My parents were really upset about my being Petrified in my second year, and not too thrilled that I was nearly attacked by a werewolf my third. So, I stopped telling them everything that went on in school after that, only explaining anything they'd already heard about. I hated not telling them everything, all the exciting stuff I did, but it was so much easier considering the events during my scholastic years. I'm hoping my last year will be quiet and normal. My parents are already concerned about what career I might choose. I think they feel I'll want an active, dangerous job."

"I would think you've had enough excitement to last you a lifetime. Unless you enjoy the accolades and crave adventure?" he scoffed at her statement.

"No. Like you, I like being effective and useful, but I think I've done enough *saving* to last me a long time," she replied, her tone slightly sarcastic, and turned her head.

He wasn't sure if she was being cheeky with him or if she was being sincere. He really didn't know how to read her expression, since she had a look of serenity on her face as she stared out at the ocean.

But she remained silent. They continued to walk. Hermione watched the people fishing or walking past them and the seagulls. Severus was well aware of the other Muggles, but he was watching her, the way she walked and the casual way her hands swung. She was at ease with him and comfortable in her surroundings. He wondered where she had tucked her wand. It was not in her trousers or down her blouse. The pale yellow fabric of her blouse was lightweight and looked soft, and it would have been loose enough to be modest if the wind wasn't plastering it to her body. That and it had numerous tiny buttons. *Probably to deter me from taking it off* he thought amused. *Too bad she doesn't know I'm well versed in a nonverbal spell that undoes buttons.*

He looked out at the ocean before his imagination could take the better of him and he Apparated them somewhere to undo her buttons and touch her silky-soft skin. "I noticed that Potter had the *Advanced Applied Applications of Arithmancy* sitting next to him in the drawing room. Are you teaching him Arithmancy?" he asked.

"I was reading the book earlier," she admitted. "Before I went up to get ready for our... dinner. I suppose he left it there for me." She stopped and turned to face him. "You know we are avoiding the one question you and I need to talk about."

He sighed, taking her arm and walking to a spot currently devoid of people. "I have not been avoiding it."

Hermione leaned her back to the rail. "I suppose not, but I still want to know if you want out or if you wish to remain in this relationship with me."

He put his forearms on the rail and leaned forward as he stared out at the ocean. It looked so peaceful and calm, although he knew the currents could be strong here. "I have not been avoiding this you have. I have shown you what I have in the way of providing for you. You know my nature. Apparently, you have yet to decide. And you are the one who picked up the annulment parchments."

"Considering how things are going, I thought it best," she said, staring at the boards under her feet. "But you keep coming to get me. That needs to stop if you if we aren't staying together." She turned her head to look at him. She was biting on her lower lip, which he knew meant that she was nervous, apparently no longer comfortable with him. "I don't like how things are."

*She is right. No woman in her right mind would have tolerated me this long.* He turned to look at the water again, clenching his teeth to fight back the ire he felt at her declaration.

"We don't spend any time together," she added.

"We are now," he stated, refusing to look at her. Merlin, he hated feeling cornered.

"I don't know what you intend to do. You keep pushing me away. You haven't given me anything... except to use me," she said, shifting her feet and crossing her arms. "You keep telling me to file for the annulment, but I know you are mad that I picked up the forms. And I assume you're going to accept the Headmaster's position, but you've not said either way," she said, finally looking at his profile.

He didn't know what to say. He fought the instinct to snarl at her for her audacity to speak to him like this, but it was why he brought her here to discuss this with her. "I have yet to decide if I want to return to Hogwarts as Headmaster," he said, breaking the silence.

"What's stopping you?" she asked.

"You," Severus said, turning to look at her. "Us."

"You're holding off your decision because of me?" she asked, her eyebrows rising. She turned around, facing the water. "Don't bother; I'll be returning to the castle in the fall. But, as far as I'm concerned, you can accept the Headmaster's position or not; it's up to you."

"The decision is whether I want to or not. My first year as Headmaster was not as I hoped but not unexpected." In fact, his first year as Headmaster had been a nightmare. The Carrows always making demands, the Dark Lord wanting constant reports, and then there was Mr. Longbottom, Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood and their friends causing havoc and carrying on a mutiny. He did not want another year like the previous one. He was certain he'd be considered the most hated Headmaster ever, even beating old Phineas for the title. *Better not think on that right now.* "So you want the annulment?" he asked, returning to the safer question.

Hermione leaned forward, resting her arms on the rail next to him with her hands clasped together. "You have said numerous times that I should file the annulment papers, even demanded to know why I haven't," she said flatly.

He stared out at the sea, finally having to decide on that question. *Do I really want the annulment?* He had to admit he'd been furious when he read she'd procured the papers, which told him that he really didn't. As much as he hated being in this Bonding, he was. The silence stretched as he warred with his decision.

"Did you change your mind?" Hermione asked, looking at his profile.

He looked at her, trying to reason out her delay in filing. "What I can't fathom is why you haven't."

"Because I thought we should discuss it first," she stated, turning slightly to face him. "Because everything I've read about this spell says that it is a very strong bonding spell. That it picks your soul mate, and it picked you. Because I thought..."

"What?" he interrupted.

He saw her bristle and knew he'd made her mad.

"That when you got over your tantrum about being forced into this union and started thinking about this, you might decide to give a relationship with me, your apparent soul mate, a try."

"I did not have a tantrum," he snarled, straightening.

"No you've been using me like a..." She stopped and looked away. She stared out at the sea, her elbows on the railing, and her hands gripped tightly in front of her face. He could see the clenching of her jaw by the tick in her cheek.

"Like a what, exactly?" he asked with a sneer, urging her to speak her mind with his cold demeanor. Angry, she would speak the truth; she couldn't help herself.

"Like a whore!" She turned on him, her hands clenched in tight fists. "The least you could have done was give me the going rate..."

"I did not cast this spell," he cut her off again, turning to face her, ignoring the looks from the passersby. "I was trapped into a Bonding. A magical Bonding for life!"

"But Marvin Maretbell in the Accidental Magical Reversal Office said that he could reverse it," she started to say as he faced her, standing at his full height, "and that it would be like just getting an annulment."

*Time to set her straight*, he thought with a sneer. "It would be on paper only," he said coolly. "Even if you got the annulment, you can never Bond in matrimony to another." Her look of shock was priceless. "Yes, you and I are *Bonded for life*. It's not a matter if I *want* you, Hermione. I *have* you. You *are* mine. And neither Mrs. Whitmire nor Mr. Maretbell can change it."

"But I we've never signed the Bonding certificate, which Mrs. Whitmire says we have to sign in order to ~~be~~ Bonded," she argued lamely. "Either we sign the Bonding certificate or the annulment forms. If we sign the annulment forms, then Mr. Maretbell in the Accidental Magic Reversal Office reverses the Bonding..."

"It's all just bureaucratic parchmentwork, Hermione. He cannot revoke the Bonding." Her mouth opened to argue and he continued. "The Bonding confirmation form is just that: a registration form that's all it is. There is nothing binding about it, except to file acknowledgement of our Bonding and to receive our license. It's all just parchmentwork so you can receive a piece of gilded parchment with a fancy seal. Likewise, the annulment forms are just an acknowledgement that we are separated, not that the Bond has been dissolved, because it can't be dissolved or reversed." He watched as she staggered a step as his words hit home. "Our magical cores are Bonded to each other. Our children would have a blending of our power, our strengths. We are united. The spell was consummated and the magic sealed on the elemental level. No vows, no ceremony necessary. We are man and wife, or more truthfully, Bonded mates. What part of that don't you understand?"

"But that means that they lied," she said, aghast.

"They appeased your Muggle sensibilities," he replied, knowing she'd understood him fully.

"*Same thing!*" she exclaimed, turning her head away then looking at him again. "I'm not some child to coddle. I expected to be told the truth."

"So far, you have not been accepting the truth. You have been listening to the wrong people and not believing *me* when I have explained this to you. And you claim that you trust me. You of all witches should believe that some magic is final, permanent, binding," he said, looking around and then holding out his hand. "Give me your hand."

"Why?" she asked, looking at his offered hand suspiciously.

"We are causing a scene and should go somewhere more private," he said, flicking his wand to cast a Distraction Charm, making the Muggles around them suddenly interested in something on the other side of the pier.

"Where to?" she asked stubbornly, keeping her hands at her sides.

He wanted to leave, go somewhere they could yell at each other if they wanted. "My place," he suggested.

"No," she stated, shaking her head and making a sweep with her arm, "and not Malfoy Manor either."

This was not going well. "Why not?" he snapped.

"I don't want to go there," she stated adamantly. "Grimmauld Place."

"I hate that house. It's the house of my nemesis," he snarled. *Merlin's balls, she's being difficult.*

"It's Harry's house," she said as if he was unaware who owned it.

Regardless, he thought of it as the Black house. "This is ridiculous," he said, grabbing her arm and Apparating away. They arrived unsplinted, thankfully, under a huge tree next to the river not far from his house. "This is private enough. Sit down."

Hermione crossed her arms, aiming a furious glare at him as he paced. "Look, we *are not* getting an annulment. It's pointless, and that's final," he spat.

"And I will not be used like a convenient personal call girl," she snapped.

"But we *are* going to live together," he stated firmly, standing in front of her and looking down at her, annoyed.

Her eyebrows rose with a look of pure incredulosity, but she did not back down. "I'm not ready for that," she declared.

"Then we are going to spend every night together," he snapped, his eyes narrowed into a scowl. He was irate with her. She was purposely making this difficult.

"In a neutral and public place. I will not be taken to Malfoy Manor, and your house is currently uninhabitable," she stated firmly, still standing with her arms crossed.

"You will come with me wherever I choose to take us," he snarled, furious that she was dictating where he could take her.

"I will have a say in where we go and where I will allow you to take me," she snapped.

"And I will have a say in where my *wife* is living and with whom," he spat, crossing his arms to avoid making his hands into fists.

"I'm not moving out of Harry's house," she added defiantly, "unless you start treating me right, and we sign the confirmation forms."

"I'll sign the forms when we are living together," he snarled, looking down at her with a hard stare, "and not before."

"Deal."

"Fine."

She had her wand out, and with a nod, she Apparated away.

Severus stood staring at the place where she'd been standing, not believing she'd had the audacity to disappear on him.

~H~

Hermione stood on the front step of Grimmauld Place with her wand aimed at the pavement and her heart thumping wildly. That was not how she had envisioned the evening going. They were supposed to sit somewhere and casually decide to sign the annulment forms and go their separate ways. She quickly entered the house and ran for her bedroom. The pounding of feet behind her told her that she was not going to be alone. Harry was the first to her door, followed by Ron and Ginny.

"So how did it go?" Harry asked.

"Not good," Hermione stated, sitting down on the bed.

"You broke up?" Ron asked, leaning around Harry as Harry stepped into the room.

She wanted to wipe the look of hopefulness off his freckled face. "No. *I can't*. We are magically Bonded *for life*," Hermione stated flatly, leaning forward with her arms on her legs. *I'm going to have to look into that. There has to be a way out.*

Ginny pushed her way past the boys to get inside the room. "So, when you say *not good*, could you be any more specific?" she asked, walking over to the bed, and sitting down next to her.

Hermione didn't look up from her wand lying in her hands. "He told me we are not getting an annulment. I told him I'm not ready to live with him, and he won't sign the forms until we do." She looked up at Ginny and continued, "Oh, and apparently neither of us wants a big family, and I told him I don't like his house. And that there will be no more shagging."

"So, in other words, you sorted out quite a bit," Ginny stated, putting her hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"Gin, she's still Bonded to the greasy git!" Ron admonished, and Ginny gave him a murderous look. "Why can't you get an annulment?"

"It's the magic of the spell," Hermione said, looking at him and wishing he'd stayed at home. "Even if I file for the annulment, it's not real. The Bonding can't be broken."

"Who said?" Ron asked, sounding petulant.

"Severus," Hermione stated, turning to look at Harry.

"Ron, this isn't helping," Harry said, walking across the room to sit down next to her. "Are you sure?"

Hermione nodded, looking at his trainers.

"So, what do you want to do now?" Harry asked, brushing back a strand of her hair that had fallen in her face.

"Drink a bottle of Firewhisky, Levitate a book, and drown in a bath." Hermione shrugged, looking back up at Harry. Hermione laughed at Harry's grimace over their shared joke. "Nothing's changed. He insists that he wants to see me every night."

Ron leaned against the doorframe, sulking. "Of course he does."

"But at least this time you talked," Ginny said, trying to sound hopeful. "You know what? Let's play a Muggle game in the kitchen. That word puzzle one Scabble. Kreacher can make us tea and biscuits. It'll be fun."

Ron stood up and put his hands in his pockets. "No thanks. I'm going home." He turned and Apparated before anyone would stop him.

"You know, a game of Scrabble might be fun," Hermione said, smiling as she caught Harry's sour expression. "I'll even allow you to use the Scrabble dictionary, if you like, Harry."

"Sure, why not," he said, standing up and offering her a hand.

~S~

*How dare she simply Apparate away when we were still talking?! He wanted to hex something blow something up. The audacity of that witch to dictate where I'm allowed to take my wife! Or whom she is going to live with. She is my wife, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let such impertinence go unanswered!*

He paced the clearing by the stream. He was certain that she had returned to Grimmauld Place, but he was not going to go running after the chit. Not after all the careful planning he'd done to make this evening enjoyable. He'd chosen the pier because it held favorable memories, and she hadn't appreciated it at all.

She'd accused him of treating her like a whore, called his house unlivable, and refused to move in with him, choosing to live with Potter instead. *At least I know that Potter isn't interested in a sexual relationship with my wife. But that Weasley boy is. Who knows how often he is at the house.* Severus walked the short way to his house, stopping to stare at the weatherworn brick, darkly draped window, and black door. It wasn't much to look at from the front, just another brick house at the end of a row of identical industrial-style houses of the mill-town. There wasn't a front garden except for a narrow strip of weeds along the pavement and on either side of the front steps.

He turned and looked at his neighborhood. Although there was a rumor that a developer was interested in the town, the place still looked bleak and, in some places, deserted. If not for his wards, his house might have fallen victim to vandals long ago. Many of the street lamps were out, not having worked for years, and most of the neighboring houses were generally in a poor state of repair, with boarded-up windows and rubbish in the curb. Severus turned, not really wanting to go inside, and walked around the side of the house to Apparate. He hated his father's house. Hermione was right, but it galled him to admit that.

Severus arrived at the Manor, his temper satiated, but his mood dark. He stormed into the manor and headed for the library. If he was going to have to remain Bonded to that witch, he'd make damn sure she didn't just vanish on him again. There was a way to strengthen the Bond, creating a tie between them. He remembered seeing it while researching which spell Hermione had used. He stopped short, seeing Draco exit the library, letting the boy pass him unseen before entering the library himself. Unfortunately, Lucius was standing in front of a bookshelf, looking up at him and then turning his gaze back to the book in his hand.

"Judging by that look, I suppose it would be best if I didn't offer you a drink," Lucius said, still flipping pages as if there was nothing amiss. "I take it your time with Mrs. Snape didn't go well."

"You could say that," Severus growled.

Lucius turned the page as if scanning for a particular spell. "Do you want to tell me or should I guess?"

Severus opted to walk in, stopping in the middle of the room. "We are not getting the annulment," he said, realizing Lucius was standing at the very shelf he desired.

"Wouldn't matter if she did." Lucius set the book on the shelf, selecting another. "Is that all that was decided?"

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Not that this is any of your business, but she refuses to move into my house, and she will not come here."

"Oh my, that does create a dilemma," Lucius stated, turning slightly. "What will you do?"

"I'm going to have to sell the place," Severus stated, "and I'm going to accept the Headmaster position."

Lucius smiled and backed up closer to the window. "No surprise on either account."

Severus had moved forward, stopping at the section of books next to the preferred shelves. "What does that mean?"

Lucius didn't look up at him. "You hate that house you always have. And you earned the position of Headmaster, regardless of the previous year. You will make an admirable Headmaster."

Severus turned his back on the books. "My first year was an unmitigated disaster."

"You won't be dealing with the same annoyances and conflicts." Lucius turned to face him. "I assume she will be returning to the castle as well?"

"Yes," Severus replied.

"Should be a very interesting year." Lucius closed the book and turned to leave. "I'll have my solicitor come by to assist you with the arrangements on selling the house."

"I'm not in any hurry," Severus stated, not sure why.

"Feel free to utilize his services when you are. You know how to reach him." Lucius stopped at the doorway and turned his head in Severus' direction. "Good night, Severus. Oh, and please refrain from damaging Narcissa's new furnishings."

"New?" Severus asked surprised.

"She redecorated a bedroom, the small parlor, and the tea room," Lucius explained, "as well as replaced a few other furnishings. Apparently, she wanted to redecorate."

"I'll refrain," Severus said with a smirk.

"Thank you."

~ T B C ~>

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*After visiting several sites on the internet to pick a real place for their date, I found Southend-on-Sea. It's is the largest town in Essex, located at the mouth of the Thames Estuary and only about forty miles from London. Southend is a busy tourist destination with excellent shopping, a world famous Pier, seven miles of beaches, and numerous restaurants, wine bars and pubs.*

*About Adventure Island park: according to their website and related webpages, the land west of the pier was purchased by the Millers back in 1976. The addition of the rides were part of the re-development of the park and one of the major turning points in the park's history. In 1995, the construction of the east side began and this area is now home to the likes of Rage and Sky Drop. I used Google Earth and various sites on the internet to pick the spot Severus Apparated them to as well as the rides I mentioned in the story.*

*The Borough Hotel is a local pub within walking distance to the pier. I found it on a website and found its location with Google Earth. From what I gathered, it's a very good sea front pub with a wide selection of Real-ale, Scrumpy Jack, cheap pool, friendly staff, house doubles, sofas and serves good food.*

## The Big Birthday Adventure

*Chapter 18 of 63*

The whole gang takes Harry on a wild weekend for his birthday, taking him to the places he's always dreamed of going, but the Dursleys, although they took Dudley, hadn't let him go. Too bad the gossip of the Ministry and a certain bug are stirring up trouble. Oh, and Hermione forgot to tell someone of her plans. Oops.



~~~~~o 15 o~~~~~

### The Big Birthday Adventure

~M~

Maggie sat down at her desk, feeling all aflutter over the lovely invitation sent to her by Rita Skeeter. The girls in the break room were positively jealous that she had such a famous and talented friend, and Beatrice was pleading for Maggie to get her an autograph on her copy of Rita's book.

*Dearest Rita,*

I fully agree with you that the Snapes are only delaying the inevitable. I could hardly believe what you wrote me in our last correspondence. I've been told by the Minister himself that Marvin Maretbell is more than happy to let the couple work things out. In the meantime, I still have to keep their file in the pending tray until I hear either way. Nevertheless, neither Severus Snape nor Hermione Granger-Snape will return my owls. So, I don't have anything new for you regarding them.

Maggie looked at the *Daily Prophet* and shook her head. Judging by the pictures on the front page, the couple had had a rather bad fight. There was a large picture of Severus and Hermione arguing on the pier with several smaller pictures along the side. The first was of them holding hands as they crossed a street, neither of them looking at the other. The second was of them eating at a table outside a pub, in which Mr. Snape was scowling and Miss Granger-Snape was picking at her food, and a third showed them walking side by side on the pier. They did not look like a happy couple. How Rita managed to get pictures of the Snapes, she had no idea. The witch was positively a marvel!

She picked up her quill to finish off her letter to Rita.

*As far as I know, Ginevra's parents are insisting that she finish school before she and Mr. Potter are properly married. Yes, Mr. Weasley has been by my office to pick up the standard marriage contracts, but as you know, it's a formality at this point. Mr. Harry Potter and Mrs. Ginevra Weasley-Potter are a registered Bonded couple.*

Likewise, I have received the forms from Augusta Longbottom, and yes, Neville Longbottom is marrying Luna Lovegood on the eighth of August. The site of the wedding is apparently under the Fidelius Charm. There are many people in the Ministry, myself not included, who have been invited. There are nearly a hundred Portkeys that have been issued for the date, but I cannot confirm anything for you. I'm so terribly sorry.

Oh, and I am delighted to confirm that Hilliard and Violetta Hobday did indeed have another baby. A girl, Sylvania, who was born yesterday. I think she is a premature baby; the registry didn't record the child as being healthy, and she's small, only fourteen inches long and weighing in at just under three pounds. I'm glad to know that the Healers at St. Mungo's are keeping the baby – I hope the dear little thing survives. It would crush Violetta to lose another. You know that this is her third, right? The last one died after only a month. Poor dear.

Marcus Flint and Charisa Travers have filed their forms, claiming they made a magical Bonding last October, but there is no such registration of their Bonding in the ledger. Their first child, Ursula, was born a week ago at the family home. She was twenty-two inches and over nine pounds at birth, (nine pounds and eight ounces to be precise). I have sent them the necessary forms for a marriage license. I'll owl you in regards to their response.

Thorfinn Rowle died yesterday, as well, resisting arrest. I know from Beatrice Underwood that Prudence Finklemyer heard that he'd died in transport to Azkaban. He'd taken no more than four curses to the chest. But this is hearsay. I do know that Gawain Robards and Zachery Wildman were two of the Aurors who finally caught him.

I do so look forward to our lunch date on Wednesday. If I learn where the Longbottom wedding is, I'll owl you.

Your friend,

Maggie Whitmire

~H~

They'd made plans to go play paintball and spend the weekend at Alton Towers, but Harry had wanted to stop at Godric's Hollow first. It was Harry's birthday after all, and if he wanted to spend it going back to the home his parents had died, then who was she to complain? Hermione had helped Harry make the plans, and Ginny, of course, had wanted to go, as had Ron. Neville and Luna had been invited to go, also. Hermione had been looking forward to this weekend for a long time, even as much as Harry had.

The house in Godric's Hollow looked unchanged. As soon as Harry touched the gate, the sign appeared. More graffiti appeared on the sign, apparently having been added since Harry's last visit, with new congratulatory messages on top of the old ones, which Harry and Ginny stood side by side, reading aloud. Finally, Harry touched the gate with his wand and unlocked the wards, letting in his friends.

The house had been magically sealed after that night, but recognized Harry's magical signature, and they entered with little fuss. The downstairs looked as if it hadn't been touched in years. Everything was just as the Aurors had left it all those years before. Halloween decorations still adorned the front lounge. There was evidence of a fight, and there were toys on the floor, including a toy broom that Harry picked up and examined, his eyes nearly filling with tears. Ginny picked up a baby blanket with a white dragon emblazoned on it and folded it neatly, placing it carefully in Hermione's beaded purse, along with the toy broom Harry silently handed to her. Several books were sitting on the side table, and there was a pipe on the coffee table, which Hermione put in her purse, as well.

In the kitchen, there were cookies still sitting on the baking sheet and cooling rack on the counter, although they had a layer of dust on them, not frosting. Even though the

house looked as if it had once been homey, there were very few personal items of the last occupants. Six pictures still remained on the icebox, held in place by magnets, all showing Harry as a baby. Luna carefully removed each one and handed them to Hermione to put in the purse.

The other rooms downstairs showed little else. Ron and Luna stayed downstairs to keep watch as the others went upstairs to investigate. The loo upstairs was a mess; one wall was missing where the shower might have been, and the debris was everywhere. Hermione found some soaps, a razor, and two toothbrushes still on the counter next to jars of what might have been hand cream and lotion. Hermione examined them, realizing that they were homemade, most likely by Harry's mum.

Harry and Neville managed to get into the room where Lily had given her life to protect her baby. The door was completely gone, two of the walls had collapsed, and the ceiling had caved in, making gaining access dangerous. The furniture Lily had used to try to barricade herself in was destroyed. Only the crib remained standing. Harry and Neville crawled out of the room, Harry clutching a toy giraffe, a large stuffed cat, and another baby blanket. He shrank the crib, which Neville carried out and handed to Hermione. The tiny crib was sweet, white with blue bedding. Hermione tucked it in her purse carefully. The room that had been used by Lily and James was a mess. Clothes and papers littered the floor as if it had been ransacked. Hermione and Ginny helped Harry collect the letters and papers, finding occasional torn pictures of his parents and their friends.

Ginny held up an envelope, reading the address. "Harry, it's addressed to your dad in Glasbury. I think Sirius wrote this ages ago when they were kids," she said, handing him the faded envelope. "It might be where your grandparents lived."

Harry nodded and slipped the envelope into his pocket. "I'd like to go there – after. Hermione, do you know the area?"

"Yes, I've been, once. I remember the bridge well enough," she replied, and Harry smiled. "It's in Wales, on the River Wye, west of Hereford. I don't know if we'll find it, Harry, but as I recall, it's a nice village."

Harry nodded. "I think I remember the bridge from when Uncle Vernon took us to Beacon. Aunt Petunia had us stop in the first town to feed Dudley. I think that was Glasbury."

"I've been there, too," Luna said, entering the room and taking Neville's hand. "Dad likes to fish on the River Wye for kellsippers." Luna looked up at Harry with a warm smile. "The kellsippers are usually active in the mornings, but we may still see them jump. If you spot one, it's supposed to be lucky."

Harry and Ginny laughed softly as Hermione simply smiled indulgently. "So, after the graveyard, we'll Apparate in pairs for the bridge. Harry, you take Ginny, and I'll take Ron, since I know we can do Side-Along Apparations, and Luna, take Neville, if you can. We can all meet at the bridge at Glasbury. We have until two to get to West Sussex, so we have time," Hermione suggested.

"Yes, I can Apparate with Neville," Luna replied, taking Neville's hand and giving it a gentle squeeze, making him smile at her with a look of affectionate pride in return.

Harry nodded, and Ginny touched his shoulder. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Yeah. It's like saying goodbye to them." He looked at his friends. "I'm – there's nothing else. We should go."

They left the house, heading to the graveyard. Hermione had a bad feeling about going, but Harry insisted, wanting to see it one more time. They were careful to watch their surroundings as they walked up to the Potters' grave. Harry stood, staring at the gravestone, surrounded by the people he cared for most. Hermione felt a lump in her throat while watching him.

"I think we should go," Luna said softly, moving to stand closer to Ron and Neville, her wand pointing at the shadows under the trees beyond the fence.

Why?" Harry asked, turning to face her.

"Ghosts don't wear black," she replied, aiming for the trees. Twin jets of light shot out of the dark shadows under the trees, making Harry, Hermione, and Ron duck for cover while drawing their wands. Ginny and Luna were the first to cast spells in the direction they'd come from, followed by a blast of light from Neville's wand as Hermione cast a Leg-Locker in the general direction.

"Quick!" Neville said, grabbing Luna's arm. Harry quickly took hold of Ginny's, and Hermione gripped Ron's as two more spells shot out from the trees at them.

Ron and Hermione Disapparated, arriving on the shoreline of the River Wye within sight of Glasbury bridge. "Do you think they're all right?" he asked, looking around for the others.

"I'm sure they are," Hermione stated, surveying their surroundings. "We got out of there pretty quickly."

"But I don't see anyone," Ron stated, looking around nervously. "Those were Death Eaters, huh? How come they knew we were there?"

"I'm sure they are okay, Ron," she replied, trying to sound surer than she felt. "Yes, I think they were Death Eaters. We were warned that they might be hanging around, although I admit I didn't really think they would be."

"So why are we so far away from the bridge," he asked. "Did you miss it?"

Hermione gave him a scathing look. "This is the place I remembered because I was here before, walking on the shore with my dad. It was the first image that came to me, and I thought it would be best if I didn't Apparate us *on* the bridge. You know, in case of Muggles? I'm not sure where Luna or Harry would go, but I assume she'd Apparate to the shore like we did."

"You don't think anyone got hurt do you?" he asked, as Hermione started walking toward the bridge.

"I don't know," she admitted, stopping and turning around. "Last I saw, everyone was grabbing hands to Apparate. It didn't look like anyone was hit. When we all get to the bridge, we'll know for sure." She wheeled back around to hike to the bridge and find their friends.

The crunching sounds of Ron's boots indicated that he was hurrying up to catch up with her. "Are you really going to stay with the greasy git?" Ron asked, walking next to her again.

"Ron, stop calling him that! His name is Severus or Professor Snape," she admonished him, still looking around, checking that they hadn't been followed or spotted and hoping to find some sign of the others.

"But you're staying with him?" he persisted.

Hermione turned to look at him. "For now, yes. Or until I get some answers."

"Like?" he asked, trying to urge her into divulging more.

Hermione stopped and pulled him closer to a thick clump of vegetation. "Do you really love me or is it the idea of me?" she asked, and he looked at her, puzzled. "I mean, you and I don't agree on much or have very much in common. We fight and argue – always have. I care for you a great deal, but I don't know if we'd have worked out. And this, all of this has really made me think about things. Besides, Severus told me that this magical Bonding can't be broken, but Mr. Maretbell said it could be reversed, and Minister Kingsley said it could be annulled. I don't know whom to believe. Severus was adamant that it can't."

"I'd believe Minister Kingsley and Mr. Maretbell," Ron said, plucking a leaf off the bush.



Hermione watched him tear the leave in shreds. "I want to get to the Hogwarts library and read up on magical Bondings. There isn't anything on them at Grimmauld Place."

"Always trusting the books," he said with a sigh, dropping the remains of the leaf.

"Yes, I do," she admitted and touched his arm to make him look at her. "If there is a way to reverse this, I want to find it. There is no point of... If this is permanent, if the Bond will tie me to Severus for life, getting an annulment is just like signing separation papers for nothing. If it *can* be broken, that's different. But I have to make sure. Can't you understand that?"

"Yeah," he said, turning to look at the bridge. "But I don't like it; you were my girl and now you're with *him*. Why *him* of all people?"

"I didn't *choose* him, Ron. It just happened!" she exclaimed, trying to keep her voice low. "I wish you were coming back to school and finishing your last year."

"I don't have to – Harry and I are in Auror training," he said with a grimace. "Why do you care if I come back to school? It won't be the same."

They started walking again. "It'll be weird you know, being roommates with Ginny and everyone who was a year behind me," she said wistfully. "It'll just be really different. I can't imagine Hogwarts without you and Harry."

"Yeah, like you'd really care if I was there. It wouldn't change anything, would it?" he asked, pulling another leaf off a bush they passed.

"I don't think so. I still have to look this spell up and find out what I can. I can't believe that the Ministry would lie to me if it can't be reversed. I mean, why would they do that?" she asked.

"I dunno," he replied. He stopped and looked at her. "I'll wait for you – until you decide what you are going to do."

"Ron," Hermione sighed. "I don't know what to say. I don't think it's fair for you to... What if he's right and I am Bonded to him for life – then what?"

Ron kicked a stone and stared at the water. "I still love you."

"We can still be friends," Hermione said, touching his arm.

He turned to look at her hand, then looked up at her face, and stopped. "I want you to be my wife! I dreamed about you being my wife. Having kids with you. A house. Everything I wanted included you – and now you'll have it with *him*! How you can stand it when he – I don't even want to think about it."

"Ron!" she said, grabbing his arm tighter when he tried to storm away. "How many times must I say this? I'm sorry. The spell didn't connect me to you. It connected me to..."

"Him! I know," he interrupted her with a snarl. "I know you're shagging him. I know when he sends for you, he's using you. I know you're not happy with him – I see it in your eyes." He jerked his arm away and faced the river. "I really hate this. Truth is, I really want to kill the git, but I know I wouldn't be able to. It's not that I don't think I could; I think it would be a really ugly fight. *Shite*, I hate this!"

Hermione watched him aghast as he bent down and picked up a rock. *I wanted to be with you that way, and you...*

"Weren't ready," she interpolated.

"Didn't want me," he finished, throwing the rock as far as he could.

Hermione stood as if rooted in place. Ron looked at her, and then he picked up another rock. "No comment then?" he sneered softly as he threw the rock into the river.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked, feeling hurt, almost as much as she'd hurt him.

"You've said enough," he said, looking sulky. "Let's go find the others."

~S~

He'd made the decision to try again with Hermione by taking the girl to Duncansby Head on the most northern part of the Scotland mainland for supper and a walk along the cliffs. It was neutral enough and somewhat private. The black Ferrin gull chicks would be flying now, so the nests would be mostly abandoned. The eggshells in the nests were used in potions, but it was the unhatched eggs he wanted. Few people knew their value. The unattended or abandoned eggs in the nests would rot, turning sulfuric in their shells, and become quite potent. If any contained embryos, it was even better. Severus had been experimenting with the unhatched eggs over the summers for a few years now. That, and the black wingtip and tail feathers of the adult gulls made excellent quills.

Severus wondered if Hermione liked flying, but since she hadn't returned his owl yet, he couldn't be sure if the idea of seeing the huge gulls might interest her. It was still worth the trip, even if she would only hover on Draco's old school broom. The Thirle Door and the Stacks of Duncansby, the Rock Clefts and Sclaites were magnificent to look at from brooms. If they were really lucky, they might find Bluepike crabs, another potion ingredient whose meat was also a culinary delicacy.

He'd taken a bottle of elf wine from the wine cellar with Lucius' permission, opting for the 1943 pinot noir instead of the 1834 chardonnay as suggested, and had one of the house-elves prepare a supper and pack a picnic basket. Still wondering why the girl hadn't answered his letter, he'd Apparated to Grimmauld Place precisely at eleven.

Severus paced outside of Grimmauld Place. He knocked on the door, only to be told by the old house-elf that Hermione wasn't in residence. Severus tried to ask the elf where the girl had gone, but the elf became indignant, telling him that he would not betray his master, and slammed the door. Insulted, because the elf was Potter's and not Hermione's, he tried casting his Patronus. The hawk circled, entered the window next to him, and exited from an upstairs window. He waited several minutes, but she didn't answer his Patronus. He tried directing his Patronus to go wherever she was, but the hawk soared off to the west, only to return and fade. For some reason, he felt that she was in Wales or some part of the Brecon Beacons National Park area, but he dismissed the feeling.

Furiously annoyed, he left the street and returned to Malfoy Manor.

Narcissa was standing in the foyer, talking to Draco, when he arrived. "I don't want that boy here," she implored before being startled by Severus' sudden appearance. "You're back?"

"Obviously," Severus replied as he thrust the basket on Draco. "You might as well consume this – it would be a waste otherwise. Maybe you can ask your woman over and picnic on the grounds." He turned to Narcissa and sighed. "Narcissa, I appreciate loan of the broom, but I won't need it today," he stated a little more amicably as he handed the Nimbus to the house-elf that appeared at his side

Draco's mouth curled into a smirk. "Granger stood you up?"

"Draco!" Narcissa scolded him. "Mind your manners, young man, and it's Mrs. Snape." She turned to Severus. "Was there a problem?"

"I don't wish to extrapolate, Narcissa, but yes, there was a problem." He bowed stiffly and stormed into the library for a drink.

~\*~

Narcissa turned on Draco and scowled. "That was uncalled for, young man. Severus is *aguest* in this house, and as such, I expect better from you. He's having a lot to deal with, and your attitude isn't helping matters."

Draco looked at this mum, his expression cross. "If his *Mudblood* is causing him grief, it isn't *my* problem," he said, trying to control his sneer.

Narcissa drew herself up, holding herself erect. "It is when he is a guest in my house." The pose used to make Draco cower, but now that he was the same height as she was, the effect wasn't as imposing to him, and it showed in his eyes.

"The next thing you know, he'll bring her here," he spat softly.

She allowed her magic to surge in her as if ready to cast a strong curse, making her hair ripple slightly. "And if he does, you shall be civil – no – courteous towards her!"

"She is a *Mudblood*," he retorted, although his shoulders were less rigid and he'd taken half of a step away from his mum.

"She is your godfather's wife," she snapped, pointing her finger at his chest, her blue eyes narrowing slightly in anger at his discourtesy towards her and to Severus. "I brought you up better than this, Draco. Regardless of what you *think* that man *might* have done to you, he has been a good friend to this family – for years. He deserves your respect, and I expect you to show it to him. And that means his wife, as well."

"He doesn't even love her," he replied defensively.

Taking the basket out of his hands, Narcissa straightened and squared her shoulders. "I wouldn't be so sure about that, Draco. You may invite Miss Parkinson to visit today, but I do not want that Flint or Pucey here. Not until after the trial. And if you know what's good for you, you *will* be polite to Severus. I'll not have my son behaving like a Carrow," she stated before turning heel on her son.

~H~

When Hermione and Ron found Luna and Neville kissing under the bridge, Ron immediately began to worry about Ginny and Harry. Luna tried to assure Ron that Harry had Apparated before they had and that neither had looked harmed in any way. Neville pointed out that Harry would have Apparated to a spot he remembered and that it could be anywhere near the bridge or the town, and they would have to walk here on foot. Ron gazed around nervously while Hermione, Neville and Luna talked about the incident on the graveyard.

A few minutes later, Harry and Ginny finally showed up, eagerly asking if everyone was all right. Harry explained that he'd sent his Patronus to Minister Shacklebolt about the Death Eaters. Feeling relieved that everyone was all right, they pushed aside the events at Godric's Hollow, determined to enjoy Harry's birthday.

Finding the house from the address on the envelope Ginny had found in the Potters' bedroom was easier than they'd anticipated. The house in Glasbury was a lovely old Tudor-style home. There were swings and a sandbox in the garden, bikes on the drive, and dogs barking in the back garden. Harry had turned to leave the moment they confirmed that they had the right address. Right house – obviously someone else's.

They had lunch at a quaint café in town and then Apparated to the Holmbush Paintball fields in West Sussex in time to transfigure their clothes to match the pictures Hermione had. They had been matched up against another group of late-teens for the paintball version of capture-the-flag. Luna had proved to be really good at hitting trees, loving the pattern the paint made on the bark. Ron and Neville had hit anything that moved – or tried to. Harry and Ginny had done really well, really getting into the game, and Hermione had simply tried her best to duck as much as possible. She had, however, managed to hit one or two members of the red team in each scenario of capture the flag. Hermione was certain that either Ron or Neville had been conjuring up extra paintballs whenever they'd run out. It seemed to her that they had been going through many more tubes of paint than Harry and Hermione had given them and had often given fresh tubes of paintballs to Ginny and Harry when they'd run out as well. By the end of the afternoon, everyone but Luna had been hot, dirty, sweaty, covered with splotches of paint, and panting. But it had been fun.

They stayed the first night in an inn in Brighton. Harry and Hermione checked in and then let the others sneak into the room, putting a few wards on the door. Hermione transfigured the beds, charming the two twin beds in the room to accommodate all six of them: the girls on one and the boys on the other. The guys tried convincing Hermione to turn the two twin beds into three and use Silencing Charms, but Ginny and Luna squashed that idea, much to the chagrin of Neville and Harry.

~S~

Severus returned to Grimmauld Place at six. The house was dark, save for one light in the drawing room. He knocked on the door, steeling his breathing to a normal rate, not one of annoyed anger, and waited. The old house-elf answered the door, again telling him that Hermione was not in residence.

"Could you please tell me where the *girl* went?" he asked, trying to keep his tone amiable.

"I cannot say, sir. Kreacher keeps his master's secrets," the elf croaked out rudely for the second time, trying to close the door, but Severus shot his arm out to brace the door open.

He quickly tried an Imperius on the creature. "I'm not interested in the whereabouts of Mr. Potter. I am looking for Miss Granger, the girl who resides here."

"She went with my master to my master's house," he replied, trying to close the door again, but Severus forcefully held it open.

"I do believe that this is your master's house," Severus said, managing to keep his temper in check.

The old elf looked up at him and shook his head. "It is, sir, but they is not here. Kreacher only knows that they go to master's house to shoot paint."

Severus had no idea what nonsense the elf was talking about. He wondered if Potter would bring Weasley and Hermione to his aunt's home, knowing full well what Petunia's reaction to his wizard friends would be. As much as he wanted to go find Hermione, he'd have to find Potter to get to her. He tried to remember what he could about Harry's family – his aunt's home to be precise, vaguely thinking the house was on the south coast, then shook his head. *No, Potter wasn't from Sussex, I am sure of that. It was more inland...* He didn't really remember where it was, but he knew that Lucius did. "Am I to understand that Miss Granger went with Mr. Potter to visit the Dursleys?" he asked.

Kreacher only shrugged. "I don't know, sir. They did not tell Kreacher."

Severus knew that he wasn't going to get any answers, so he released the Imperius and befuddled the memory of his visit, in case the elf told Potter he'd used the Unforgivable on him, and allowed the creature to slam the door closed. He turned to face the street, wondering if it was worth asking Lucius where the house was. He thought it was in Surrey, still having a nagging feeling that Hermione and her friends were in West Sussex, but couldn't remember the address. Neither Dumbledore nor the Dark Lord had wanted him anywhere near the house in case Petunia recognized him. He decided to go to the Ole Oak Cask and Cleaver for a beer and steak, rather than return to the Manor so early. Besides, he didn't want to give Lucius any reason to question him about his interrupted date plans.

~H~

In the morning they slipped out early to have breakfast at McDonald's before going to Alton Towers amusement park in Staffordshire. Upon Hermione's suggestion, they booked a room at the Splash Landings Hotel, then went to spend the day in the theme park.

Ron whined about the lines, wanting to Apparate to the front of the lines and Confund everyone, but Ginny and Hermione were adamant against it.

Luna enjoyed the cotton candy so much she had three. And Neville loved the hot dogs so much, once he'd been convinced they were not made from actual dog meat, that he ate four of them.

Hermione kept tabs on the map as to which rides Harry wanted to ride the most, making sure that they managed to get in at least ten.

Ginny and Luna loved the roller coasters.

Neville claimed to, although he was slightly pale and shaking each time he got off the rides and had to be coerced into trying the Nemesis, the inverted rollercoaster, and he had to Scourgify his trousers after ridding the Oblivion.

Ron scoffed at the fake ghosts in the Haunted Hollow and complained about getting wet on the Ripsaw, which Ginny chided him about as they dried their clothes, pointing out that they'd known that the ride swung in, around, and through the water fountains before they'd gotten on.

And Harry was having the time of his life.

~S~

She was avoiding him. He knew it.

He'd tried casting his Patronus, but there had been no response.

He'd asked Narcissa if he could borrow a house-elf, and the bloody creature hadn't returned either.

Lucius had told him the address of the Dursleys in Surrey, but that they hadn't returned back to their house since the war because the Ministry didn't think it was safe for them to do so yet. Severus had nearly sworn aloud when he'd remembered that Dumbledore had warned Hestia and Dedalus to keep the Dursleys at the safe house until they'd be safe enough to return to Muggle life, not until just after the war. There were still Death Eaters at large who thought that Potter might care enough about them to try and save them from a trap. Severus wasn't sure, but the boy did have a hero complex, so that was possible.

He forced his mind to think about what he knew about Potter and not focus on his desire to get his hands on Hermione.

He'd returned to Grimmauld Place, and the elf told him the same thing it had the previous night.

*The Burrow is out of the question because there is no way the elf would have called it Potter's home* Severus reasoned out, *even though that was the only other place that the boy had ever lived...* Then it hit him. *Surely the boy wouldn't have taken Hermione to Godric's Hollow for two days? That house is a ruin. Still, he might have gone there to see it, thinking it safe to do so.*

He Disillusioned himself and Apparated to the town, only a few feet from the old house. The house Lily had died in was just as he remembered it: dark, lifeless, and the upper floor mangled. There was no evidence that Potter was still there or if he'd even been there.

Flanders and Travers were standing in the shadows of the trees in the graveyard when he went to pay respects to Lily's grave. Severus had no trouble sneaking up on them.

"He'll be back, I say. He didn't have time to leave nothin'," Flanders said.

"I think Dolohov is wonky; he won't come back," Travers growled, shifting his feet. "Didn't plan it all that well, did he? He didn't figure on the fact that Potter and Granger would bring their friends along. And why hide all the way back here, huh? You got all these gravestones, and you both chose to be way over here?" Travers asked, waving his hand at the graveyard.

Flanders glared at Travers, his fingers gripping his wand tightly as the wizard continued berating him. "Besides, while you were trying to get Potter, he was trying to get that girl, Granger, and he wasn't able to get his hands on her neither."

Severus felt himself bristle at the comment. *He'd attacked Hermione?* Casting a Silencing Charm at the ground as he walked closer, he moved within easy listening distance of the two, close enough to be able to cast a spell if he needed to.

"It was six to two," Flanders argued defensively. "We was out numbered, I tell ya."

"Six teens, five who haven't even finished school, against two fully-grown wizards," Travers sneered, turning to lean on the nearest gravestone. "This is a waste of time, if you ask me."

"They are war heroes! They've been hardened by the war and know how to fight, I tell ya," Flanders growled, at least trying to keep his deep voice low. The problem was he had the kind of voice that carried well, especially in silent places like a graveyard. "That girl got me arm! And it still hurts," he whined, raising his arm and flexing the elbow joint.

"They were standing at the grave – way over there!" Travers said, swinging his arm toward the Potters' gravestone. "You're a wet prat if that hurt you so badly. No kid could send a full force spell from that distance."

Severus felt a quick surge of pride. *Hermione could, and so could Potter or Miss Weasley if they put their mind to it.*

Flanders turned on him, and for a moment Severus thought that he'd been spotted. "The girl is a really strong witch. Everyone says she's extra smart and really capable. I'm telling you she managed a Legs-Locker at me arm from *all the way from there!*" Flanders spat the last few words angrily, making spittle come from his mouth as he pointed past Severus.

Travers stared at Flanders, and for a moment the men simply glowered at each other. "Fine. But I still want to be the one that gets that witch. Imagine how tight she'd be."

Severus had heard enough. Fighting Potter and Black in school and surviving two wars had taught him how to cast sequential spells without pausing. He deftly Stupefied the two thugs, adding a Blinding Hex on both and a Ringing Jinx on their ears. He then sent his Patronus to Kingsley with the message, '*There are two confirmed Death Eaters in the Godric's Hollow graveyard – the ones that attacked Potter and Granger earlier. Come get them.*'

*There, that's for you, wife. I will be the only wizard who knows just how tight you are or how you look in the throes of passion. You are mine. Now, where the bloody hell are you?*

North, the voice in his head said. *West Midlands.* He shook his head. *This is no time to go after a wild hippogriff chase.*

He quickly backed away from the two incapacitated men and hurried for a safe place to Apparate where he'd be unnoticed. Several cracks announced the arrival of Kingsley and his Aurors. Severus wasn't surprised to see Arthur Weasley among the group. He waited, listening as the men gathered up the Death Eaters, scanned the area and left. He was pleased that his name wasn't mentioned during the retrieval. *At least Kingsley is holding up his end of our bargain.* He leaned against the gravestone at the other end of the graveyard, thinking about what he'd heard. *This means that Dolohov is still seeking retaliation against Hermione. He might come looking for his thugs... or not. He's a suspicious man, and hot tempered, but he's not dumb.*

Severus settled his bum more squarely against the stone to try and get comfortable*If Dolohov is going to come, it will be within the hour or at least before dark.*He had no other clue as to where Hermione might have gone and no idea on where Dolohov was holing up. Lucius hadn't had any word from the wizard either after he'd refused Dolohov financial help. Turning in old associates gained a lot of favor with the new Minister, and he knew that Lucius had divulged what he'd known, but it was all old information by now.

Seeing Arthur arrive with the Minister told Severus another piece of information. Either Miss Weasley or Mr. Weasley was with Potter and Hermione, possibly both. Arthur's body posture and his actions were like those of an enraged father, more than just someone fulfilling Ministry duties. Severus would bet Lucius his favorite cauldron that both of Arthur's kids were with Potter, which meant that it was couples: Potter and Miss Weasley, and Hermione with Mr. Weasley. It was enough to make his blood boil.

He would hunt down and find Dolohov and then take care of Mr. Weasley, right after he found his wife.

~H~

The next morning, they all went down to the Cariba Creek Waterpark in their hotel. The indoor-outdoor tropical-lagoon-themed park in was fun. Ron was really uncomfortable seeing Ginny and Hermione in their bikinis when they dropped their towels, and Luna's made Neville trip over his feet when he saw her in hers. The girls, having planned on wearing the skimpy Muggle swim suits, simply laughed at the boys' ogling, and Neville's and Ron's incoherent stammers, and sauntered over to the first waterslide. Harry wrestled with Ron nearly all morning to keep him from forcing Ginny to wear a T-shirt over her tiny bikini, mostly because Harry loved seeing her in it.

By late afternoon, they returned to Alton Towers to ride a few more rides before they had to Apparate back home. They returned to Grimmauld Place, tired, exhausted and completely worn out.

Kreacher greeted them, his hands bandaged, claiming he'd punished himself for being a bad house-elf, and for letting the black man in the door, but he couldn't tell them anything specifically. Neither Harry, Ginny, nor Hermione were able to make any sense of what he said and let it drop. But Hermione insisted that Kreacher let her heal his hands with Burn Paste.

As the evening wound down, Ron and Neville began to complain about pain. Hermione and Luna jumped up and forced the boys to remove their shirts, then gasped in astonishment at their bright cherry-red skin. Hermione, Harry, and Ginny had used liberal amounts of sun block, but Ron and Neville hadn't, becoming a quite sunburned. Luna had taken a potion for the sun, which she carried with her all the time considering her fair complexion.

Hermione and Luna were down to Harry's potion workroom, making some more Burn Paste when a huge hawk Patronus flew into the room.

"Where have you been?" the mellifluous tones of Severus Snape bellowed from the silvery hawk.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

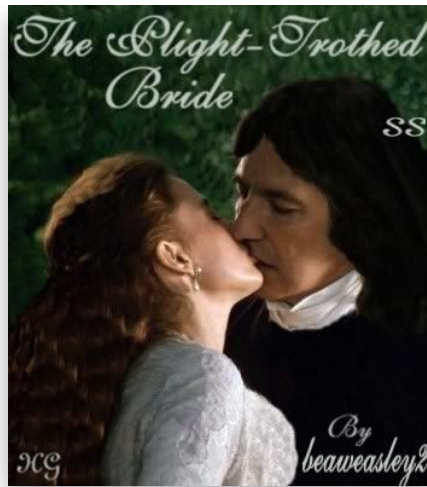
Holmbush Paintball U.K. is located in rural West Sussex between London and Brighton. They run both adult and junior paintball games every weekend though out the year.

The Alton Towers is a very popular amusement park located in Staffordshire. The Splash Landings Hotel is the newer of the two hotels on the resort. The Cariba Creek Waterpark is an indoor and outdoor waterpark themed as a tropical lagoon is located within The Splash Landings Hotel.

# Duncansby Head

Chapter 19 of 63

Severus is raging mad about Hermione's Muggle gallivanting all over the country with her friends, regardless of the reasons. He decides to take her to Duncansby Head nevertheless, in every effort to sort things out, and try his hand at courting in hopes of some reconciliation with the girl.



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Duncansby Head

~H~

Hermione was absolutely terrified about the angry tone of Severus' voice coming from the Patronus. She gripped the workbench as if the world was falling out from under her feet. The thundering footsteps on the stairs preceded the arrival of the others. Thankfully, Harry and Neville entered first. "What how did Snape get down here?" Neville asked, looking around, his face pale and his wand drawn. "Hermione?"

Harry rushed over to her, and Hermione hugged him fiercely. "Oh, my gods, Harry! He's furious! He'll... I..." she stammered, panic stricken.

"His voice came from a Patronus," Luna explained as Harry asked softly, "Didn't you tell him you were taking a holiday?" He was trying to disengage her so he could look at her face, but Hermione didn't want to let go, needing the comfort of her friend.

Hermione shook her head. "I forgot. I don't have an owl, and I forgot to ask if I could borrow one. When I do, I borrow one from George... but with all the planning and such, I forgot."

Luna touched her back reassuringly. "You can send him a message and tell him you were with us."

"Kreacher," Ginny's voice rose from the back of the room. A crack announced the immediate arrival of the elf. "Did Hermione receive any letters or notes while we were away?"

"Yes, miss," Kreacher replied, bowing stiffly. "I sets them in master's friend's room."

"Please get them for me," Harry asked. In two seconds, Kreacher was back, holding four folded pieces of parchment, which Harry passed to Hermione.

Hermione opened the first one with shaky hands. It was a lunch invite, direct and to the point but otherwise rather amicable for Severus, considering their previous outing. Hermione read the proposed offer to see the Stacks, the Rock Clefts and Sclaites of Duncansby Head with a smile that widened at the mention of seeing the black Ferrin gulls and the Bluepike crabs, and then frowned at the mention of flying on brooms to collect said crabs and the unhatched eggs and eggshells from the empty gull nests.

"Well?" Ron asked.

"Let her read them," Harry said, trying to peek at the letter in her hand.

Ron tried to move forward and was unintentionally blocked by Ginny and Neville. "I want to know what the git wants with her," Ron said.

"RONALD," Ginny admonished him, sounding quite a bit like her mum.

Hermione was too engrossed in her letter to pay attention to her friends. She smiled warmly as Severus mentioned eating lunch on the cliffs, and her grin widened when he suggested that she braid her hair. She folded the first letter and opened the next. The tone of the second was firmer, much more curt, offering to *'reschedule the lunch for today,'* which meant he must have sent the second note yesterday morning. She smiled as she read that he still wanted to take her to see the gulls and then bit her lip as she read that he was expecting an immediate reply. He'd signed it pointedly 'your husband,' with a small perforation tear at the final stroke of the *D*.

Neville turned around to look at Ron. "Can't be bad she's smiling."

"Hermione, give what does he say?" Ginny asked, trying to edge her way closer to her other side.

"Let her read them, and then she will tell us," Luna said patiently as Hermione handed Ginny the first letter.

Ginny quickly read the invite, her smile widening by the time she reached the end. "Oh, this sounds like fun!" she said, handing the letter to Luna.

Neville leaned over Luna's shoulder so that they could both read the letter. "Oh, you'll get to see the Seanorcampus up there too," Luna said, handing the parchment to Neville.

Luna's comment barely registered with Hermione as she read the third letter. She felt the blood drain from her face from the letter's tone. He was furious that she'd not answered the first two posts, demanding that she meet him that night to explain her actions. The writing was messy, some words tighter and harder to read instead of his usually meticulous slanted script as if the words had been hastily scrawled, clearly showing his frustration. It was dated yesterday.

"What's wrong?" several voices asked at once.

Wordlessly Hermione gave Ginny the third letter, apprehensively opening the last one.

Ginny blanched after reading the lambasting letter. "I think this one was sent Saturday," she said softly as she passed it to Luna.

"So, what does the git want?" Ron asked, snatching the first letter from Harry.

"This isn't so bad," Luna said, giving Hermione back her letter. "He just didn't know you weren't here. Just write him an apology and clear things up."

Hermione absentmindedly took the letter as she read the final one. The last note was obviously written in anger, saying that he'd be by at eight to pick her up and that not even Potter would prevent him from seeing his wife. "He's coming by tonight to get me," Hermione finally said. She looked at the clock on the wall and covered her mouth as she noticed the time. "Oh, gods! That was over an hour ago! He's been here and gone already!"

Ginny snatched the last note and scanned the message, her brow furrowing. She grabbed Hermione's wrist. "Quick! You and I will go see George and borrow an owl. Neville and Harry can help Luna make the Burn Paste."

Hermione nodded and quickly followed Ginny. "Wait, what about me?" Ron called up the stairs.

"Stop being a git!" Ginny shouted back.

~S~

Severus sat in the chair by the fireplace with his leg crossed comfortably, his foot twitching irritably every so often, reading a very old tome and sipping on a fine French brandy. Except for the soft drumming of his fingers, he was the picture of serenity.

Lucius sat comfortably in an identical chair, across the alpaca fur rug, watching his friend slyly while reading his own book and sipping a glass of the Framboise brandy.

Draco squirmed again, shifting in his seat, oblivious to anything going on in the room except his own boredom. He turned the page of his book, trying to concentrate on the words, all the while appearing as if he had somewhere else to be at the moment.

"Draco, if you don't like that one, get another," Lucius said dismissively. "Or find something else to do."

"Like what, exactly? I am stuck here. I can't stand just sitting around, doing nothing. This is so unfair," Draco moaned.

"Then go to bed," Lucius snapped.

Draco rose, strode across the room to return his book to the shelf and turned to face the men by the fire. "Thank you, father. Severus, good night."

"Good night, Draco," Severus nodded while smirking at the boy's feigned manners.

Lucius waved him off and returned to his book.

"I'll just say good night to mother," Draco snorted as he left.

"He's feeling the strain of confinement a little too acutely," Severus said smoothly as he turned the page of his book.

"Apparently," Lucius stated with a subtle sneer to his lip. "He doesn't like Narcissa smothering him, and he's restricted on who may come to visit. Many of his friends are being investigated. Flint and Goyle were arrested. Montague is likewise under house arrest, and Miss Parkinson is only allowed to visit in the afternoons."

Severus suppressed a laugh. "He ran with the boys in the Dark Lord's circle, but he was never really one of them."

Lucius' eyes turned a steely grey. "No. He was weak, overly cocky, and otherwise influenced. The good thing is that he will be acquitted."

"Most likely. He didn't really do much, except make three failed attempts on Dumbledore's life and allow Death Eaters into the school," Severus replied, smirking at Draco's recent fall from his father's good graces.

"Speaking of school, how is your wife these days?" Lucius asked, clearly wanting to redirect the subject.

Severus set down his book, feeling his annoyance toward Hermione surface again. "I haven't spoken to her."

Lucius closed his book. "No? I thought that you were resolute to work things out?"

"She was not at the house," Severus said softly, his jaw set firmly as he clamped down on his emotions.

Lucius' eyebrow rose at the remark. "I had a most interesting correspondence from Rita Skeeter. She's under the impression that Hermione is going ahead with the annulment."

Severus knew that Lucius had seen the pictures of his last outing with Hermione. "No, we are not," Severus said, a bit more sharply than he intended. "She was apparently unavailable this weekend."

"And yet you didn't know her plans? Is she not taking this Bonding seriously?" Lucius asked, tracing the cover of the book on his lap.

"No," Severus stated, and Lucius raised his eyebrow at him again. "I don't know how seriously she is taking it. Our last encounter did not go as planned, as you well know. The Minister and a few Ministry officials told her that the Bonding could be reversed. She doesn't believe me."

"Why ever not?" Lucius asked.

Severus snorted into his glass. "Our previous associations were not always... amicable."

Lucius laughed softly. "No, I am well aware of how you treated the girl." He looked at the fire for a moment. "It may be that she simply needs to be informed," he said thoughtfully.

"She will not believe you either," Severus pointed out. "She has even less reason to trust you."

Lucius looked at him, a deep crease appearing between his brows. "Then what would make her believe?"

"Books," Severus said with a subtle sneer. "She believes what she reads in books."

"By all means, lend her one and get her in hand," Lucius suggested, picking up his book again and opening to the marker. "In the meantime, I'd appreciate a favor."

"Ask," Severus said cautiously.

Lucius handed the book he was looking at over to Severus. "I'm thinking about creating one of these."

Severus looked at the picture of the stone basin with markings interlaced with ancient Aramaic and ancient runes. "A Pensieve?"

"Yes." He crossed his leg over the other and laced his fingers together. "Between the two of us, we should be able to create it. I have been working on translating the letters and runes."

A house-elf entered the room, bowing low to Severus. "Sir, this is come for you."

Severus read the groveling apology from Hermione, and his lips curled up into a sneering smile. "From my wife."

Lucius cocked his head and smirked.

"It appears that she regrets not getting my notes. It seems that we are to have a second attempt at reconciliation. If you'll excuse me," he said coolly, rising, "I'd like to borrow an owl."

"By all means," Lucius said, raising his glass in toast, then sipping on his brandy.

Severus returned the book to Lucius and walked to the owlery. He took a sheet of parchment from the writing desk just outside the owlery door and dipped a quill in the expensive ink.

~H~

Hermione and Luna had their arms crossed on the table as they leaned forward over the game board, laughing at the word Neville had put down while Harry tried to find it in the Scrabble dictionary.

"Give it up, mate," Ron said, leaning back in his chair, languishingly holding his butterbeer in his fingers. "If the girls say it's not a word, it's not a word."

"But Hagrid uses it all the time," Neville said in defense, although he removed the game pieces.

Kreacher entered the kitchen, carrying a letter to Hermione. She took it apprehensively and opened it. It was acerbic and curt, demanding to know where she'd been.

"One guess who that's from," Ron sneered as Neville placed the tiles to spell *criers* on the board instead.

"What does he say?" Luna asked, ignoring him, laying *wardrobes* off his *R*.

"It's from Severus. He's really mad," Hermione moaned. "He wants to know where I was and demands that I be available to meet him tomorrow."

"Git," Ron snarled, putting down the letters to spell *taped* on the board.

"Use both *Ps*, Ron." Ginny suggested as she produced a quill and parchment. "Here, write him back, and we can have Kreacher take it to Severus," she suggested.

"Just tell him you went to Staffordshire for my birthday," Harry said, adding *Gurg* to the board.

"To ride rollie-coaters," Ron added. "He might even know what they are."

Hermione quickly drafted a response.

*Severus,*

*We went to West Sussex and Brighton Friday afternoon for Harry's birthday, after stopping to pay his respects to his parents' graves in Godric's Hollow. Saturday and Sunday we were at Alton Towers in Staffordshire.*

"And that you've planned on this for months," Neville suggested, peering at the parchment from across the table.

"But forgot to tell him because you were too wrought up from him yelling at you," Ron added.

"Let her write it so she can make her play," Luna admonished the boys.

Hermione smiled, shaking her head, but added, *Harry and I had planned on this trip for months now. I'm really sorry I forgot to tell you. Yes, I will meet with you tomorrow. What time and where are we going?* She signed the note and handed it to Kreacher. "Thank you, I appreciate you..." she started to say, but he'd vanished with the letter as soon as he'd grasped it. She just finished laying down *houl* to make ghoul off Harry's *G* when Kreacher returned with a reply.

*Hermione,*

*I do not condone the fact that you went on a date for the weekend! That is completely unacceptable.*

*As for where and when, I have already told you where I want to go and the time. You have inconvenienced me now twice, and I expect you to be ready tomorrow at eleven when I come to get you. No excuses and no disappearing. We will discuss this date you went on then.*

*Severus*

She looked up to see Ginny grinning as she added the word *Veela* to the game board.

"Miss, he is wanting confirmation," Kreacher croaked.

Hermione flipped the parchment over and quickly wrote her reply.

*Severus,*

*I'm sorry that you felt inconvenienced by my absence. But as we had no definite plans to meet, I cannot understand why you are so upset. I simply went away with my friends for some fun, for which I have apologized to you, although I don't really see that I've done anything wrong.*

*I will gladly meet with you tomorrow at eleven. Am I to assume that we are still going to Duncansby Head tomorrow?*

Hermione signed the note and handed it to Kreacher.

"Is anything wrong?" Harry asked as Neville toyed with his letter tiles.

"Severus apparently doesn't like the idea of his wife going on vacation without his consent. He's probably very old-fashioned as well as quite proper," Luna stated, beaming up at Neville wistfully. "Neville, eikon, *E, I, K, O, N*, is a word."

"Luna, you're not supposed to help them," Hermione admonished her. "That's a double word score!"

"Oh, it's okay. I want to use the *K*," Luna replied as Neville laid down the letters to spell eikon.

Luna beamed at him as she quickly added *W, R, A, C, S*, a blank tile, *U, R*, and a *T* on the board.

"But that doesn't spell anything!" Ron complained. "Wracks is okay, I suppose but *urt* isn't! I know that's not a word, and Hermione said we can only put down one word at

a time. I wasn't allowed to use acid pops."

"She's using a blank as a letter," Harry said, his brow wrinkled in confusion. "Not as a space like you did, mate."

"It's wrackspurt," Luna replied serenely as Kreacher returned with another house-elf, both tugging on the note addressed to Hermione.

Hermione grasped the letter as Kreacher stormed off, grumbling angrily.

*Hermione,*

*It was our agreement that WE would be together every night. I even reluctantly agreed to inform you of our rendezvous in advance and allow you to continue residing at Potter's, against my better judgment. I have upheld our agreement. It is you who have not.*

*I have delayed my trip to Duncansby Head twice now, on account of you. I intend to go there tomorrow, as was originally planned, and expect you to accompany me. I expect you to be ready to leave promptly at eleven. Do not make me come and hunt you down, again.*

*Severus*

"Apparently I'm going to Duncansby Head tomorrow to see the black Ferrin gulls," Hermione stated, relieved and unsettled. If he were still keeping to the same plans, it meant she'd have to fly on broomstick. "I can't believe he still wants to take me. I need to borrow a broom for tomorrow," she said, trying to sound light and fight down her nervous anticipation at having to fly.

"No problem, you can take mine," Harry said. "Luna, isn't that some invisible creature that makes someone's brain go fuzzy?"

Luna looked at him quite pleased. "They're not invisible, they're tiny, and they float into your ears, making you confused or forget things."

Hermione grimaced at the thought of using Harry's Firebolt. "No offense, Harry, but yours is way too fast for me. Ginny, I know yours was damaged flying to Hogsmeade; do you think I could ask George?"

"Oi!" Ron exclaimed, sitting up. "What about mine? Not good enough for you?"

Hermione felt her cheeks burn. "I didn't know if you would thank you, Ron. I would really appreciate it. I'll be really careful with your broom, I promise."

"All right, then," Ron said, but she knew his feelings had been hurt all the same. "It's as good as George's even if his is newer."

"A-hem, pardon me, miss," the house-elf in a pillowcase said. "I is to take your reply to him."

Hermione flipped Severus' letter over, writing a quick assurance that she'd be ready on time, while Ron rearranged his letter tiles, his eyes sweeping the board as he decided on which word to play.

~S~

Severus reread Hermione's notes again, trying to ascertain the subtle implications of what she'd written with that which she hadn't been forthright about. He'd already confirmed that she had been at Godric's Hollow and had been surprised to learn she'd been in West Sussex, Brighton, and Alton Towers in Staffordshire. He could very well imagine Potter wanting to go to the seashore, but what allure Brighton had for the boy still eluded him. Severus had never heard of Alton Towers, and it now piqued his curiosity. What interested him more were the general locations of their weekend romp. Something about them nagged at him. She clearly stated that she had been to these places with her friends, so his suspicions that Miss Weasley and Mr. Weasley had been with her and Potter were confirmed. That really irked him. It *had* been couples.

He looked up to check the time as he pocketed the notes in his cargo trousers. The clock on the mantle showed 10:57, so he picked up the picnic basket and brooms, walked to the foyer, and Apparated to the top step in front of Potter's house. The elf answered his knock, although Severus was pleased to see Hermione standing in the entryway, holding a broom. His gaze swept over her, critically eyeing her tight jeans, Muggle top, and zip-up hooded jacket. She wore good walking boots and had her hair tamed into a braid. "Are you ready?" he asked softly, keeping his tone as neutral as possible. He flicked his wand at Draco's broom, sending it back to the Manor.

She was staring at him, examining his appearance. "Yes," she replied, swallowing nervously. He held out his hand, making her walk to him. As soon as she'd grasped his hand, he Disillusioned them and Apparated before she could start asking him questions.

They arrived on a stretch of grass between the lighthouse and the cliffs. "Come with me," he said smoothly, keeping his ire suppressed, and pulled her over to a corner of the lighthouse. After checking that they were not observed, he removed the Disillusionment Charm. He allowed her a few minutes to look at their surroundings before giving her hand a slight tug. "This way," he said with a tilt of his head. He turned south and led her down a well-trodden path that led over the highest part of the landscape to the cliffs. Hermione followed, obviously taking in everything around her, impressed by the surrounding landscape. As they reached the cliff edge, Hermione's eyes widened as she got her first view of the Sclacites.

He stopped several paces from the edge of the cliff and turned to look at her. *Now is the time for answers.* "I want to know exactly where you were this weekend and why you went on a date with Mr. Weasley."

Hermione involuntarily took a step away from him, backing away from the cliff, her eyes wide. "It wasn't a date! I went with my friends to a few places Harry wanted to go to for his birthday, that's all."

Severus crossed his arms and stared down at her. "Mr. Weasley was with you and the Potters, was he not?"

"Yes, so were Ginny, Luna, and Neville," she replied, still gaping at him as if surprised by his question.

He fought down the anger at her admission, grinding his teeth a little, and his hand tightened on the broom he was carrying. "So it was ~~three~~ couples."

"No, it was *six* friends," Hermione said defensively.

"Are not Harry and Ginny a Bonded couple, as are Luna and Neville?" he asked, using their first names for the first time. Hermione looked at him surprised and nodded. "So, it was the Longbottoms and the Potters with you and Mr. Weasley, your ex-boyfriend. Am I correct?"

"Technically," she admitted, looking up at his stony expression. "Okay, yes. Luna and Neville are getting married, and Ginny and Harry are engaged. So what?"

Severus dropped his hands to his sides, flexing the fingers of his free hand so as not to make a fist, but the hand holding the broom was throbbing from the tightness of his grip. "They are Bonded *couples*, Hermione," he snarled, "just like *we* are."

"It was an innocent holiday with six long-time *friends*," she said defensively, fidgeting slightly.

He exhaled to control his tone. "One of whom you had an intimate relationship with."

"Ron and I were never intimate!" she exclaimed.



He looked at her surprised and quickly controlled his expression to the stony indifferent mask he'd used for years. "Precisely where were you Friday and Saturday night?"

She looked him in the eye. "Friday night we stayed in Brighton and Saturday at Alton Towers at the Splash Landings Hotel," she said, unflinching, her expression one of honesty.

He did appreciate her apparent truthfulness, but her admission was one that nearly sent him in a rage. "I am to assume that you had separate accommodations," he said firmly, barely controlling his temper, although he had the edge of a question to his voice.

"No, not exactly. We all shared the room." She flinched when he gave her a scathing glare. "Girls in one bed, the guys in another it's less expensive that way? What?"

"My *wife* is not to be in a hotel room with any male other than myself *ever*!" he snapped at her, his temper flaring.

She recoiled at the anger in his tone. "Don't you trust me?" she gasped, her expression earnest.

"Trust is gained, Hermione, not given," he snarled venomously. "Respect is earned. You'd best remember that."

"I have no problem respecting someone and giving them my trust if I feel they are worthy of it," Hermione stated, looking at his hands.

He snorted in disgust. "For Gryffindors maybe, but not for Slytherins. Nor is it acceptable for *a wife* to romp around with ex-boyfriends in such a manner. You and I have been much in the papers lately. I'm just thankful that you were not photographed on your weekend jaunt," Severus explained coolly. "I want to know precisely what happened."

Her gaze snapped back up to his face. "I just told you!"

"You will show me," he said firmly. "*Legilimens*." He plowed through her memories as she tried pushing him from her mind. She was surprisingly capable at nearly shoving him out, but he found the images he sought each time he forced his way back into her mind. It was how she described; except for an argument on a riverbank, and sitting next to him on various amusement rides, she hadn't been alone with Mr. Weasley. The activities were mostly juvenile, the kind of activities Potter would have wanted to do, and he could see that Hermione had greatly enjoyed most of them, too. The sleeping arrangements were as she had stated. The connection broke just after he caught an image of her parading around in a construction of tiny green triangles of cloth and stringing that barely covered her body and made his penis involuntarily twitch. "What was that green string thing!" he growled menacingly.

She jerked, involuntarily taking a step away from him, obviously too frightened of him to complain about the assault on her mind. "A-a bathing suit!"

He turned and stared at the ocean, seething. He didn't know what to say. He'd seen girls in them before and knew about them, of course. But seeing *her* in one, knowing she had been prancing around in front of Potter and Weasley in it, infuriated him.

"Muggles wear them to pools, lakes, water parks, and the beaches all the time," she tried to explain, but he couldn't look at her. "It's nothing."

"Precisely, it's nothing," he snarled, rounding on her. "You might as well have been *naked*!"

"It's I've always..." she started to say, and her voice faltered as he glared at her.

He turned, crossing his arms and stared at the ocean. He was so angry he could feel his powers surge slightly, and he tried to calm himself enough to clamp down on them. He noticed that she had turned to face the ocean, occasionally glancing at him in fear. After a long silence he turned to look at her. "If I *ever* find out that you are wearing one of those bikinis things in front of Weasley *any* Weasley again..."

"You'll what? Kill me? Liked Azkaban that much, did you?" she asked obstinately. "It wasn't inappropriate. I wear it to swim. Loads of girls do! It's not socially unacceptable. You're making a big deal out of... nothing." Her voice trailed off again under his furious glare.

He narrowed his eyes and gave her the darkest glare he could master. "You'll *never* be so scantily attired again in public, in front of another man, as long as you are *my wife*."

"Fine. I'll find a more conservative swimsuit," she conceded. "Besides, Ron was far more concerned about Ginny's bikini than mine." He raised an eyebrow at her remark, and she continued undaunted. "Harry really loved seeing her in it, but Ron kept trying to force her into a T-shirt to cover up. The guys were actually wrestling over it it was comical. And if you're remotely concerned about Neville, he couldn't take his eyes off Luna, making him trip over everything all morning. It was hilarious! Besides, they both fill out their bikinis far better than I do."

Severus smirked. *Then the boys were blind!* he snarled mentally, his penis twitching again as the mental image of her so scantily clad crossed his mind again. He stared out at the water, trying to resolve the irritation he felt. He couldn't shake the image from his thoughts, and his body reacted accordingly. He mentally reviewed her comments to what he'd seen in her mind. She was not being deceitful, but she also didn't see the error in her actions. Nothing in her memories showed any inappropriate interactions with her friends, except for the bikini thing. Once again, the image of her in the swimsuit crossed his mind and made his blood boil and his groin tighten. There was nothing he could do about what happened other than insist it not be repeated.

"I didn't appreciate that, you know," she said, her voice low, obviously trying to control her anger.

He looked at her, her statement interrupting his excogitation. "I wanted to know the truth," he said simply, giving her a look that meant he wasn't going to defend his actions. "It was the fastest way..."

"It's an invasion! It's practically a type of rape," she spat. She flinched when he glared at her. "I didn't lie to you!"

"But you were not forthright with me either," he snapped, angry at her choice of words. He knew it was an invasion, but it had been necessary. At least he thought so.

She looked down as if unable to meet his eyes. "I would have answered any of your questions honestly," she said, the emotional hurt evident in her angry voice.

He sighed. "That I do believe." He turned his head slowly to look over his shoulder at the surroundings, relieved that there were no other tourists visible.

"Which are the Ferrin gulls?" she asked. "I don't see any black ones."

He hoped that her change of topic meant that he'd not have to justify himself to her anymore. "The primane feathers on their wings are black, unlike the seagulls whose primane feathers are white, and they have a black V just above their tail feathers. They are also slightly larger. They're not as prolific as common seagulls because occasionally the eggshells are too thick for the chicks to hatch." Severus scanned the birds, pointing out a pair flying below them over the water. "There's a pair. The one to the right is a female. Their feathers are dull, but they still have the dark wing tips and black V above their tails." He looked at her again, smirking at how effectively she'd distracted him. "Come, we need to go this way," he said, indicating the direction of the rock cleft.

They walked in silence, Severus still contemplating Hermione's actions and their relationship in silence. It was apparent to him that she still harbored resentment of his invading her mind, but she seemed to have let the matter drop. When they reached the huge cleft in the cliffs, Severus laid down his broom and pocketed his wand so it would be easy to reach while flying.

Hermione looked down with a look of pure wonder, clearly impressed with the view. "Severus, have you ever heard of a Seanorcampus?"

He was taken aback again by her question. "Yes, why?"

"Luna told me that they live around here," she said, still gazing down at the spectacular sight of the thousands of seabirds in the deep crevice. "With her you never know if it's a real creature or not."

He was surprised she didn't know about them, but then they were class XX and not Hagrid's preferred level of creature. "They are about the size of a medium seal but twice as aggressive. They have small tusks, which can grow about the width of your palm, similar to a walrus. They more closely resemble a seal, although they're frequently mistaken for a young walrus by Muggles. They prefer the colder waters, but some come to the uninhabited Orkney and Shetland Islands to bear their young. I have seen them here occasionally. They are generally afraid of humans and especially avoid Wizardkind."

"Why?" she asked, looking at him with the inquisitive expression with which he was so familiar.

"Their tusks have magical properties, although not much. Ladies like to have combs made from them, and their fur is used to line hoods, gloves, and boots. I also believe that the bones in the flippers have been used by Seers, because they resemble human hand bones somewhat," he explained, aware that she was hanging on his every word. "Narcissa has a comb. She says it helps keep her hair silky. I think Lucius uses one, but he'd never admit it. They are very expensive and rare, because hunting the creatures is tightly controlled."

He indicated her broom. "Shall we?"

"Shall we what?" She looked frightened. "Down there?"

"Yes," he said, perplexed. "It's where the nests are." He explained what the nest looked like and how to extract the eggs, handing her a pouch from a pocket in his jacket. Hermione listened carefully, looking like she was fighting back the urge to throw up. "What is the problem?"

"I hate flying," she admitted quickly. "I can't feel the broom, and I'm afraid I'll fall off."

"It's the Cushioning Charm, it pads the broom handle for comfort." He fought the urge to smile, watching as she squeezed her legs on the broom handle like she was fighting back the urge to urinate. "Didn't you ride the Thestrals to the Ministry your fifth year?"

"Yes," she replied, relaxing her grip on the broom.

"And how did it feel between your legs?" he asked.

"Like an anorexic horse," she replied, obviously perplexed.

"Sit on the broom handle like you did the Thestral," he directed her, "and cross your ankles. Now, do you feel a difference?"

"Yes," she admitted, hovering next to him. "But now I can't feel the broom handle very well."

He shook his head at her. "It is supposed to feel like a pillow, not a stick. Just keep your balance, and don't try to race around. Trust the broom and you won't fall."

"Harry did," she retorted.

He nearly smirked, remembering the game she was referring to. "I'll catch you."

Severus cast a Dissimulata Charm on them so that any Muggle tourists that might come wouldn't see them and led her into the cleft. They soared slowly as he pointed out the Ferrin gull nests. The various birds, also slightly affected by the Charm, soared around them as if they were simply huge seabirds themselves. Hermione caught on quickly, hovering and dipping smoothly on her broom as they checked the nests for eggshells, although still she still held onto the broom handle with a death grip. Severus stayed close enough to her so that he could catch her if she tumbled. He pointed out the Seanorcampuses swimming in the water, watching her relax as she watched them play and hunt for food. Severus led her lower over the water, showing her how to immobilize the Bluepike crabs and levitate them into a second bag. They flew among the cliffs and cleft for over an hour, and by the time he was getting hungry, they'd procured quite a collection of sizable crabs and even a good number of unhatched eggs.

They landed on the clifftop fields with a stunning view of the Thirle Door and the Stacks of Duncansby. Hermione watched as he pulled out the picnic bask from a pocket, and she conjured a large, thick blanket. Severus set the basket down, pulling out the dishes of Cornish game hen breasts, salami slices, fruit, cheese, sliced warm baguette, and an herb butter spread the house-elves had prepared for them. He cast an Anti-tipping Charm on the wine glasses, offering her one.

"Severus, what are the eggs used for?" she asked, accepting the glass. "I don't mean the eggshells. They're used in cures for various rashes, psoriasis, and eczema. But the unhatched ones why are you interested in those?"

"The eggs become sulfuric after a while. I have found them useful for strengthening potions for severe bronchitis, constipation, and rheumatism, although I've yet to publish my findings," he explained as he spread some herb butter on a piece of bread.

"Have you ever considered writing a book?" she asked, nibbling on a strawberry.

"No," he lied and then shook his head. "Yes, but with my history no one would take it seriously."

"You might be surprised." She ate a bite of cheese as she regarded him thoughtfully. "You should, you know. They would be brilliant. You could update the school Potions books, for example, improve the directions, fill in the missing steps and ingredients."

"Explain," he said smoothly, wondering why she assumed the school books were so inadequate, then remembered that Potter had his old Potions book.

"Just a thought," she said, lowering her gaze, apparently not willing to admit that she knew about his book. "I just assumed that with your skills and knowing that you experiment... If you ever did, the books would be brilliant."

Severus knew that was a close to a confession that Potter had his book that he was going to get from her. He considered her suggestion thoughtfully. "After lunch I'd like you to accompany me to the library at the Manor," he started to say, and she looked up at him, her eyes flashing ready to retort. "I have to attend to the crabs before they spoil. I'd appreciate the help."

"We can do it at Harry's," she suggested, and he snorted. "It would be preferable."

"My lab is currently set up at the Manor," he stated, and she huffed as she turned her head. "What is it about the Manor that you detest so? You will not be harmed."

"Oh, yes, I'd be so welcome there. Both Draco and Mr. Malfoy hate me. Mr. Malfoy has tried to kill me. He maliciously sneers and scowls at me with total disdain whenever I've seen him, and he calls me a Mudblood. Narcissa Malfoy treats me no better. The last time I was at the Manor I was tortured with the Cruciatus severely," she ranted angrily. "It was like they enjoyed watching me scream in pain!"

"It was Bellatrix, I believe, who used the Cruciatus on you," Severus stated pointedly.

"They were in the room, watching!" she spat angrily. "Lucius Malfoy looked on with a smug expression, and Narcissa Malfoy was smiling."

"She was smiling because Narcissa knew that you hadn't broken into their vault well, at least up to that point." Severus knew by Hermione's smirk that she didn't believe him. "I admit that Lucius wanted to simply hand you over to the Dark Lord, but it was only to gain an advantage in the Dark Lord's favor to protect his family. Truth was both

Lucius and Narcissa were becoming disenchanted with the Dark Lord at the end, after housing him... That was a very rough time for all of us. Things are much different now."

She scoffed at him. "Regardless, I won't go back under any circumstances. You can forget it."

Severus watched her as he turned his head slightly, appearing to be gazing at the grassy landscape, angry at her refusal. They ate in silence. Hermione stared at the view, occasionally glancing at him, then looking away when she realized he was watching her.

"So what's next? We go home after this?" she finally asked.

"Is my company so distasteful?" he asked, wondering if she was eager to be somewhere else.

"Pardon?" she asked, turning to look at him.

"That you want to leave," he said, keeping his tone even to hide his disappointment. "Is my company so unsatisfying?"

She flushed as she stammered, "I, er... I just meant never mind. I didn't know if you had anything else planned after lunch."

He shook his head curtly. "I need to clean the crabs and separate the midgut glands, testes, and gills. If the females have eggs still, I use them as well, although Narcissa likes them also." When Hermione didn't reply, he turned the conversation to Alchemy, engaging her in a discussion of algebraic equations in regards to Charm convergence. Hermione's eyes lit up during their discussion, comparing methodology of various current Charms theories. She still paraphrased the books she'd read, but their discussion was enjoyable.

Afterwards, they walked along the path, stopping occasionally as Hermione gazed at the stunning view of the rock arch called the Thirle Door and the tall jagged sea stacks and architecture of the Geo of Sclaites from the clifftop. He checked the Stasis Charm on the crabs, knowing he'd have to attend to them soon. Reluctantly, he decided to try reasoning with her again. "You do know that the Malfoys are wandless. The Cruciatus cannot be cast without a wand."

"I will not go there," she stated firmly. "You are more than welcome to come to Harry's. His workroom is more than adequate."

"You won't even need to see any of the Malfoys," Severus argued, hoping he could actually pull it off if she relented. He didn't want to go to his father's house *The kitchen is too small for the task. The empty jars in the shelves need to be thoroughly cleaned and sterilized before I can use them. My best knives are at the Manor and...* "Narcissa's elves make the best crab bisque and croquets," he said aloud. His mouth watered at the thought.

"You've yet to try Kreacher's cooking," she countered.

"And if I insist?" he said smoothly.

"Don't," she warned. "I will not go willingly."

"Is it too much to want to have dinner with me?" he asked, his agitation starting to rise.

She shook her head. "No. I'll be happy to have dinner with you tomorrow. What time?"

"Seven," he said sharply and sighed. *At least we aren't yelling at each other.* He stepped closer to her, and she looked at him speculatively as he brushed a strand of her hair from her face, placing his other hand on her waist. "I want to kiss you," he said, lowering his voice seductively, pulling her body even closer to his, his fingers of his other hand stroking her hair with the gentlest of touches.

She stiffened under his touch. "I told you..."

"It's just a kiss, Hermione," he reminded her, cutting her off. He closed the gap between them and leaned forward. "What harm is there in a kiss?"

She looked up at him, and her eyes sought his as if trying to read any untoward meaning. "Just a kiss?"

He held back the snort that she'd be able to even read him or see past what he wanted her to see. "Just a kiss," he affirmed.

"One kiss," she conceded. She swallowed under his intense stare and made one tiny affirmative nod of her head. "I suppose that's all right."

Severus fought back the smile that threatened at her submission. He focused on her face, staring at her eyes as if memorizing each fleck of gold and every shade of brown. His fingers leisurely glided from the back of her head to the sensitive skin just under her ear as he unhurriedly and deliberately swept his gaze across her cheekbones and down her nose, lowering his gaze to her lips. Moving at a glacial pace, he leaned forward as his hand cupped her face and his other hand tightened on her lower back. He placed a feather light caress on her cheek, trailing the tip of his nose on her skin as he brought his lips down to hover over hers, and paused, taking a shallow breath and exhaling while counting to himself.

"What's wrong?" she asked after a while, her voice shaky and breathless.

"I know the satiny feel of your lips, the honeyed taste of your kisses. You have no idea what they do to me... how they undo me," he replied silkily, waiting in anticipation. "I dream about your kiss, Hermione. You have no idea how they how you haunt me." As his words ended he closed the gap, tightening his grip on her as he kissed her. He heard her gasp and slid his tongue out to caress her lips, before plunging forward. Her hands grasped onto his coat, and he leaned forward, making her grasp onto him to keep her balance. Severus assaulted her mouth with his, feeling himself harden in response.

Hermione moaned, staggering slightly, and he crushed her to him as if to support her. He pulled his head back, slackening the hold he had on her face, lightening the fevered kiss somewhat as he sensually caressed her lips and stroked her cheek with his fingertips. His hand trailed down her jaw to her neck while his tongue danced with hers. His fingers swirled on her skin, his penis straining in his trousers against her as he savored the taste of their kiss. He heard the appreciative sighs and murmurs she uttered, and he claimed her mouth again fiercely, hearing her startled whimper.

He broke the kiss off abruptly. She staggered, her breathing ragged, her lips trembling, and he smirked as her eyes fluttered open, staring at him in utter disbelief. He held her elbow as she gathered her wits and tried to compose herself. Severus smiled as he pulled her back into his embrace. "I don't want this to be over. Come with me," he drawled out slowly.

Hermione nodded, and he smiled. "Okay," she replied, still reeling from his kiss. "Where ... ever."

"You'll come back to the Manor with me," he said softly, "and help me in the lab?"

Hermione stiffened. "I told you no. Not there!"

Severus relaxed his hold on her and stepped back. "So, I can't convince you to come with me to the Manor..."

"No," she said, interrupting him.

He sighed in agitation, really having hoped that he'd been able to change her mind. "Then, I suppose I should return to you Potter's house."

She tilted her head and smirked at him. "It might be best if I went home."

"You're *home* is at Spinner's End, Hermione," he corrected her, watching her nose wrinkle once in disgust. "Until I say otherwise or procure another residence."

She watched him a moment, obviously absorbing his statement. "Fair enough... for now," she replied, picking up her broom.

He allowed the comment to slide, giving her his arm to Apparate with her. *For now*, he thought before taking her back to Potter's. *Why in heaven's name is this so bloody difficult?*

~ T B C ~>

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

*Author's notes:*

*Eikon is an image, effigy, picture, or mosaic of a sacred subject; also referred to as an icon. Eikon is used rather in an abstract sense and rarely for a work of art.*

*The primane feathers are the long feathers on the distal third of a bird's wing and nearly as strong as the tail feathers.*

*Dissimulata is Latin meaning: concealing, to ignore, leave unnoticed.*

*Thank you to CourtneyRochelle for being a sounding board when I had a bit of a block, Era1960 for his masculine advice, and my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for helping me clean this up and fix all my mistakes.*

*I also want to give a big hug to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my banner. I still get that silly little grin each time I look at it.*

## Squabbles and Shopping

Chapter 20 of 63

Severus and Hermione have another row, but when Hermione tells to Ginny about it, she sees things quite differently than Hermione does. On the plus side, the girls go shopping for their school supplies and deal with their celebrity status.



~~~~~o 20 o~~~~~

Squabbles and Shopping

~S~

Severus and Hermione arrived on the pavement in front of Grimmauld Place, and the Muggles passing by merely looked at the street when they heard the loud crack since the Dissimulata Charm was still in place. Hermione let go of Severus' arm and quietly walked up the path to the door. "Hermione?" he asked, confused and hurt that she seemed so eager to be rid of him.

"I'll see you tomorrow at seven," she said over her shoulder.

"Hermione?" he asked again, wanting to make her turn around and face him.

"What?" she asked, making an abrupt about-face. She glanced at him quickly, then looked at the street. Her eyes had a blank, indifferent look. One he'd perfected well.

"Will you tell me what's wrong?" he asked.

"You insisted that I go with you to the Manor," she said flatly.

"Yes, to help me prepare the crabs before they spoil," he replied, trying to make her see reason.

She put her fists on her hips. "Even though you know that I can never go back there."

"There is no reason why you can't. It is where I am staying, where my lab is. You wouldn't be harassed or mistreated," he said, a little more harshly than he'd intended but still trying to make her understand. "They don't even have wands!"

Hermione tipped her chin up defiantly. "That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?" he asked, his own ire rising.

Her amber eyes flashed with anger. "I don't like being manipulated like that. I don't like being pressured into doing something I don't want to do. I've had enough of that, and I don't like it."

Severus' patience snapped. "*You've* had enough of that? When? As a child? A student? During the war? Or camping in your tent? When were you ever *forced* into doing things you didn't *want* to do – didn't choose to do? When were these manipulations happening? When were you forced to serve two conniving, manipulating bastards – one a narcissistic megalomaniac and the other a wizened old fool who played with people as if they were merely chess pieces? Or are you referring to this sham of a marriage – our Bonding? The one *you* manipulated *me* into."

"Look, I'm not going to apologize to you again for doing that stupid spell. *know* it was a mistake. But it's one I can easily rectify," she said, leaning forward slightly, her fists still planted firmly on her hips.

"No, you cannot," he stated. Severus looked around quickly, then back at her. "I don't want to do this out here."

"Then come inside," she said with a sweep of her hand toward the door.

"No."

"Well, why not?" she asked, flinging up both hands and letting them fall at her sides.

"It's the home of my enemy," he snarled. "Don't you know how much I loathed Black and everything about him and his family? *Narcissa is the only redeemable Black I know!* he wanted to say, but he refrained.

Her fists were firmly planted back on her hips as she stood there, glaring at him. "It's Harry's house. When are you going to drop this animosity you carry around toward Harry for what his father...?"

"*It's the Black House,*" he snapped at her. "It's the ancestral home of my nemesis."

"Not anymore. It doesn't even look the same." She turned on her heel again, saying, "Fine. Good night," over her shoulder.

"Hermione," he said, making her stop again.

She whirled around to face him, her expression furious. "Malfoy Manor *is* the home of my nemesis. *My* enemy. This house is to you what the Manor is to me." She flung her hand behind her at the door. "Only this house isn't what you remember. The Blacks don't live here anymore. They're all *dead*. It's Harry's house, *the Potters'*. There's new paint, new furnishings, new residents, and laughter. The heads are off the wall, and Mrs. Black has been removed. The place is clean and bright, and we have flowers and herbs in the back garden. It's not the same house. Good night, Severus."

He turned to Disapparate before she could slam the door in his face.

~H~

Hermione sat in the library, staring at the same page for the last hour, mentally replaying her two dates with Severus in her mind *Both times he's taken me somewhere that he's been before. Somewhere that he wanted to show me. He had planned the date, where we'd go, what we'd do, or what we would eat, and where we would walk to. Both times I saw a glimpse of him through his hard exterior. He'd actually let his guard down. But we always seem to end our dates with a fight. It's like being with Ron all over – the fighting – I don't want that kind of relationship. Sure, he's done nice things, the hair band and the way he flew next to me in case I fell off my broom, but does that really make up for all his mistreatment?*

She started recounting all the times she'd shared with Severus since their consummation. Hermione decided to discount the dreams – they were just that... dreams. She focused on what was real and realized that she didn't like the overall picture.

Hermione dropped the book on her lap. In fact, their relationship was horrible. Severus was proving to be domineering, manipulative, and even abusive. He had raped her mind and not even apologized for it. He'd tried to manipulate her into going to Malfoy Manor. He'd shoved her away at the end of his trial. Moreover, the only times he'd been like the dreams was when she had gone to see him in jail. He didn't love her, and he didn't respect her. She didn't know if he even liked her. This was an arranged marriage with a man who would abuse her and expect her to take it. Well, she wasn't going to take it any longer.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Ginny asked.

Hermione looked up, suddenly aware that she had slipped into the room while she'd been thinking. "Severus and I had another row after our last date. It's like – I just wish he wouldn't treat me like Ron used to."

She smiled when Ginny set *Witches On Brooms, Flying With the Big Men: The First Women in Professional Quidditch* down on the sofa next to her. It was the book that Ginny had given Harry for his birthday. "First, don't compare Ron to Severus. That's not fair to Ron. Second, have you talked to the guy? Tried getting him to open up...? Eh, yeah, right. Severus Snape. Opening up." She chuckled, ignoring Hermione's furrowed brow. "Okay, just tell me what happened – and don't leave out the good stuff."

Hermione sighed and told her all about her date at Duncansby Head.

"You know, you're not being fair. For Severus, that sounds downright nice," Ginny said when she was finished.

"Ginny, he raped my mind," Hermione said, her voice going shrill, "and he practically tried to drag me to Malfoy Manor."

"You're right, he shouldn't have done that, but I'm sure you told him off about it." Ginny nodded, grinning at Hermione's shocked expression, and scooted closer to her.

"About the Manor. Where else would he be able to take you? You hate his house, and he *is* staying with the Malfoys. It's not like he could or should have to pay for an inn every night you are together. *And* Bluepike crabs have to stay moist or they go bad. That's a fact, and you know it. They are also a very expensive potions ingredient, because unless you prepare them immediately and correctly, they are no good except for cooking." Ginny sighed as Hermione slunk back against the sofa. "How bad is his house anyway?"

Hermione sighed and turned to face Ginny, telling her what she remembered of the house.

"Now honestly, is my house, the Burrow, any better?" Ginny asked.

Hermione crossed her arms, hugging the book to her chest. "Ginny, there is a huge difference!"

"Yeah, right. It was a pigsty once, did you know that? It was enlarged, of course, but the ground floor was a pigsty. Dad added the upper floor when he married my mum, two bedrooms, a box room, and a loo," Ginny tried to explain.

Hermione tried to envision what Ginny was describing. She'd never really looked at the Burrow quite like that before, she'd always just accepted it as Ron's home and loved being there because it felt so warm and inviting.

"After Percy was born, the box room was enlarged as much as Dad could, but it's still a really small room. Charlie and Bill shared a room. Then, as the family grew, Percy and Charlie needed their own rooms, the loo became the stairs," Ginny continued. "But have you any idea what my brothers and I have had to endure being teased about living in a pigsty? Especially from the purist prats?"

"No, I – yes, Malfoy teased Ron once about his family living in one room," Hermione recalled, remembering how embarrassed Ron had gotten. "Yes, he did tease Ron about living in a sty."

"So now you know – my house is a sty," Ginny said, tilting her head and regarding Hermione. "And you have told me a hundred times that you like staying at my house, in my room. The old box room, which Mum used as her nursery for each of my brothers."

Hermione toyed with the ribbon on her bookmark as she thought about what Ginny had said. "But the house is filthy and..."

"Needs a good scrubbing, some fresh paint, and Strengthening Charms to the rickety old furniture," Ginny finished. "My family's furniture all came from garage or estate sales. The sofa Dad found on the curb once, and three of the kitchen chairs Dad found from Merlin knows where and fixed up in his shed. My bed was from a neighbor who'd moved. The twins' beds were bunk beds Mum bought off a witch in Mansfield Dad knew at the Ministry. Even the plates come from secondhand stores and are all different patterns. Heck, the glasses only match because Aunt Muriel gave them to Mum and Dad as a wedding present, and they have Charms to make them unbreakable and chip resistant. Even Mum's wireless was a gift to my dad, that is to say it was a Muggle one someone tampered with and his boss let him keep."

Hermione nodded, feeling like one of the purist prats from Slytherin.

"You are judging Severus a bit unfairly. For a bachelor's flat, it doesn't sound too bad. How much space do you think ol' Severus needed? He only lived there over the summers," Ginny said. "And homes like that, two up and two down, are common in northern England, especially in the old mill districts. In the highlands, the older homes are mostly one large room with add-ons. Usually, wizard homes are added onto magically. Who is to say that, cleaned up and repainted, the house won't be a good starter home? How much space do you need anyway?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. She looked around at the room, envisioning what the place had looked like the summer before her fifth year. "I suppose I wanted a house like my parents had," she admitted, "or a nice flat. You're right. Cleaned up, the place might not be too bad, but the bed needs replacing."

"Or a Fluffing Charm," Ginny said giggling. "For someone so smart, you constantly forget you are a witch!"

~S~

Severus arrived onto the grounds of Malfoy Manor ready to hex someone. *That insolent witch!* Her words still echoed in her head. *She knows nothing about being manipulated, used, and forced into doing acts you don't want to do – forced to witness acts that make your skin crawl and make you heave, made to kill someone just because you've been ordered to – someone who didn't deserve to die.*

A house-elf approached him, carrying a letter. "Pardon me, sir. You has a urgent owl, sir," he said, his ears shaking as if expecting to be punished. "The owl is still here, sir. Waiting."

Severus took the letter, thanking the elf. He scoffed at the prim writing of Elaine Prevatt.

*Mr. Severus Snape,*

I do regret to inform you that Lawrence McDonough is still unavailable to meet with you due to a sudden illness. However, it is imperative that you come by the offices tomorrow to sign the necessary papers for your reinstatement, should you still intend to continue as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The meeting for the governors is scheduled at one in the afternoon, and the matter of the Headmaster appointment is of the Governors' utmost concern.

If you'd please come by at ten, Elsa Deers, Roberto Delgado, and Marvin Boatright will be meeting with you to discuss the necessary terms.

Thank you for your cooperation in this matter,

Elaine Prevatt,

Clerk to the Governing Body, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Necessary terms? The decrees I was forced to enact because of the Dark Lord? Hermione perhaps? Severus folded the letter and shoved it in his pocket, smirking about the pending meeting. *Of course, I'll be there.* Truth was he was relieved that at least his second year as Headmaster would be far less troublesome than his first had been. It would be nice to get back to familiar surroundings, even considering what memories the castle would hold.

He looked at the huge Manor. Hermione's words came back to him as he stared at the fine stonework and elegant windows, manicured lawns, and clipped hedges. The cry of a peacock from somewhere in the formal gardens made him cringe. The Manor was the visual display of opulence, wealth, and privilege. Even the roses bloomed nearly year round. Hermione's words hit him like a hex. *'Malfoy Manor is the home of my nemesis. My enemy. This house is to you what the Manor is to me.'* She had been tortured here. Draco and his friends had bullied her at school, just as Black and Potter had me in my school days. But the Malfoys are my friends. Through everything, Lucius and Narcissa have always remained my friends.

He stared at the grand house and thought about his life. He didn't fit in this world. He was welcome here, invited, befriended even, but he wasn't a part of this opulence. He was a scrawny kid from a dilapidated mill town, who was so unsure of himself that he hoarded his earnings, buying the bare minimum of clothes and personal belongings. In fact, besides his books, he owned even less than Lupin had when he'd arrived to teach. No, he wasn't one of the rich and affluent nor a pureblood. He just knew how to play the role of one who was.

He thought of returning to Spinner's End, but he didn't want to be there either. Severus then decided to go somewhere he'd seen twice when his mum had taken him so she could beg them for assistance and once on his own as a curious teen after he'd passed his Apparation license. A place his mum had told him about when she'd spoken about her childhood and had even shown him pictures of. *Yorkshire.* A large, nine bedroom, grey stone Queen Anne house on the fringe of Yorkshire dales. *My great-grandfather's house. If the old codger still lives.* Severus' only living relative. He wasn't sure. They were the only relatives he knew about.

His last visit at the house hadn't gone well. His grandfather had taken one look at him, dismissed him as Tobias' spawn, and left. His great-grandfather had been cantankerous, obstinate, fustian, and acerbic at his best, at least according to what little Severus remembered of the man, each time he'd seen him. Talfryn Prince had asked him a few questions, scoffed at Severus' answers, and retired to his study each time they'd spoken. His great-grandmother had been polite but reserved, more concerned about the wax dripping from the candles or the condition of her geraniums than in him. Severus hadn't been back, even when he'd received word that his great-grandmother had passed away or when he'd heard that his grandfather had died. Dumbledore had let him attend the funerals, but he hadn't stayed for the wakes.

Nevertheless, for some reason, he wanted to see the place again.

He Apparated onto a stretch of overgrown lawn, facing the old stone house. The garden was going wild, the plants vying against each other, the magical ones and the mundane.

The lights in the lower left windows of the house were on, as were the lights in the upper windows, which he knew to be Taffryn Prince's bedchambers. *So the old man still lives.* Squaring his shoulders, he approached the door.

A Healer answered his knock after a long pause. "I'm Eileen Prince's son, Severus."

She reacted in shock. "Are you really? I mean, I know about you, of course. Oh, where are my manners? Come in, come in." She stood aside to let him into the foyer.

He entered the home, taking in the slightly neglected air of the place. The main hall of the house ran straight down the center, the kitchens, dining area, and his great-grandmother's parlor were to his left, and to his right, the lounge and his great-grandfather's den, which also served as his study – the one room Severus hadn't been allowed during his visits, and the only one with a locked door.

"I'm sorry that the place is a mess, but Pepper won't leave her master's side except to fix him broth, so the rest of the house is somewhat neglected."

Severus looked at the woman, piecing together what she saying. He must have appeared confused to her. "He's ill, sir. Very ill. It won't be long, I'm afraid."

Severus thanked the Healer and mounted the stairs to the upper floor.

~H~

Hermione paced the house the next morning, feeling restless and cooped up. The school lists had finally arrived, and Ginny had hurried to the Ministry of Magic to get some money from her dad. She'd been gone an hour already. Hermione had just flopped down on the sofa for the umpteenth time when Ginny came through the Floo, grinning like a Clabert. "Okay, I'm ready!"

"So, no problems then?" Hermione asked, grabbing her shopping bag.

"Actually, one. Harry was in Dad's office, and of course, he offered to pay for my school supplies. Dad told him, 'Nothing doing. I can very well afford to pay for my daughter's schooling, Harry,' and Harry adamantly said he wanted to since he's technically my husband," she said, lowering her voice to try and sound like her dad when she'd quoted him.

"So, who won?" Hermione asked, amused.

"Well, Dad did, of course," Ginny said, her eyes showing a mischevious glint. "Dad asked why I wasn't going with Mum, and I had to remind him that Mum had accepted the position at St. Mungo's and was working, so I was going with you. Then, of course, I had to remind him that we were of age and that we'd survived a war and could take care of ourselves in Diagon Alley. I also pointed out that it'd be crowded today, what with everyone getting their lists and all. You'd think I was still eleven," she said, shaking her head. "But Dad relented, making me promise to go to George's shop first. I suspect he's hoping George will escort me shopping." Ginny made a laugh that sounded a little like a like a snort. "Then Harry insisted on walking me to the Floos and gave me a handful of Sickles and Galleons! He told me to 'have a good time,' and I intend to! So, how about it – want to ask George to have lunch with us?"

"Sure," Hermione replied, laughing at her tale. They were still laughing as the girls emerged from the Floo in the Leaky Cauldron.

Diagon Alley was bustling with shoppers. Many of the shops had reopened, and there were several new vendors with brightly colored kiosks. The girls wandered the shops. The Apothecary asked for autographs when they bought their Potions ingredients, and again, the shopkeeper asked Hermione and Ginny to sign a *Daily Prophet* each when they went to get treats for Crooks and Ginny a new owl at the Magical Menagerie. However, the kindly witch behind the counter persistently tried selling Hermione a guard Crup, insisting that it would protect her from Severus Snape. In both shops, Hermione and Ginny were ogled by the mingling students and their parents and were even stopped to ask for an autograph or to pose for pictures.

In Madam Malkin's, the shop assistant was very pleased to see Hermione and Ginny and greeted them warmly, fawning over the girls and even giving them both new pairs of socks. Nevertheless, she did pull Hermione aside and offer a bit of advice about tying her knickers in a knot with a sprig of Juniper and placing it under her pillow. "It will keep him from wanting to accost you while you sleep," the elderly witch suggested. When they left, there was a cluster of girls who smirked and laughed as Hermione walked by, one saying, "Yeah, but she had to resort to *ensnaring* Snape in order to get any," which Hermione chose to simply ignore.

In the stationery shop, Hermione was amused that when the girls tried to get new quills, the shopkeeper wanted a picture of them for his wall, and gave each girl a pad of parchment and an extra bottle of ink for posing with him. But as they exited the shop, they heard three girls snickering about Hermione having to tolerate being shagged by the greasy git.

In the bookshop, Ginny was so absolutely delighted as she selected new books rather than second-hand that it was easy to ignore the snickers and rude comments from the other shoppers and smile for the ones who wanted to shake their hands. Hermione and Ginny both smiled and happily signed copies of the *Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler*, which had articles devoted to them. After posing with Mr. Blotts, Ginny and Hermione both left with Winnifred Chandlers' newest Charms book *New Discoveries For A New Age*, and a brand new journal each.

The girls went to the Quidditch Shop next so Ginny could get some broom wax, and they nearly toppled over a second-year who'd stopped in the doorway, his mouth gaping like a guppy, until his mum pulled him out of the way, babbling her apologies. Ginny received a lot of attention from the boys who'd been admiring the new brooms, and once again the shopkeeper was so delighted to see the heroines of the war that he also asked for a picture to hang in his shop, although even he had given Hermione his sympathy for her situation, saying he hoped it would all work out in the end. On the way out of the door, a pair of young girls asked Hermione if she'd really ridden on a dragon, and then they scooted off smiling when she'd admitted she had.

With bulging sacks, they strolled down the street, getting handshakes, thanks of gratitude for helping Harry rid the world of Tom Riddle, and Hermione receiving plenty of advice as to what she should do regarding her Bonding.

"Kind of makes you wish you'd stayed home, doesn't it?" Ginny asked, laughing at the last wizard's advice to slip Severus a Forgetfulness Draught and take Ron in as a lover. "Now I know what Harry was talking about when he complains about all the attention."

"I think the world's gone insane," Hermione groaned. "Touted like a celebrity and then treated as if I was mental all in the same breath from these people! It's enough to drive you mad," she groaned as she opened the door to George's shop.

"Oi, you two!" George shouted from the counter. He hurried over, his eyes narrowing momentarily at the bags, and then he looked up with a huge grin. "Good, no shopping!" He motioned them to follow him. "Drop your things in the back. Did you know that I got owls from Mum, Dad, and Harry, asking me to take you shopping so I could *protect you* and one from the Aurors department asking if they should send a guard? But it looks like you managed well enough without."

"It was rough," Ginny said, grinning. "Fighting our way to the counters, signing autographs, and defending Hermione from all the old biddies and their advice."

Hermione playfully stuck her tongue out at her.

"Figured as much," George said smiling. "So, fancy some lunch?"

George led them to the Leaky Cauldron for lunch. Ron showed up just as they sat down. "Hi," he said, leaning toward Hermione. "I hope this is okay?"

"More than okay. How are you?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged. "All right, I suppose. You?"

She was glad that Ron was at least acting like his old self again. "You want the truth or the public version?"

"You're smiling, so the truth is you're doing okay. So, tell me the public version," he said.

Hermione laughed. She started to tell him all the bits of advice she'd gotten that morning, and Ginny filled in the ones she'd been told to give Hermione. It had the four of them in stitches while they waited for lunch to be served.

Suddenly, something in George's pocket made an awful sound. "Problem at the shop," he said, jumping up.

Ginny looked worried. "Isn't that your burglar alarm?"

"Yeah, and Verity is all by herself. I have to go," he said, turning and running off.

Ginny stood to go. "I'm going to go and see if – make sure everything is all right at the shop," she said excitedly. Ron looked torn between staying and going.

Hermione placed her hand on his arm. "If you want to go too..."

"Can't," he said. "Look, the real reason I'm here is that the Aurors are worried for your safety. I wasn't supposed to say anything, but you and Gin are on the Death Eaters' hit list, as are Luna and Neville. Harry and I are rarely alone anymore in public. Loraine Matsuno from the department was next to the door, but she followed Ginny. I'm guessing that Hayward Blume went, too. I don't see him either. But we're okay here – Tom doesn't let stuff happen in his pub."

"How bad is it? Do you know how many more are out there?" Hermione asked, trying to remain calm.

"Enough," Ron admitted. "Ever since your attack, we have been keeping as close a watch on you as we can. Truth is, no matter what I think of Snape, he's been taking you to some unusual places, Muggle ones. We don't think any of his pals will try anything with him around, but here – it's too public."

Hermione looked at him and noticed the concern in his eyes. "Ron, it's public. There are loads of witches and wizards around. They wouldn't be so foolish..."

"Just yesterday, Dennis Creevey was accosted, and Hannah Abbott was hit with a hex, here in broad daylight. The hex came from between two shops just down the street. The official report was that it came from an overexcited eleven-year-old showing off his first wand."

"No one would believe that!" she gasped. "Is Hannah okay?"

"She's fine. Andy Montrose – you remember him, right? He had her right in a flick." Ron grinned. "Truth is that the little Muggle-born was showing off his wand and set off a few shots that thankfully didn't hit anyone. His wand was checked, but he didn't fire the hex. He wouldn't have known that one anyway. Still, it made a convenient cover for what did happen."

"So, Ron, tell me, how many of them are there?" she asked.

"Ten," he said definitively. "We've been able to identify most of the ones who called themselves the inner circle. We have a list of ten Death Eaters still on the loose and at least five supposed supporters that we can't find to verify."

Hermione and Ron talked about some of the other things that were new at the Ministry. Change was slow, but already Kingsley was being credited for trying to pass some good ideas. "Muggle-baiting and even bullying Muggle-borns is now against the law. You know that the Ministry has a trace on the word, Mud—, er, well, you know. You can lose your wand or go to Azkaban if you are given too many fines for saying it. Kingsley is trying to set a better standard to the new laws, make them more realistic. Could you imagine, some kid like Malfoy being jailed for calling you..." He'd lowered his voice to a near whisper as he added, "a m-u-d-blood."

Hermione stifled a grin, their heads still close together. "I can spell it, Ron."

"I can't!" Ron exclaimed, his body jerking back slightly, and then he leaned forward again. "If I say it, even in jest, I'm out of the training program. At least the new restrictions are only being enforced among Ministry personnel. I hope the amendments pass, the way Kingsley wrote it is much better."

"Bugger, it's like a full swing of the pendulum, from one extreme to the other," she remarked, and Ron grinned. "What about the giants, the ones who sided with Riddle? I heard something speaking about them in the bookshop."

"Dead. Killed. They were hunted down. We don't know who did it, but they were tracked to a valley and found dead. Grawp was given a collar to identify him, has a license and everything. Grawp, I think, likes it. Hagrid's pleased, we think. At least Grawp is now protected." Ron laughed softly. "Harry and I were sent out there to give him the collar. Grawp wanted to play with it but finally let Hagrid put it on him."

"I heard that Grawp had been given a medal," she said, suppressing her laughter, "for helping rebuild the school."

"That was the official report, we gave him a medal that he wears around his neck," he said, nodding, smiling in return. "Anyway, when you see him, from the ground it looks like a crup tag."

Tom arrived with their lunches, and Ron told him that Ginny and George would be back in a bit. He turned back to Hermione. "Actually, I thought you'd be incensed that he was given a license, kind of like a crup."

Hermione shrugged. "To the world, he's still a giant, regardless of how well Hagrid does trying to civilize him. At least this way, he'll be okay."

"Hermione, you always amaze me," he said, relaxing in his chair.

George and Ginny returned. Hermione noticed the witch and wizard who remained at the doorway, talking. "Yep, someone tried to rob us. Good thing those Aurors were here," he said, indicating the two at the door. "I have to get back. I hope I can get Dean to sign on with me, but he's deciding if he wants to or not." He hugged his sister and then Hermione, then turned to go, taking his sandwich with him.

Ginny sat and finished her lunch, telling them all about the attempted robbery. "And those two, Mr. Blume and Miss Matsuno, it's lucky they were assigned to Diagon Alley today. Can you imagine?"

After lunch, Ginny and Hermione decided to have an ice cream before leaving. Ron went with them and tried to insist that they eat inside, but it was too crowded and noisy. Hermione was greeted by Rebecca Marcello, a Hufflepuff who had graduated Hogwarts two years before the war, and was pleased to learn that she was the one who had reopened the ice cream parlor with a girl she'd befriended from Beauxbatons. The new décor had a French café style and served French pastries filled with ice cream. As they carried their desserts outside, Hermione saw both Mr. Blume and Miss Matsuno lingering near the shop as they ate their ice cream.

~M~



Maggie couldn't believe what she was seeing. Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger-Snape were sitting together in a booth at the Leaky Cauldron. She took as many notes about how close they leaned in toward each other, the smiles and how Mrs. Granger-Snape touched Ronald Weasley's hand. She was going to owl Rita as soon as she returned to the office. This was priceless. Mrs. Granger-Snape was sharing an intimate lunch with her old paramour. *Rumors are true – the girl is going to annul her Bonding.*

She watched as George Weasley and Ginny Potter arrived, he greeting Mrs. Granger-Snape fondly and apparently saying good-bye, taking a sandwich with him as he left. Miss Potter apparently joined her friends. After lunch, the threesome wandered down the street, looking at the various displays in the windows and entered the newly reopened ice cream parlor. Maggie sat demurely on a chair and waited, rewarded when the trio sat at the table behind her. She could overhear everything, not that what they were saying was juicy, but it was apparent that the friendship was strong between Mrs. Granger-Snape and Mr. Weasley. Maggie took notes anyway, just in case she was misinterpreting anything as inconsequential. *Besides, Rita will be able to use the quotes in her article. Oh, this is exciting! Like being a correspondent myself – not that I'm nearly the caliber that Rita is.*

When the trio got up and walked to the Apparation site, she followed discreetly. She was rewarded again at seeing Mr. Weasley hug Mrs. Granger-Snape farewell *Oh, yes, things are definitely chummy between these two!* She scurried away to the Floo, eager to get back and send her notes to her friend.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

I'm so sorry that this story took so long to update, but we moved at work into the new building. There was so much to do, and still see patients at the same time, that I was exhausted every night, and I had a really big project due that took me longer than I anticipated. Work has settled into the 'new normal' and my project is complete. So I'm able to focus on my stories again. Thank you so much to everyone who is following this story. Your reviews and support keep me going on, and I really appreciate all the kindness you've given me. Thank you for your patience.

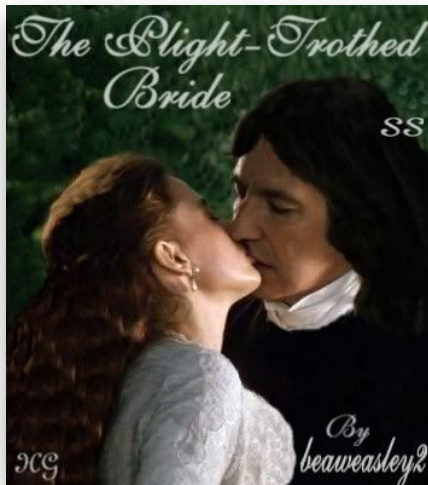
Thank you to Era1960 for being a sounding board when I had a bit of a block and his masculine advice, and to my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for helping me clean this up and fix all my mistakes.

I also want to give a big hug to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my banner. I still get that silly little grin each time I look at it.

## Regulations and Requests

*Chapter 21 of 63*

Severus has a meeting with the governors, and Hermione gets a request from George.



~~~~~o 21 o~~~~~

Regulations and Requests

~S~

Severus left his great-grandfather's house feeling disgruntled. He Apparated to the hillside overlooking the small village of Havenhold where he'd buried his mum years ago. He leaned against the tree that he'd planted beside her grave and stared at the lights of the village, thinking about his mother and her family.

His great-grandfather was quite ill, but the old codger had been as acerbic as ever. They had talked, briefly, mostly about the things his great-grandfather had read about Severus in the *Prophet*. He had wanted to know about his involvement with the Dark Lord, something Severus was uncomfortable talking about since he had no idea on which side his great-grandfather had stood. Talfryn Prince was a pure-blood, but he had no idea as to the wizard's ideology. Severus did know that his grandfather, Edgar Prince, was, in fact, a purist in the extreme and that he'd hated the fact that his daughter had married Tobias Snape. Talfryn had also been quite curious about Severus' teaching years and his term as Headmaster. Severus had answered the questions with as much neutrality as he could. However, when Talfryn had asked about 'that girl' he was Bonded to, Severus was loath to say much. He had told Talfryn that she was a past student with exceptional retention, avid researching skills, quite capable with her wand and demonstrated a remarkable talent following potions directions. It was the truth, it was how Severus saw her, but he wasn't sure if that was all there was.

Nevertheless, it was all he would admit to.

Then had come the question.

*"Are you going to marry the witch?" Talfryn asked, his fatigue starting to show.*

*"She's my Bonded mate," he said noncommittally. "It was she who used one of the oldest of the matchmaking spells, and we are recognized in the Marriage Registration ledger as Bonded in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office."*

*"So in other words, no," Talfryn said groggily.*

*Severus sighed. "We are undecided at this juncture," he replied.*

*Talfryn closed his eyes, made a grunt followed by a gargled sound, and then became silent. Severus watched Talfryn for a while, then walked over to the bedside table to examine the potions he was taking. He scoffed at the quality, making a mental note to brew a better supply, and then wondered if he should meddle. He hadn't been asked but felt impelled to help the old man anyway.*

By the time Severus had returned to the Manor, the house had been dark. A house-elf had met him seconds after he'd arrived on the grounds with a candle to light his way. The next morning, he'd risen late, dressed, and gone downstairs.

Narcissa was embroidering in her sitting room. "Severus," she greeted him warmly.

"Narcissa, my apologies for last night," he said, smiling at the precision of her needlework.

"Are things settling down?" she asked, her eyes flicking from her craft to his face without missing a stitch. "You have the meeting with the governors today, do you not?"

"Yes, in an hour," he said. He knew he faced a meeting where he'd have to respond to questions he wasn't ready to answer, one in particular that had yet to be decided his relationship with Hermione. He also knew that he'd be told if he'd be allowed relations with his own wife. Being dictated to was something he'd hoped was behind him, but apparently Fortuna wasn't so kind after all.

"The elves can bring you breakfast if you wish. They made lemon scones this morning," she said, her calm voice helping to ease his nervousness.

"Thank you, Narcissa," he replied, smiling as he sat down next to her. A house-elf appeared with a cup of breakfast tea and the mentioned scone, fidgeting nervously as Severus added, "But no. I'm fine."

Narcissa indicated the table and looked up at Severus. "Then do sit and keep me company," she requested.

He sat and chatted idly about all the normal pleasantries as he watched her sew and sipped the tea. He admired the grace of her hand and the way her hair stayed perfectly in place instead of falling in the way of her needle. Fifteen minutes after the clock chimed the half hour, he rose. "Narcissa, thank you."

"Things will be fine," she replied, setting her needlework on her lap. "But good luck to you."

Severus arrived at the Administrative Offices of the Hogwarts School Governors. Elaine Prevatt, a prim witch with pink, rhinestone-adorned, horn-rimmed glasses on a silver chain and beige business robes, led him up to the general meeting room. "May I introduce Elsa Deers and Roberto Delgado," she said, indicating a kind-faced black woman whose hair was pulled back a tight bun and a thin, wiry wizard with an extremely thick, handlebar mustache. "Marvin Boatright is due any minute. May I offer you something to drink?"

"Water would be nice," Severus said. He took the seat she indicated across the table from the two school governors.

A portly wizard in a green robes entered behind Miss Prevatt. "Sorry I'm late. Floo was stuck." He took the seat at the head of the long table and opened a thick folder before looking up. "You are Professor Snape. We've never met, but I've read a great deal about you. Interesting life you've had. I would love to talk to you about the Morganston Elixir sometime. Quite a feat, that," he said, although Severus was certain that the man wasn't the least bit interested in the elixir at all. "Now, shall we begin?"

"We were uncertain if you'd accept the post of Headmaster, so we had a meeting with Minerva McGonagall last month," Mrs. Deers stated. Severus wasn't the least bit surprised.

"We are deeply concerned regarding your position on punishments," Mr. Boatright said, coming right to the point.

*A Gryffindor all right,* Severus thought. "I can assure you that I agree with the approved methods of punishments."

"But while you were Headmaster there were a number of punishments allowed that were completely inexcusable," Mr. Delgado said, looking at several pages in his file. "Beatings, chains, being locked in closets... Unforgivables being used on students!"

"The Ministry had fallen to the Dark Lord, and thus the school was under his control as well," Severus pointed out the obvious. "Although I had to maintain certain pretenses, it was all I could do to keep the Carrows from torturing and killing the students. But the Dark Lord was dictating how the school should be run."

Mrs. Deers was looking at him with deeply concerned eyes. "And yet the students were tortured."

"Tortured, yes; killed, no. The Carrows grew increasingly difficult to control toward the end of term, claiming that they were under the Dark Lord's instructions," Severus said plainly. Somehow, he'd known he would face this topic, so he was somewhat prepared. "And Alec and Amycus are in Azkaban for it thank Merlin. Personally, I'd have preferred the Dementor's kiss for them, but they got off easy."

Mrs. Deers eyes grew large at the declaration, but Mr. Delgado grunted in agreement.

"And as Headmaster, how can we be assured that such methods will not be employed again?" Mrs. Deers asked, her concern still evident as she rolled her quill in her fingers in what was obviously a nervous habit of hers.

"Because although I was considered a harsh professor, the usual punishments I doled out were cleaning cauldrons, gutting and preparing potion ingredients such as insects, grubs, and other small critters, buffing rust off cauldron bottoms, and doing lines. It is a matter of record. Tedious, dirty, slimy, and demeaning work, but character-building, in my opinion. As Headmaster, I reenacted Dolores Umbridge's decree regarding the Headmaster's right to reassign detentions, and I assigned as many of them as I could to Professors Hagrid, Slughorn, Flitwick, and Vector, until Professor Hagrid was dismissed for hosting an illicit party."

"Yes, I recall the students at your trial claiming to have scrubbed the astronomy tower stairs with a toothbrush, or raking the pathways of the grounds, pulling weeds, shoveling snow, feeding thestrals... and trimming Hippogriff claws," Mr. Boatright said, reading off a sheet on the file. He looked up, and his eyes narrowed. "The school still has Hippogriffs?"

"Exactly," Severus replied. "And yes, Professor Hagrid is quite fond of his Hippogriffs. They are well-managed and, if approached properly, quite reasonable creatures. The only incident we've had with the beasts since Professor Hagrid took over the post was when young Draco Malfoy approached a Hippogriff without showing the animal the proper respect. His injuries were only minor abrasions and a cut to his right forearm, regardless of what you were told otherwise."

"So, you condone the use of dangerous beasts at Hogwarts?" Mr. Boatright stated as he made notation on his parchment.

"I recognize that Professor Hagrid is quite capable of handling the creatures in question and that he has the ability to assure the students safety as long as they follow his instructions. Does he need to be reminded of what is appropriate for certain age levels? Yes. However, he has remarkable skills with all manner of creatures." Severus looked at the other two sitting across from him. "However, as Headmaster, I did sit down with Professor Hagrid and made a course outline of which creatures should be covered in his curriculum according to the suitable year level that did include his more dangerous animals for the older students. As per our agreement, a few of the more common creatures are still introduced to the third-years so they will be prepared to protect themselves if faced with them in the wild."

Mrs. Deers smiled and nodded in understanding while Mr. Delgado looked appeased.

Mr. Boatright cleared his throat. "That's all fine, and we'll take that into consideration. Now, in regards to the other decrees set forth during your year as Headmaster," he said stiffly as he shuffled a few parchments.

"Gratefully rescinded," Severus said. "They were Dolores Umbridge's decrees, imposed upon the school through the Board of Governors. Thankfully, she has been removed from the board and imprisoned."

"Good to hear," Mr. Boatright said, apparently ignoring Severus' comments about Umbridge.

"Now about this Bonding with Miss er, Mrs. Hermione Granger er, Snape," Mr. Delgado stuttered. "She is returning to Hogwarts as a student to complete her N.E.W.T.s. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Yes, Hermione is returning, and, as of the moment, I don't foresee there being a problem," Severus said, forcing his tone to remain even and calm.

"You are remaining Bonded then?" Mrs. Deers asked, her expression anticipatory.

Severus smirked at the witch. "Yes, since it is a magical Bonding."

Mr. Boatright made a check on his parchment and then looked at Severus pointedly. "I heard that she is filing for an annulment?"

"We are not getting an annulment. She is going to finish her schooling since I see that as a priority," Severus said a bit more firmly than he intended. "I insist that she gets a proper education, which, I'm glad to say, she has indicated as her priority as well."

"Good to hear," Mr. Delgado said, nodding at Severus.

"And her living arrangements? Is she going to be in the dormitories, or do you anticipate having her live in your rooms?" Mr. Boatright asked.

Severus held his agitation in check. "The arrangements will be discussed with Minerva McGonagall as her Head of House and with my wife. However, our relationship will not impede on her studies in any way. I shall see to it."

"That's all well and good, but you did not answer the question will she be living in the dormitory or in your quarters?" Mr. Boatright persisted.

"My wife and I haven't discussed it yet," Severus reasserted.

"According to the charter, a professor may not entice or coerce a student into any type of fraternization," Mr. Boatright said, slightly lowering his head so as to look down his pudgy nose at him, "or risk dismissal."

The tactic never worked well on Severus, and he resisted the urge to demonstrate the proper technique. "My wife conducted the Bonding spell that matched us. I did not pursue her."

Mr. Delgado's brow furrowed. "Current accepted arrangements for spouses are to have the household Floo connected with the professor's office or to utilize the Deputy Headmistress' Floo."

"If Hermione wishes to live in the Headmaster's tower or accepts my invitation to do so, then she shall," Severus said, knowing that was the only logical answer.

"So you *do* intend to have her stay with you in the Headmaster's suite?" Mr. Boatright asked, clearly affronted by his statement. "May I remind you that the faculty is prohibited from conducting illicit relations with a student? Students are not permitted in the professors' private quarters. You must at all times uphold the professor-student relationship..."

"There is, in fact, a seven hundred-year-old precedent for a student of legal age, who was properly married to a professor prior to the professor's hiring, to receive the special privilege of being provided quarters on the second floor of the west wing with their spouse," Severus stated smoothly, steeping his hands in front of him. "There is also a five hundred-year-old precedent for professors who are in an arranged marriage between two pure-blood families for the student involved to reside with their spouse in a house in Hogsmeade, or as you stated, have the Floo in the professor's family home connected to the school. Since I am to be Headmaster, I would not, of course, be relocating, nor will Hermione be living off school grounds, so these are not applicable. I will *not* have the Gryffindor Floo connected to the Floo in the Headmaster's office, so that option is not applicable either." He let his hands drop. "Since there are no other examples of precedence, the only choices I see are that either Hermione resides in the Gryffindor dormitory and has free access to the Headmaster's tower, or she resides with me. So, my wife and I will discuss this matter with her Head of House, and we will inform you of the decision." *There, that is safe enough*, Severus thought.

"But if she resides with you, there will be a scandal!" Mrs. Deers exclaimed.

"No more scandal than there already is over our Bonding, I assure you," Severus said with a smirk. "But I do believe that Hermione is a level-headed witch and that Minerva McGonagall will insist on what she believes will be in my wife's best interest. In regards to Hermione's lessons, I can assure you that as Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall will oversee her marks and handle any complaints of favoritism."

Mrs. Deers looked concerned, and Mr. Delgado appeared appeased, but Mr. Boatright was affronted by his answer and had been writing furiously. He looked up at Severus with a stern expression. "We will, of course, be watching you."

"Naturally," Severus stated.

~H~

When Hermione came down to breakfast after having a brief lie in, there was a letter waiting for her, propped up on her glass of orange juice.

It was from George, asking her for help with some of his more complicated products.

*Hermione,*

*You remember when you came by and brewed some potions for the shop? Of course you do. Well, the thing is, I could really use your help. See, we, Fred and I, we always made all the shop's products together and, frankly, Ron isn't up yet to doing the necessary spells, and Dean is still learning them and can't do the complicated ones yet. I was hoping that maybe you'd consider giving me a hand. It would mean a lot to me, and I'd be more than happy to pay you.*

*Owl me as soon as you can.*

Hermione smiled as she grabbed a slice of toast and then ran upstairs to change. Not having an owl, she decided to just take the Floo to Diagon Alley and see George.

The street was bustling. Inside, Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes was bursting with kids of all ages and exasperated-looking parents. Ron was busily ringing up customers at the register, and Dean was assisting a group of teens over at the Snackboxes. Hermione touched Verity's arm to get her attention. "Hi, Verity. Could you tell me where George is?"

Verity shrugged and shook her head. "I don't think he's back from Gringotts."

Hermione waved at Ron and made her way back to the front of the shop. Taking a chance, she walked over toward the bank. She waved when she saw George making his way through the crowds. "Oi, George!"

George looked up and smiled, waving Hermione over to him. "I'm assuming you got my note since you're here," he said when she was in hearing range.

"Yep, this morning. So what exactly did you need help with? I'm not going to be a tester for anything," she said right off so there'd be no misunderstanding.

George started to laugh. "Nah, I have a few others on the payroll who help me with that Angelina for one. No, what I need are your wand skills." He looked around. "Do you mind walking with me? I have to go to the Apothecary to pick up my order." He indicated the café a few doors down. "Let's get a cuppa and talk, shall we?" George took her hand and placed it on his arm. "So we don't get separated among this lot."

Hermione smiled and let him lead her to the café. "So you're still in touch with Angelina?"

"Yeah, we're kind of dating," he replied, pulling her out of the way of a witch and six kids. "It's unofficial, and we're keeping it quiet for now don't want to get Mum's hopes up or anything. So, keep that to yourself. I'm only telling you because if you're going to work with me, you'll be seeing her. She's over a lot."

"I'll be the picture of discretion," Hermione said, laughing.

~S~

"I see you've had an irritating day," Lucius greeted Severus when he entered the library. "Come, sit, and relax with me. I'd ask, but you look as if some dunderhead has blown up your lab."

"It's always a pleasure being questioned by the board. At least they were less hostile towards me than they were last year," Severus said with a slight weariness to his tone.

A house-elf popped in and muttered something to Lucius. "Scotch," he replied dismissively to the elf and then turned to Severus. "I thought you could use something on the strong side."

"Thank you," Severus said as the house-elf offered him a drink. He wanted to down the drink but refrained. He didn't need to get drunk before seeing Hermione. "Narcissa really has a green touch her herbs are doing well. I notice that the elvians, garridelli, and sage are blooming nicely, and the delphiniums are bountiful this year. The lugwort is thriving and ready for harvesting."

"Always the Potions master," Lucius said with a chuckle. "You've only to ask. I'm sure Narcissa will be glad to let you harvest her plants." He sat down and regarded Severus thoughtfully, which meant he wanted something. "She was hoping you would brew a few potions for her."

Severus smiled. He turned and faced his friend. "I'll be busy most of tomorrow, but if you give me her list, I'll see what I can do," he said.

"She'll be pleased." Lucius crossed his legs on his knee, balancing his drink on his ankle. "So, you are seeing your wife again tonight?"

Severus turned back to the window. "Bonded mate, and yes, I am."

"Any place in particular?" Lucius asked. The clink of ice in a glass made Severus turn back to his friend. "I know we won't be seeing you here. Although we are having the Chantilly apples and stuffed pork you like so much."

"She won't come here. She made that perfectly clear our last evening together," Severus said, still annoyed that she didn't trust him. He'd understood her point, but he didn't like it. "She insists we go places that are neutral. I don't like eating out all the time. She refuses to go to my house, so I can't take her home and cook there. She is the most infuriating witch! I cannot understand why in the blazes the Moon-Song Curse matched us together. I have nothing in common with the girl." He downed his drink, and the house-elf returned to refill it. "I feel like I'm bloody well courting her."

"That's what dating is unnecessary expense for little reward," Lucius teased him. "Don't tell me she insists on expensive dinners?"

"No, she hasn't said anything yet about the locations of our outings."

"Dates," Lucius said with a grin. "So, where to tonight?"

"Somewhere private, quiet, and without intrusive reporters." Severus shrugged. "and somewhere Dolohov won't be."

"Limits your possibilities," Lucius said with a smirk. "You can go anywhere you have to pay, and he won't be there."

"I saw Darthmyer leaving when I arrived," Severus said. "What did the Aurors want this time?"

"Information." Lucius sighed, the weariness of his house internment showing. "Either they come for more information, which I don't have, or they're checking to see if I've acquired a wand, to check the restraining wards, and the occasional request to examine my library. I know what they hope to find my Dark Arts tomes, as if I'd have them lying around in plain view. Many of those old books are priceless."

"Frustrating for them, I'm sure. Lucky they have no idea where your hidden assets are, or you'd be back under investigation, regardless of your cooperation with them. You do know your best bet is to make copies of the tomes and give them to the Ministry. Then they cannot badger you about your priceless books. I'm sure the Unspeakables would love to have the copies in their possession. I know the spells Madam Pince used on the old Hogwarts tomes, if that would help."

"I'll consider it but the timing," Lucius said and shrugged. "If I divulge them now, I would be seen as harboring dangerous items, and that goes against my parole. As if antique and ancient books are dangerous items." He paused to sip his drink. "Speaking of Dark items, have you had any more run-ins with past associates?"

"No, thankfully," Severus said with a smirk. "But I'm ever vigilant. So, what are you going to do about the old books?"

Lucius looked at the ice in his glass. "Keep them safe for now until I decide."

~H~

Hermione hurried home after a fun day of learning the spell work Fred and George had invented for their products. It had been an exhausting afternoon, filling in for Fred's half of the charms, enchantments, and even a few hexes. Hermione developed a new respect for the twins' magical abilities and inventiveness.

She had just arrived back at the house and had slipped into the kitchen for a glass of water when Kreacher admitted Severus into the entry hall. She quickly Apparated up

to her room to change her top, opting in her rushed state to grab the first thing she saw one of the new jumpers from Harrods. She bit the tags off and slipped on the nice, lightweight cashmere jumper. She checked her image quickly. Her black jeans would have to do. *At least they don't look dirty...* Her hair was all right, a bit more curly than usual from the cauldron fumes in George's workroom, but decent enough, she supposed. She dabbed at her face with a tissue and applied a bit of powder to her nose and a dab of lip-gloss, tucking the gloss into her pocket. *Okay, I don't look like I have just Apparated out of the shop after spending eight hours working on Charming objects and creating potions.*

She kicked off her trainers and slipped on a pair of shoes, smirking at the two-inch heels. With one last stop in the loo to quickly brush her teeth, not a full brushing, she could only imagine Severus' scowl by now, but she wasn't going out with dragon's breath. She spit and hurried down the stairs.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of the time today," she said as she entered the foyer.

The look on Severus' face clearly told her that he was taken aback by her appearance. His gaze stopped on the green, sleeveless cashmere jumper she was wearing. She fought the urge to clasp at the neckline, knowing that it was somewhat low, but it did completely cover her bra except if she bent forward, and she wasn't going to do that tonight. Besides, she thought he'd like her in green. Okay, that was a lie. Truth was that she loved cashmere, it had been on sale, and it was new. Ginny had talked her into the rich emerald shade instead of the blue or the black.

"Let's go." He turned and opened the door.

Hermione wanted to laugh. He offered her his arm, and as soon as she'd taken hold, he Disapparated. They landed in a wide alley between two brick buildings. The look on his face told her that he was getting his bearings. "This way," he said, heading for the street. He turned left, and they stopped in front of really cute pub.

"This is nice," she said, curious about the scowl on his face.

"They've remodeled," he said, looking at the pub.

Hermione suppressed a chuckle, pursing her lips as she turned her face. It was so obvious that the pub wasn't where he'd originally planned to take her. He opened the door and ushered her inside.

The pub was populated with small groups of regulars along the bar, a pair playing darts against the far wall, and several people eating. From what she could see, the food looked really good. "How did you find this place?" she asked.

"My father, who else?" Severus stated flatly. "He was a deft hand with darts." He indicated for her to walk toward the back wall where the booths were separated by the high backs of the bench seats and thick pillars of worn wood.

A few people looked up as they passed but returned to the conversations they were having.

"Don't you ever wear robes?" Severus asked when they'd sat down.

"So far you've taken me to Muggle places," she replied with a shrug. "Besides, you didn't specify, did you?"

"You expect me to tell you what to wear?" he asked incredulously.

Hermione was interrupted from responding by the approach of a portly woman in a white blouse. "Do you want to hear the specials, love?" she asked.

"Yes," Severus replied, setting down the menu.

"Our specials today are the Somerset pork chop, Frenched and grilled, served with a sage and sausage stuffed baked apple napped with a scrumpy cider sauce, or the braised corned beef and cabbage with, carrots, red bliss potatoes, and horseradish. We also have bangers and mash with our white cheddar and chive lumpy mash," she rattled off quickly. "So, what shall it be, then?"

"I'll have the pork," Severus said, "and a Newcastle brown."

"I'll have the bangers and mash, and a Coke if you have it," Hermione said. The waitress made a check and hurried off.

"I only have a few robes... well, my school robes and two dress robes," Hermione admitted. "One of them well, it's seen much better days. I just haven't gotten rid of it."

Severus looked at her as if astonished. "So, you don't have any clothes."

"Oh, yeah, I run around starkers all the time!" Hermione laughed softly, ignoring his scowl at her comment. "I usually just wear my school robes over my clothes if I go to Diagon Alley. Harry and I both wear Muggle clothes around the house, and the Weasleys don't care what I wear. I suppose I just haven't gone shopping for robes except, of course, school robes not that I have loads of money for that. I will have to pay for my last years' tuition."

Severus's attention was diverted as the kitchen helper came with their drinks. "I will be covering your tuition," he said flatly when the boy left.

"I think it may have already been deducted from my account, but if not, the money's there," Hermione replied. "My parents put the money in the Gringotts account for me when I got my first letter and made regular..." She was interrupted by a burst of loud cheering over by the dartboard. "Before they left, they made sure I'd have enough to finish school."

"Before they left?" he asked.

Hermione waited until a party of four passed their table. "Yes, before they went to Australia." Hermione smiled as the waitress showed up with their food. "Oh, this looks good." She eagerly tried the lumpy mash. "You said your father used to come here. Do you play darts as well?"

The door opened, and a crowd of young men and women came in. Hermione counted nine young men in rowing suits and jackets that were apparently from a local team, several men and women in various shorts and jeans, and a few girls in skirts, apparently coming to the pub to celebrate a victory.

She turned her attention back to Severus, amused to see him scowling again. "My dad...to play. I don't... darts... more, it's too... with magic," was all Hermione could make out from the noise as the large party moved several of the tables in the middle of the pub together while two of them returned to the bar carrying four pitchers apiece, followed by two waiters with a tray of pints.

She leaned forward. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"To our coxswain," one of the rowers said loudly, holding up a pint of beer. The eight teammates and their friends raised their glasses and cheered.

Severus' expression reminded her so much of their days at Hogwarts that Hermione didn't know if she should leave him be and eat quietly or try to talk to him.

"I said, I do..." he started to say and was drowned out again. He fingered his sleeve, and for a minute she was certain that he was about to draw his wand. He withdrew his hand and picked up his fork instead.

When the waitress was serving the group another round of beers, Hermione tried again. "So you don't like darts?"

Severus looked up, his fork dropping back to his plate. "I didn't say I don't like darts. I'm quite good, but only because..."

He was drowned out again as one of the crew led the party in another rousing toast followed by loud cheers.

"Eat up," he growled.

Hermione suppressed a smile as she watched him. They ate in silence for a while, until Severus set his fork down and finished off his beer. Hermione contemplated whether she should continue eating or claim to be done as well. By the look on his face, she opted for telling him she was through. Severus tossed some notes on the table and led her outside.

"Well, that was... nice," she started to say, falling silent at his expression of disbelief. "If you didn't like the place, why'd we come here?"

"It's usually quieter," he said, his gaze on the street around them.

*Always aware.* "So, where to now?" she asked, trying not to sound too peppy.

His gaze snapped to hers, and his dark eyes narrowed. "We need to talk, Hermione, and the Manor seems to be out, you won't come to my house, and I won't go to the Black Potter's."

"We could simply go for a walk," she suggested. He looked around, obviously uncomfortable with the idea. "Do you trust me?"

"Trust you to what?" he asked as if she'd lost her mind.

"Apparate us," she replied. She felt like taking control. If he wanted to talk, fine, but it would be somewhere safe.

"Where?"

Hermione held out her hand.

He looked at it as if she were handing him something obscene.

She waited and then softly laughed at him. "I did this many times with both Harry and Ron all last year." She stood there, waiting, her hand outstretched to him.

He stared at her as if contemplating her abilities.

She tilted her head and gave him an incredulous look. Finally, he took her hand. Hermione smiled and Disapparated, arriving beside a swimming pool in a back garden.

"Where are we?" he asked, looking around in confusion.

"A friend of my father's," she replied nonchalantly. "Don't worry, he's away on holiday." She let go of his hand and walked over to sit on one of the lounge chairs, picking up a cushion from a chair as she went. She sat down, and he sat facing her on the lounge chair next to hers.

He leaned forward, his arms on his legs with his hands clasped together, his head down as if he was staring at the ground, but she could feel his eyes upon her. She eyed him, a knot forming in her gut as the silence stretched. Finally he spoke. "We need to talk about our living arrangement. You are starting school, and I want to know what you expect regarding where you'll be staying."

"What do you mean, I'll be..." Hermione felt the knot tighten. "You expect me to stay with you!"

He raised his head to look directly at her. "Yes, I do. You and I are, for all intents and purposes, married."

"But spouses don't live together in the castle, do they?" she asked.

"Spouses don't, no. They either move to Hogsmeade or the professors can connect the Floo in their office to their Floo at home. The nights you are not on duty, you can go home, but that works out to about one to two nights a week at best. It's a different for Heads of House, but the rules essentially apply. However, there hasn't been a married Head of House for many years." He sighed and let his hands relax. "But what I want to know is if you are you what about living in the Headmaster's tower?"

She gasped and stared him in the eye. "But students aren't supposed to go to the professors' private quarters," she said when she could speak again.

"Under certain circumstances, special arrangements can be made," he replied, his expression controlled and hard to read.

Hermione looked at the water in the pool. She wasn't ready for this. She had believed that she would be in the Gryffindor tower with Ginny. She knew that Severus was watching her, trying to read her expression, but she had no idea what to tell him.

"I see," he said softly.

Her head snapped back to face him. "You see what?"

"You are still considering the annulment, aren't you?" he asked, sounding annoyed.

"No yes I don't know," she replied. "How exactly do you expect me to decide this? You and I don't talk. I mean, you never open up to me at all." She turned so that she faced him. "I don't even know you, well, except as my snarky professor."

His eyes narrowed and seemed to grow darker. "I see. So you prefer to remain separated."

"I would prefer to get to know you better, a lot better, before living with you!" She was now uncomfortable with him. "That's why we are spending every night together, isn't it? So we can get to know each other."

"This is hardly spending the night." He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "What is it you want from me? I can't keep doing this dating my*wife*."

Hermione inhaled at the snap of his tone. "Harry and Ginny aren't..."

"I'm not Harry Potter, and you are not Ginevra Weasley," he said sharply. "Look, you want to get to know me, fine, but I'm not going to keep this up. You will have to choose. We will be spending time together not going out on dates every night."

"What are you implying?" she gasped.

"My house. Spinner's End. It is my home, Hermione, and yours. I can set the wards to recognize you, and you'll be able to come and go..."

She now felt nervous. "So, now you expect me to move in with you?"

"Damn it, witch, be reasonable," he spat.

"I am being reasonable. I'm only asking," she said, trying to sound calm.

His placed his hands on his knees and sat up straighter. "Yes, I expect you to move in with me."

She stood up and tried to control her emotions. "I'll consider it. Okay? I can't not tonight."

"And why not?" he asked, his irritation showing.

"Because," she said, her mind devoid of any reasonable sounding reason. "Let me think on it."

"Tomorrow then," he said rising as well.

"I can't tomorrow," she said, trying to come up with a way to delay. She needed time to think.

"What?" he snapped.

"I have other plans," she said, her mind whirling. "I'm sorry. I'll owl you."

"What other plans?" he insisted.

"I'm having dinner Luna and Ginny at the Weasleys. So, unless you want to come over there and discuss bridesmaid robes, flowers, colors, hairstyles, and eat cake..." she lied. "I'll owl you."

He stood back and swept his arm as if indicating she should go. Hermione took that as her cue and Apparated home.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*For all the Americans following this story, bangers and mash are sausages served on mashed potatoes. Sounded good, but rather fattening to me.*

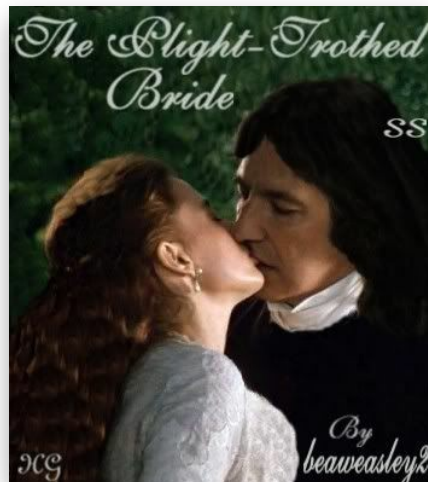
*I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Return to Spinner's End

*Chapter 22 of 63*

After an enlightening meeting with Minerva, Severus takes Hermione to Spinner's End.



~~~~~o 22 o~~~~~

Return to Spinner's End

~L~

Lucius looked up as Narcissa scowled briefly at her poached egg. "Problem?" he asked as he spread marmalade on his toast.

"The yolk is overdone," she sighed discontentedly, scooping up a bite.

His lip curled into a slight smirk, knowing full well that the egg was satisfactory if she wasn't calling the house-elf to reprimand him. She was going to be irritable today. The restrictions imposed on them were making both he and his wife miserable at times. Draco was becoming downright intolerable. He looked up at Severus, actually thankful for his friend's extended stay. Even with Severus' occasional outbursts lately, he was still a person who could discuss any topic with a level of intelligence. *In a way, he's*

*making my confinement bearable*, Lucius thought as he looked at his friend. *And I know that his usually calm demeanor is soothing to Narcissa. Well, normally. That, and she likes having her own Potions master on hand.*

The owls arrived, and most of the post landed in front of Severus, as did their copies of the *Prophet*. Severus simply handed Lucius his copy with a subtle smirk and started opening his mail, discarding the first letter as if it was offensive.

*Love notes from the desperate and lonely, or advise and condemnation from the nosey and intrusive old biddies* Lucius thought with a smirk. He turned to his own post. He did receive the regular correspondences regarding his investments, but thanks to his confinement, all his business post was inspected. It was annoying and, at times, most inconvenient. Lucius read through his letters as he finished his breakfast, slyly watching Narcissa fume over her lack of post. *No parties and no luncheon invitations. To her it's like being shunned for the social season.*

Severus set the letter he was reading down with a definite scowl and reached for his *Daily Prophet*. He opened the paper, and his expression darkened, never a good sign, as he scanned the front page. He nearly ripped the parchment as he opened it to the fourth or fifth page, and his scowl became angrier as he finished the article. Severus then closed the paper, setting it aside as if disgusted. "I'm sorry, Narcissa, I seem to have lost my appetite. Please excuse me," he said smoothly, his tone barely concealing his anger. "Lucius," he added with a nod as he left the table.

Lucius reached for his paper and scoffed at the headline: *Mrs. Snape seen cozying up to ex-paramour.*

"What is it, another scandalous article about Severus and Hermione?" Narcissa asked over the rim of her teacup.

"No, this time it's just the girl," he replied, scanning the article. Unlike Severus, he didn't care to continue on page four. There were two pictures on the page, one of Hermione walking on the arm of George Weasley, and the other of George opening the door to the apothecary for her. The caption read: *This witch really prefers her redheads. Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelor, George Weasley, has been seen escorting Mrs. Hermione Granger-Snape in Diagon Alley. Sources say the couple spent a considerable amount of time together. Is she throwing Severus Snape over for a Weasley?*

"One would really question the girl's sensibility," he said, flipping to the financial section.

"What has the girl done now?" Narcissa asked, setting down her teacup and looking at him expectantly. He passed her a paper. "Doesn't she know how to behave with the proper decorum? She's one of the heroines of the war, and she prances around like a trollop."

"Caution, dearest. She is very well-liked these days. She is a Mud Muggle-born. Nevertheless, you're right, of course. But I really have to question her social status," he sneered. "I mean, even Muggles have social levels. The way she conducts herself... It's appalling. I don't know how Severus tolerates her or why he allows her such a free rein."

"You know, Lucius, this might not be what you think," Narcissa said, after reading the entire article. "This Skeeter woman is notorious for printing slander. It could be a misunderstanding. The article does mention that Ginny Weasley-Potter was seen with them, as well as a Mr. Thomas and his brother the younger one. Isn't this Miss Weasley-Potter the Weasley girl?"

"Yes, but the younger Weasley is her ex-boyfriend. And from what Severus has told me, he still cares for her and is waiting for the girl to get an annulment," he said, reading the Ministry news. "You are right about Miss Skeeter, though. That woman is notorious. Still, someone should take the girl in hand."

Narcissa smiled as she turned to the social pages. "Yes, both of them."

~S~

Severus entered the gates of Hogwarts with a sense of coming home. He strode up the path to the castle, trying to force all thoughts of Hermione from his mind. However, he knew that it was one subject Minerva was bound to want to discuss.

The door to her office was open, but he knocked on the doorframe, nonetheless, to garner her attention before walking in. "Headmaster," she said, looking up from sorting parchments. "I you're early. I thought we were meeting in your office."

He smiled as he sat down in the chair facing her desk. "I believe you have everything ready," he said, indicating the ledgers that sat on the corner of her desk. "Why not make this informal and just discuss everything here."

"Very well. Where should we start?" she asked formally. "The housing problem, punishments, course curriculum, staffing changes, or staff assignments..."

"Housing problems?" he asked drolly, bracing himself for her opinions regarding Hermione.

"As you are probably aware, there will be a number of students returning to make up the year they missed, which has lead to overcrowding the of dormitories and classrooms for the years two through seven," she said, dragging the school registry from the stack of ledgers and opening it up. "In addition, since the laws regarding home tutoring haven't been amended, those students will be returning as well. My concern is the influx of students on the dormitories and classrooms."

He almost sighed in relief. "Minerva, I'm sorry, I don't see that as a problem. The dormitories will extend to accommodate the increase of students," he said, lacing his fingers together across his middle. "And, if you like, we can add additional assistance by allowing the professors to take on apprenticeships."

"So you don't intend to I thought we might have separate housing for the adult students returning after a year's absence to finish their seventh year?" she asked, looking up at him over her spectacles.

He controlled the smile at her tactic, knowing that she'd used the same expression on Dumbledore numerous times. "No, I don't see a reason to. They can stay in the seventh-year dormitories of their houses. It's only been a year after all."

"All right, I'll notify the house-elves," she said, closing the heavy book. "Next, in regards to the barbaric punishments..."

"Minerva, I don't see why we cannot revert to the standard forms of discipline," he interrupted her. She momentarily glared at him, but he continued undaunted. "Make a list of what you deem as appropriate means of punishment, and I'll have it posted in the office of each Head of House and in Filch's office. I would appreciate it if you would circulate it among the rest of the staff, please."

She looked appeased, making a few notations on her parchment. "As you wish. Now in regards to staff. I have received acceptance letters from our two new professors, Kenneth Brandstone for the position of Muggle Studies and retired Auror John Dawlish for Defense."

Severus nodded. "They will be fine. Mr. Brandstone wasn't he Arthur's replacement in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office? I believe he was in hiding last year."

Minerva checked his file. "Yes, I believe so. Arthur recruited him into the Order the... summer... But I don't believe you were ever formally introduced. He was a great help in hiding the Muggle-borns and their families during the war."

He smirked, knowing she was referring to the summer after he'd killed Dumbledore. "I also want to hire a new History of Magic professor," he stated firmly.

"What about Cuthbert?" she asked, her eyes widening and her body reflexively leaning away from him slightly.



He wanted to laugh. "He may stay on at the castle, of course, but I want someone with a more current and broader spectrum of knowledge in regards to history. Besides, he will hardly know the difference."

"Severus!" she admonished him.

"Cuthbert Binns died in 1785! The only history of any relevance during his lifetime was the Goblin rebellions. While I do concede that the Goblin wars of the 1600s and 1700s are indeed an important time of our history, they are not the *only* significant occurrences of our past. We currently have an amicable relationship with the Goblins, and there have been many other events in history in the last two hundred years that should be covered. If we are to teach the students the follies of past mistakes, wouldn't it be prudent to cover the major uprisings of maniacs such as Hitler, Grindelwald, and even the Dark Lord?"

"Who did you have in mind?" she asked, folding her hands on her desk.

"A professor from St. Petersburg, Tigran Avoian," he said, handing her a thick packet of folded parchments. "Here is his acceptance letter, awaiting confirmation of course, his curriculum vitae, and letters of recommendation." He watched as she unfolded the parchments. "I also understand that Professor Slughorn wishes to retire. If that is still the case, Reginald Reynolds has agreed to accept the post as Professor of Potions. He is quite competent at potions and qualified to teach. He will be more than happy to share the post until Horace retires, and since he attended Hogwarts for five of his seven years, in Slytherin House, as you well know, he is eligible to serve as Head of House when Professor Slughorn retires."

"I'm surprised he wants the post!" she exclaimed, apparently having heard of Reginald.

Severus hoped she knew more than that which had been printed in the *Prophet*. "Reginald and I go way back," he said and paused, knowing what had been said in the paper. "And no, he was not a Death Eater he was Imperiused. I shall speak to Horace about Reginald personally."

"Very well," she said as she set down the parchments and looked him squarely in the eye. "Now in regards to Hermione Granger."

Severus gritted his teeth. He was not yet ready to address this subject. "Hermione's living arrangements do need to be resolved, but as of yet, my wife and I have not reached an understanding."

"You do realize that it would be more prudent to her studies to be housed in the school dormitory," she said pointedly.

"I realize that would be your position, Minerva; however, Hermione is a levelheaded witch, and I assumed this would be something the three of us should decide," he said smoothly, with enough authoritativeness to dispel further discussion.

"Very well," she said, but he could see she wasn't appeased. She laced her fingers together on her desk. "I know I don't have to remind you, Severus, but the school charter is rather specific in regards to student-professor fraternization." Severus shifted in his chair before answering, but she held up one hand to stem of his rebuke. "I know that over the years you have behaved with the utmost decorum in this regard. I am well aware that even considering your dark, broody, acerbic nature, female students over the years still formed infatuations for you which you've always handled adequately."

"I am well aware of the regulation of initiating or accepting the advances of female or male students for, as you put it, fraternization. However, this situation, this relationship between Hermione and me, is of her doing, by means of a Betrothal Charm or more accurately the Moon-Song Curse," he informed her.

"I'm aware of the situation, Severus," Minerva said softly. "What I want to point out is that there is a great deal of attention on the two of you because of the unusual circumstances, although I can hardly understand why Miss Skeeter is still so interested in the both of you. I happen to know that Hermione is undecided about the relationship..." She held up her hand to cut him off again. "And I can only assume why. Not my place to interfere. But because there is some discourse, I feel compelled to insist that, if Hermione chooses to reside in the dormitory, you allow her to decide if she wants to spend intimate time with you."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her presumption, and Minerva smiled slightly, looking at him indulgently. "Now don't get your feathers ruffled I'm merely reminding you that can't be seen consorting intimately with Hermione or insisting she visit with you as if you were handing out a detention. This is the one thing the portraits are not under the vow of secrecy to keep coercion of a student for illicit purposes."

"I'm aware of this, Minerva," he said with a warning edge to his tone.

"Then let me be perfectly clear I know that Hermione is having doubts. She came to me over the summer. I know that you two need to work out your differences. There is a certain excitement about secret rendezvous and chance encounters or slipping into private nooks and corners. You spent years disrupting such encounters and deducting house points for such behavior," she said with an equal level of warning in her tone, and then her expression became indulgent. "What I'm just saying that you'll have to establish a private and acceptable relationship with Hermione, and I shall have to rely on your discretion."

"Oh, you can count on that," he said, curious about her apparent position on his relationship with Hermione. He had been prepared for her to be fully against *Well, wonders never cease*.

"Very well, and I'll deal with the bothersome meddling of presumptuous parents," she said. "Now in regards to curriculum, are there any other changes, beside History of Magic, that should be addressed?"

~H~

Hermione arrived home after spending two days at the Burrow with her friends. It had seemed like old times, with the exception that Luna had joined them and Molly had moved the girls into Bill's old room since it was the largest. Still it had been very similar to when she'd been sleeping in Ginny's room, staying up late, talking about everything.

She sighed as she stripped out of her clothes. Ginny was so anxious for school to be over so she and Harry could get married, and Luna had a wistful look every time she mentioned Neville or the girls had talked about her wedding. *It isn't fair*, Hermione thought as she eased into the tub for a good soak. *Both of them are so happy and content. No, I'm not going to moan about being matched with Severus anymore.* The hot soapy water was soothing. She lay submerged to her chin, letting her mind go blank. There was simply something about bubbles that lifted the spirits, and lately, she'd needed the lift.

The chime of a clock jostled her from her state of relaxation, making her aware of the time, and she grudgingly dragged herself from her bath. When she entered her room, there was a letter lying on the clothes she'd selected for her date.

It was from George.

Hermione,

*Thank you for your help yesterday. I knew you were the right girl to ask, so I'm asking again. Would you be willing to work for me on a permanent basis? I'd be glad to hire you for the summer and then possibly on a part-time basis while you finish school. I promise, no testing, just creating and inventing.*

*Reply as soon as you can.*

Still in a dressing gown, Hermione rushed to the Floo to answer, tossed a bit of Floo powder on the grate, called out, "Weasley's wild loft," and leaned into the flames. She hoped he was still in his flat and was relieved that he answered her when she called out his name. "I only have a minute, but my answer is yes. I'll come by tomorrow, okay?" she asked quickly then pulled back, breaking the connection.

She hurried upstairs to dress. Severus had indicated that she should wear robes, which was to say he'd asked if she'd had any. The answer was an embarrassing, no. Well, not really. She had her dress robes from her fourth year and from Bill and Fleur's wedding. So Hermione had selected what she hoped was the next best thing: an ankle-length sleeveless dress with a simple scooped neckline. It was pink, had a sash around the waist and slits up the side past her knees, but it was a dress. She slipped it on and examined her appearance, gasping at the state of her hair. It was full of soot. Groaning, she tried the spell used to clean Floos and brushed it out. It helped, but now her hair was frizzy. She checked the time and grimaced; she didn't have time to wash it again. She twisted her hair up, turning, tucking, and curling it until it was somewhat under control, and used the holding charm Lavender had taught her, adding a few hairpins just in case.

Still unhappy, but knowing she didn't have time to fuss with it, she hurried to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Dabbing water on the flyaway hairs at her temples and neck, she rolled them around her wand, using another spell Lavender had taught her. With a touch of lip-gloss and mascara, she finally felt ready to face Severus. She was putting on her low-heeled sandals when Kreacher popped in to tell her he had arrived.

Severus was standing in the foyer in his usual attire, staring at her as she approached, although he didn't make any comment about her hair or her dress. Mentally shrugging it off, she casually walked up to him.

"Are you ready?" he asked coolly.

"Yes," she said, holding her small clutch in her hand.

Severus held out his hand, and she nervously placed her hand in his, wondering what had his wand in a knot. She turned to face him as soon as they were out the door. "Where are we going tonight?" she asked, pushing her nervousness aside and hoping it didn't show.

"I already told you. Now hang on," he said smoothly, tightening his grip on her hand and Disapparating. They arrived in a dark alley between two brick houses. "This is the Apparation site. There is a charm on this location to muffle the sound of Apparation, although if you make loud entrances it may still be noticed. This way," he said, still holding her hand firmly, and they stepped out onto the narrow cobbled street under a broken street lamp and turned left.

Hermione tried to take in her surroundings and still keep up with him. The street gave off a sullen, depressing feel as they walked. Most of the houses on the street appeared dilapidated and unused. The windows, those that weren't broken or boarded up, were dull and dark. One of the houses had the door hanging open, and the soft sound of the news broadcast wafted out as they passed. There were weeds growing amongst the houses between the front steps, and the paint on most of the doors was faded and peeling. The street lamps were flickering, as if threatening to go out, or were not working at all, and the cobbled street had many broken, loose, and missing stones. Severus slowed his pace when Hermione stumbled on a loose stone.

He stopped at the last house on the street "This is it," he said. The house was like all the others, except with a slightly larger window to the left of the door. The front door might have been blue once, judging by the slivers of paint still left on the wood. There was a tall mill chimney sticking straight up, almost like an accusing beacon, over the rooftop.

Severus drew out his wand. "Hold out your hand, but do not touch the door," he instructed. Hermione did as she was told, feeling the vibration of the wards on her palm. He made a few quick swishes of his wand, and the sensation turned to a warm tingling then faded. "Go ahead, open the door."

She entered, stopping short in wonderment. There was a faint scent of lemon and orange oil, and the musty smell she'd remembered was gone. The candles flared to life, and she stared in amazement. The threadbare carpet had been cleaned, not that it made much of a difference, but some of the furniture had been changed. There was a new sofa and two chairs with soft blue cushions, as well as two standing lamps. The small side tables, though, were the same. A bowl of aromatic herbs sat on a small glass coffee table, which had replace the old, wobbly, wooden one. She turned her head, realizing that all the books had been meticulously dusted, and the wood of the shelves, mantel, and floor shone with a warm polish. There were even gauzy curtains that would let in the daylight and blue drapes on the window. "You've been busy," she said, turning to face Severus.

He was scowling at the room. "Like an elf," he said frostily as he crossed to the door that led to the kitchen.

She quickly followed him and froze at the sight. The walls, cabinets, and counters were scrubbed clean. The mismatched chairs, table, and dish cupboard had obviously been buffed down, refinished, and oiled. The Floo was cleaned up, and the copper bottom pans on the rack shined almost like new. Hermione turned and hurried through the now tidy box room into the sunroom, smiling in delight at the clean windows and the rows of herbs and flowers on the shelves and gardening bench. A small wicker set sat in the corner. She turned around to look at Severus and realized he wasn't in the room.

He was leaning against the kitchen sink with his arms and ankles crossed when she walked in. "So have you given us any thought?"

"Some," she replied hesitantly from the doorway.

"By all means, keep me in the dark," he said through clenched teeth.

"I have no idea what I want anymore! You tell me one thing, but people I know and trust tell me the exact opposite, and Ginny, she, well..." Hermione stammered, not really wanting to tell him Ginny's opinion. "I hardly know you except as my snarky professor, and frankly, well..." She wavered under his stare, feeling like an errant first-year, wanting to say, 'I don't like be used and manipulated,' but holding back. "I feel like I've been trapped in this and I *know* you do too. You keep throwing it in my face, which is why I don't understand why you aren't trying to break this Bonding, too. I thought you wanted out of this, but... I can't believe you want to stay in it after all the times you bit my head off for doing the spell! I mean, do you really want this us? Do you? I admit, you're being nicer to me than you've ever... but only because you have to. You don't even like me!" She stopped, aware that she'd tapped her foot like a child. She waited, breathless for him to lash out at her, fully aware that he was watching her intently and not saying anything.

"I see," he said, turning his head to the side and back, apparently looking at the floor.

"You see what?" she asked, baffled. She expected more of a reaction than that.

His head snapped up. "You still want to get the annulment," he said as if he was clenching his jaw.

"I admit it. I don't know what I want okay, I know you don't like being trapped in this with me, and if I can fix this, I will." She said, dropping her head so she didn't have to see the anger in his eyes.

"And if you can't?" he asked, one hand now resting on the counter beside him.

Hermione walked over and leaned on the side counter, still keeping her gaze anywhere but his face. "Deal with the dragon when the egg hatches, isn't that the saying?" she replied.

"Does this have anything to do with Ronald Weasley?" he asked.

Her head snapped in his direction. "With Ron? No!" she exclaimed.

He didn't seem to accept that. "And yet you were seen with him in the Leaky Cauldron," he said coolly, "and *know* you are still seeing him."

"Only as friends," she tried to reassure him. "Ron has been treating me like he did when we were in school, nothing more. We have been friends for a long time. There isn't anything going on between us."

"You expect me to believe that when you have been seen alone with him, apparently on a date," he spat.

She stared at him in shock, trying to figure out what he was talking about. "I haven't the last time I saw him... Unless... Of course! But that wasn't a date!" She explained what had happened when she and Ginny went to lunch with Ron and George after buying their school things. He was staring at her so intently as she spoke that she averted her head. "No, don't you dare! You are not going to use Legilimency on me again!"

"Just because I'm looking at you doesn't mean that I am going to use Legilimency," he snapped.

Hermione looked at him timidly.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin! Look, I should have asked you before using it on you, but I wanted answers, and I didn't trust you to tell me the truth," he said, shifting his feet.

Her gaze snapped to him in mortified disbelief. "I've never lied to you," she said, and he smirked at her. She pointed a finger at him. "The troll doesn't count! And Harry didn't steal from you." His eyes narrowed, and she blushed as she held up both hands in supplication. "I admitted to making the potion, and about the..." She took a chance and looked him in the eye. "But that day on the cliffs, I wasn't lying to you and you just forced your way into my mind!"

"Hermione, it is a convenient method of interrogation, and I happen to be quite an accomplished Legilimens. I frequently used Legilimency to obtain the information I needed, quickly and efficiently. It was one of the reasons I was favored by the Dark Lord that and my other skills. I'm not saying it was right, but it's a hard habit to break. I am a Death Eater. It's who I am, and that's not going to change," Severus paused and looked away for a moment. "I should have apologized for it, but I was angry because you had disappeared for days, and I didn't like what I saw. I wanted the truth. I won't do it again."

Hermione looked at the floor and sighed. She knew that was a close to an apology as she was going to get.

"What *is* going on between you and Weasley?" he asked.

Her head snapped up. "I just told you! Nothing is going on between me and Ron we are just friends," she said, exasperated to have to answer the same question again.

"Then please, explain this," he said, pulling a copy of the *Daily Prophet* from his pocket. Hermione didn't need to see it; she could guess what it said. The paper rustled as he held it out, waiting for her to take it. When she didn't, he dropped the paper on the counter next to her, and it opened to the front page.

Hermione cringed at the headline. "That's rubbish, and you know it!" she exclaimed, looking from the paper to him.

"Do I?" he asked coolly.

She crossed her arms. "I thought you were intelligent? You know that woman writes lies. I told you about the lunch. The other George is not interested in me romantically. I have accepted a job working for George Weasley for the rest of the month. This was taken when he was when I went to talk to him about taking the job."

"Why did you see him about a job?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Pocket money! Pin money for incidental expenses," she said waspishly. "You know I don't have any money except for necessities. What little I have I need for school, and I spent most of it already on school supplies. It would be nice to have some spending money."

"And Ronald?" he asked again, as if still not satisfied.

She exhaled to control her annoyance. "I have already explained twice now he and I are only friends, nothing more. This us has been rough, but he's treating me like he used to. He knows about the Bonding, and I told him that I can't be with him romantically, and he's accepted it. We are just friends."

He still didn't look convinced. "How am I to believe you?"

"You'll just have to," she said flatly. "How are we ever going to have a relationship built on trust *if you never trust me!* It's bad enough..." she sighed and crossed her arms. "Oh, never mind."

"No, *never you mind* spit it out," he snapped. "How am I supposed to trust you this is a two headed newt, Hermione. I have every right to question you regarding your actions especially when you make the front page! With two different Weasley boys, no less!"

"Is there anything else you'd like to throw in my face tonight?" she asked and sighed heavily. She stared at the bottom of the fridge and fought back the angry tears. She felt horrible. "You're making a dragon out of a salamander. I don't want to fight anymore. I'd rather just..." *talk*, she finished in her head, still staring at the floor. *I wish you'd trust me. Harry and Ron always trusted me.* She looked at him, feeling the hurt and anger sink in her gut like a rock. She wished they had more in common, that he'd liked her in school the way the other teachers did, instead of always belittling and scowling at her. *I wish you'd open up more ... let me get to know you. Merlin, I wish school would start soon like tomorrow!*

Severus looked at the opposite wall as he apparently considered what she'd said. He sighed and pushed off from the counter. "We might as well see what was done to the second floor." He turned when she hadn't moved. "Aren't you coming?"

"I'll wait for you down here," she replied, pulling out a chair.

"I want you to tell me what changes you want made to our bedroom, if any."

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. "Your bedroom and I'm not ready for that yet," she replied, then swallowed nervously at his scowl. "The only thing I didn't like about the room, besides the dust, was that the mattress was flat and lumpy and so were the pillows. If you've cleaned the upstairs as well as downstairs that's one problem solved."

He smirked at her comment, and she forced herself not to fidget. "So are we eating here?" she asked.

He reached over and jerked open the fridge. "Unless you can make edible food with an onion and an old celery root, I think not."

"What else is here?" she asked, and he pointed to the cupboard behind her. Hermione turned around and opened it up, scrunching her face at the tins within. They looked old. She picked up one and cringed at the expired date. "So if we are to eat, I suppose were going out," she said while turning around, "unless you'll brave Harry's place?" He scowled, and she smirked. "There is always take-away?"

"The local fish and chips is moderately digestible," he said with distaste.

"Have you ever tried Burger King?" she suggested with a grin, assuming he'd decline going there. He surprised her by accepting, although admitting that he didn't know the exact location of the nearest one. Choosing a Burger King he knew, they Apparated from the sitting room and, with Hermione's insistence, found seats along the window to eat.

Hermione was amused that he leaned forward over his food as he ate like he used to in the Great Hall. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" he asked, looking up.

"Eat like I'm going to snatch your fries away from you," she replied.

"I don't like eating around a bunch of kids," he said, turning his head to look at the other families and teenagers.

"Then why ever did you choose to teach?" she asked.

"I love berating children," he said facetiously with a smirk. "It's so much fun to impart knowledge to dunderheads, dole out detentions, and take away house points."

Hermione started laughing, nearly snorting on her Coke. "I always assumed you took the post because you hoped to raise the level of potion making at Hogwarts to your exacting standards. When I was sixteen, I realized you took the role when you switched sides and joined Dumbledore."

He was watching her with an odd look to his eyes. "It was Dumbledore's suggestion after he helped clear my name, and after I reaffirmed my loyalty... I didn't have a lot of other options. After the Dark Lord's resurrection, I managed to convince him it was advantageous to have me at Hogwarts, and he agreed. Truth was, it was convenient to stay. Later, he decided it was where *he* wanted me to be."

"And when he came back, he was pleased that you had, wasn't he?" she asked. She had always wondered about what had happened when he'd gone to Voldemort that night.

"Not at first, no. I had to convince him of my reasons. But he did see the advantage of allowing me to retain my position and my connections with the Order," he said smoothly. "Don't dig too deeply. I will not talk about my... years with him."

She shrugged as she ate her burger. She washed it down with a drink of fizzy drink. "You won't tell me about your childhood or your school years or any other part of your life. How is a girl supposed to get to know you?"

He set down his orange Hi-C. "No one has been this interested in me for years," he said. "I'm not used to just opening up as you are apparently capable of."

"You could at least try," she said, finishing her last fry.

"Are you done?" he asked.

She smiled and crumpled up her Whopper wrapper. "Yes."

He scoffed and piled their trash on their tray, then slid out from the table. Hermione waited by the door as he dumped the trash, and then he followed her outside. He pulled her aside at a spot that he must have thought of as acceptable for Apparation. "Good night, Severus," she said politely. "I had a good time."

"Come back to the house," he murmured, touching her arm.

She looked up at him, nervous about the intensity in his eyes, and turned to stare at the ivy growing on the wall. If she went back, she knew that things could get awkward between them at least for her. His hand stroked her hair, giving her that fuzzy sensation she loved when someone touched or brushed her hair. She opened her eyes and looked up at him with a dazed smile as he leaned forward. She parted her lips to speak, and her mind went blank just as his lips touched hers. She felt him tip her head up as he kissed her softly. She inhaled, his scent mixing with the headiness she felt at his tender unhurried kiss and his fingers still toying with her hair. She felt herself slipping, giving in to him, and for a moment, she allowed her mind to soar.

He broke the kiss and leaned his forehead on hers. "Stay with me."

Her heart skipped a beat. She wanted to, but didn't want to let things progress too far not yet at least. Her mind raced over possible scenarios, knowing that since she'd already been intimate with him, he'd expect her to have sex again was expecting it from her. She just wasn't ready for sex. "Not tonight. I can't," she replied, fighting down the rise of anxiety in her chest, knowing that he would be angry at her. He became rigid, and she quickly added, "Not tonight, I'm really tired. Some other time, maybe?"

He drew himself up, his posture rigid and his expression stony. "Fine."

She reached out and grasped his arm. "This weekend. I'll spend the day with you the whole day this weekend," she suggested, hoping to appease him but also wondering what he'd plan.

He stared at her, unmoving. "Fine." He stepped back and vanished with a pop.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*Severus' account of the events regarding his appointment as professor of Potions is based upon the fact that he turned to Dumbledore the summer of 1980 but didn't start teaching until sometime after his trial in 1981. It is confirmed in OotP that he started in 1981, I'm assuming the start of term in September. So, I've accounted that he was possibly a spy in Voldemort's camp from sometime in August 1980, imprisoned between October and November 1981. (No, this doesn't fit with what Sybill assumed happened in HBP chapter twenty-seven.)*

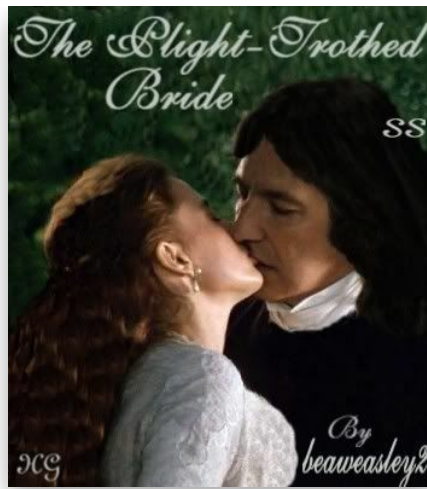
*I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Good Intents and Interventions

*Chapter 23 of 63*

Severus visits with Talfryn Prince again, making a few changes for his great-grandfather that may change his life.  
Hermione gets a very strange offer for lunch from someone very unexpected.



~~~~~o 23 o~~~~~

## Good Intentions and Interventions

~H~

*Hermione was hurrying down a corridor of Hogwarts, trying to get to Harry so she could use the Basilisk fang on the diadem before he had to face Voldemort. She was late, and lessons were due to start at any minute. She saw him hurrying down the stairs that led to the dungeons. Damn, he'd get there before she did. She followed him down the stairs, turned left, then a right, and another right as she chased after his shadow. The shadows around her lengthened, stretching down the stone corridor. She spied the back of Harry's school robes and ran after him, only stopping when she realized she was lost. She turned on the spot, unsure which of the three corridors she should go down. She turned left again, walked a few paces, and changed her mind. When she turned to go back, there was a door instead of a corridor.*

*Panic rose in her chest as she pivoted on the spot, trying to remember which way she'd come.*

*Without a sound, someone had come up behind her, his hands grasping her waist. She braced for the worst, finding herself pressed against a hard body in a warm embrace. One hand slid up to her neck as his other hand slid to her middle and held her firmly. Her breathing, which had quickened from the surprise of his presence, became deeper as he brushed her hair to the side and kissed her neck. She closed her eyes, her head tilting to give him access, and allowed her senses to swim as he kissed and caressed her. He turned her around wordlessly, holding her in his embrace as he trailed kisses from her neck to her lips. Severus' kisses were tender, unhurried, and his tongue leisurely slid past her lips to tease hers.*

The alarm on her bed jarred her from her dream. She was still as breathless from the dream kiss as if Severus had been actually kissing her in her bedroom. She shook her head. The dream kiss had been so much like his kiss from the night before, unhurried, sensual, and provocative. Hermione rubbed face with her hands. "It wasn't that great of a kiss. Get a grip," she muttered as she stumbled to the loo to start her morning routine before going to work.

~S~

Severus sent Hermione an owl first thing in the morning, asking her what time he should expect her on Saturday. Then he made his way to the potions lab on the first floor of the Manor to brew the replacement potions for his great-grandfather. He wished he knew more about Talfryn's condition but doubted he'd be well received if he showed up with another Healer for a second opinion.

Hermione's reply was delivered by a barn owl late in the day. The female owl swooped in on him through Lucius' library window and landed lightly on the back of a chair, proudly presenting a rolled up parchment. He untied a parchment with a fuchsia border and glanced at the precise script, written in black ink with sparkling red glitter. The note simply said, *Can we make it on Sunday? I'd forgotten that I'd already made plans I can't change. How about if I come over around eleven or so on Sunday?* He sighed heavily and halted the owl before it flew off. "I have a reply for her." He asked Lucius' house-elf to retrieve his red, self-inking quill and wrote on her parchment as if he were grading an essay, *I'll expect you at eleven sharp on Sunday* He looked at the childish ink she'd used for her reply and shook his head, wondering why Fortuna had given him such a young girl as a wife.

~G~

This was George's busiest time of the year, the weeks between when the school lists came out until the end of August. George missed Fred a lot, especially on the nights he was alone. However, his business was booming, and he had his family and friends.

It was great having Hermione help him make the products he needed to restock the shelves. It also helped to have both Ron and Dean working downstairs because it afforded him the time needed to create his joke items with Hermione during the day. Truth was, she was a godsend. Each time he'd asked her to assist him with a new or different product, it had only taken her a few tries to be able to do Fred's part of the Charms, Transfigurations, and Jinxes he needed. There had been a few of the really complicated ones that she'd had difficulty with, and he just knew that she had been trying them at home until she had them right because the next day, she'd managed them just fine. And the potions she was masterful at the potions.

By noon, they had amassed a pile of items ready to be boxed. He'd have Angelina help him do that when she came by tonight.

"Hermione, how about lunch?" he asked.

She was presently reading one of Fred's work journals, trying to decipher his diagrams, codes, and annotations. She looked up, confused. "Is it that late already?"

He laughed. "You're a workaholic like Fred was! Yes, it's past noon. I was hoping you'd get hungry soon."

"In a minute," she said with a wave of her hand and looked down at the journal. "I still can't figure out what he wrote here. I mean I think I understand the spell, but then 'to fold it in on itself'... I don't understand what he means."

"Hermione, food?" he asked, putting his hand on the book to make her set it down. "There are labor laws."

She grinned. "So what are we making for lunch?"

"Making?" he asked, confused. She nodded. "Hermione, I don't cook!"

"You mean you eat out all the time?" She laughed, shaking her head when he admitted that he did.

"Or I go have lunch with Mum. Angie's a really good cook, but she only likes cooking on the weekends. On Sunday we have shepherd's pie."

"And I'm not much of a cook," she admitted. "Well, I've been told that I'm a lousy cook." He looked at her incredulously, and she shrugged. "Your brother didn't care for my cooking, although, Harry didn't mind much. I suppose I could make sandwiches and heat soup... or follow a recipe for something."

"We'll negotiate about your cooking skills another day. I'm too hungry." George stood, grabbed her hands, and helped her to her feet. "You have a choice my favorite café, the café or the café."

"Hm, tough choice... How about... the café?" she teased him.

"Sounds good," he said, heading for the door. "I'll get Ron. He's due for a break, too." He saw her shoulders slump as if she'd sighed at the suggestion and wondered if his brother was still giving her grief about their breakup and her Bonding. *Well, I'll be there to keep things neutral.*

Hermione picked up the small pouch she was using as a purse. *Mental note buy her a proper purse for her birthday...* He suddenly remembered how fussy Angelina had been selecting out her new purse last weekend. *...or ask Ginny to go with me when I get one for her.*

~S~

Lucius was playing chess with Draco in the sitting room when Severus walked in. "Nice to have you join us," Lucius said in way of a greeting. A house-elf appeared, offering Severus a glass of scotch on the rocks. "You've been rather industrious lately."

"Severus." Draco quickly inclined his head in greeting without really taking his eyes off the chess board, still contemplating his move.

"I had some potions that I needed to brew for someone. I'm afraid I depleted some of your ingredients," Severus said with a slight weariness to his tone.

"Anyone I know?" Lucius asked as he motioned his pawn forward.

"No," Severus replied, sitting down to observe the end of the game. "I'd rather not talk about it. Let's just say they are for someone from my past." He smirked as Draco moved his queen. Severus had known with only a cursory look at the board that Lucius would have checkmate in three moves.

"I thought you'd be with Mrs. Snape all night," Draco said, grimacing when Lucius took his rook.

"Check," Lucius said and then looked at Severus. "Make a list of what you need, and I'll send an order unless you'd like to go purchase them for me."

"I'd prefer going, if you don't mind. I have somewhere to be tomorrow afternoon; I can go to the apothecary after that," Severus answered, smirking as Draco moved his bishop to protect his queen. "Bad move."

Draco looked up, caught the look, and turned to examine the board.

Lucius told his knight where he wanted him to move. The piece nodded, crossed the board, and smashed Draco's rook. "Checkmate," Lucius said off-handedly.

Draco studied the board, and then he sighed. "Good game, father."

Lucius merely nodded. "Thank you." He turned to Severus. "There was a parcel for you from the Board of Governors. Have you received your acceptance letter yet?"

Severus smiled. "No, the Board is waiting until I give them a decision regarding Hermione. However, I have been given my Headmaster collar to wear with my robes to the next Board meeting in September. So suffice it to say, I have been told I am unofficially official. I was also given a copy of the minutes and a pamphlet entitled *Approved Punishments and Their Applications Guideline*. I forwarded it to Professor McGonagall."

"I'm sure Elaine Prevatt will be in touch soon about your decision. That witch hates loose ends," Lucius replied, smirking as Draco mended the broken pieces. He rolled his wedding band around on his finger casually as he looked at Severus. "So, things are settled then?"

"Yes and no," Severus said, smiling at the gesture. He scratched his palm with his fingernail while casually watching the newly repaired pieces return to their places.

"No?" Lucius asked smoothly, sliding his ring up to his knuckle and back.

Severus saw the gesture and understood the question even if he appeared to be watching Draco intently. He gave Lucius the look from the old days that meant, 'Not going well.' "Some things still need to be ironed out."

Lucius laced his fingers while pressing the tips of his thumbs together, which meant either head-butting, headstrong, or being unreasonable. "Which you'll undoubtedly resolve."

"In time," Severus replied, lacing his fingers on his knee and put one thumb over another indicating his plan. He sighed, hoping that things with Hermione would iron out. At this point he wasn't sure. *Maybe Lucius has a love potion I could give the girl? Or I could brew one... Narcissa has all the right Who am I kidding?*

Lucius gave a subtle nod of his head that got Severus' attention and quirked his eyebrow. "So, Draco, care to try the old wizard again, or do you concede to Severus?" He straightened his index fingers and pressed them together, then brought his hands up to his lips.

Severus knew the sign but scowled at the implication that Lucius wanted to engage Hermione in a threesome. He was not remotely interested in that, especially since he was unable to bed the witch. "That will not be necessary," he said rather sharply.

Both Draco and Lucius looked up, Draco confused, and Lucius smirking. "Apparently Severus doesn't wish to play, Draco. So it's you and me if you want another game."

"Sure, father, I'm up for another," Draco said, accepting a refill of his drink from a house-elf, missing Severus' quick angry scowl at his father.

~S~

Severus decided to visit his great-grandfather again around noon. He'd spent the morning finishing the potions for Talfryn Prince. He put the replacement potions in his pocket and Apparated to the grounds of the house. After receiving a stunned greeting by the Healer, he walked purposefully up to the master suite. The old man was worse, not that Severus was surprised. He sat with Talfryn while Pepper fed the old man his lunch.

"So, you came back," Talfryn stated between bites.

"Yes, I was concerned," Severus said.

Pepper wiped off some broth that dribbled on Talfryn's chin. "You weren't too concerned before."

"I wasn't sure about my welcome," Severus admitted. Talfryn's penetrating stare made Severus think of his own use of the look.

"So, are you hoping to be in the will?" he asked after a long pause.

Severus turned his head to look at the window. "I don't care about the will." His gaze returned to the old face in the bed. "I get by well enough on my own."

"Oh, yes, you're Headmaster now, aren't you?" he asked, his breathing labored. Pepper adjusted the pillows behind Talfryn's head, and the old man readjusted himself to get comfortable.

"Yes," Severus replied.

"What about your witch? I suppose she has money?" Talfryn asked gruffly.

Severus stifled a laugh. "No, but she has one year of school left. She has taken a summer job in a shop."

Talfryn scoffed, which turned into a racking cough. When he stopped he turned to Severus. "In my day, wives didn't work."

Severus chuckled softly. "Hermione is an independent witch."

"I see." Talfryn closed his eyes, breathing from his mouth. "Eileen was an independent girl, always doing what she wanted. Look where it got her."

Severus sighed, that may have been true once, but his father had beaten any independence out of her. He talked with Talfryn for a little while longer until the old man fell asleep. Despite the illness, Severus could tell that the years had been kind to the old man; he was much the same as Severus remembered him, from his hooked nose and dark eyes to his veined hands. Talfryn's mind was still sharp, but his hearing less than acute. The illness made him weak and his breathing labored. Still, Severus had felt like he had been facing the inquisition under the old man's scrutiny, and Talfryn had remembered everything he'd read in the *Daily Prophet* and everything they'd discussed during Severus' last visit.

The old man had fallen asleep before Severus could learn the outcome of the interrogation. He scoffed as to why he cared if the old man approved or not. Talfryn Prince was a hard man to read.

Rising and walking around the bed, he began to switch the contents of the Healer's bottles with his own potions.

"What is you doing?" Pepper squeaked, grabbing Severus' robes as he poured out the pain potion into a glass vase.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Pepper?" Severus said as he cast cleaning and sterilizing charms on the now empty bottle. "I'm replacing these potions with ones I brewed myself."

"But master... he needs his potions! You can'ts," she scolded him, tugging on the hem of his robe.

Severus picked up the bottle and vase. "Pepper, you know that I am a Master of Potions?"

Pepper nodded, but she didn't stop trying to pull him away from the bedside table.

"Stop this irrational behavior and let me explain." He turned and knelt, facing the distraught elf. Severus had anticipated that Pepper would try to stop him, so he knew that he'd have to gain the elf's trust. "Hold this vase. I want to show you something." He handed the vase to Pepper and withdrew a book from his pocket, opening it up to the page for the Pain Potion. "This is the potion he's currently taking. See this color in the bottle on the page? It's supposed to be this color a light orange. Now look at the potion in the vase."

Pepper did as she was told and her brow creased.

Severus smirked; it was like showing a second-year why they got a 'T' on their potion. "It's brown, well dark sienna. I wouldn't allow my third-years to pass this off as a Pain Potion." He handed Pepper the bottle of Pain Potion he'd brewed that morning. "Now compare this one. And smell a light scent of peppermint and tea blended with the scent of orange rind..."

Pepper sniffed the potion and immediately her eyes widened, and her ears drooped. "This one is like the picture," Pepper said, handing back the bottle. Her ears drooped lower and her shoulders sagged.

Severus grabbed another bottle off the bedside table. "This other one it's supposed to be Sienna or a cinnamon color at best. This is worthless. It even smells as if it had scalded."

She took the bottle and scrunched her nose at the smell. She handed the bottle back and looked ready to cry. "Pepper didn't knows potions was bad, sir."

Severus exchanged the bottle for another. He reached for the vase and smiled when he realized Pepper had emptied it for him. "Now this one should have a watery lilac appearance." He poured the potion into the vase, scowling at the watery, puce color and bits of ingredients still floating in the liquid. "See the filament? This potion never blended correctly. Now the herbal ingredients will have a beneficial effect for Mr. Prince, but this isn't even a potion." He showed Pepper the one he'd brought.

Her eyes were wide as saucers, and she looked ready to punish herself.

He placed his hand gently on the elf's shoulder and gave a slight squeeze. "It's not your fault, Pepper, do you understand me? It's ~~not~~ *your* fault. *You* don't deserve punishment. It's Miss Prisswell's fault. She should know better." He stood and set the new potions on the bedside table, making a mental note of two new potions that he hadn't seen the last time he was there. "Who makes these potions, Pepper?"

"Miss Prisswell, she brings them, sir," Pepper said, wringing her ear.

"Stop that." He gently pulled her hand away from her ear and knelt down to her level again. "From now on, you will bring any potion Miss Prisswell brings into this house to me. I will verify the quality and if necessary brew a replacement," he said kindly to the elf. "You are to make sure that Mr. Prince only takes potions I make or deem as acceptable, is that clear?"

She bounced on her heels, her ears now fully extended. "Oh yes, sir! Pepper will give you all Miss Prisswell's potions, sir, so you can replaces them."

Severus stood and checked to make sure the bottles were placed exactly where they had been. "That's good. Pepper, this must be between us a secret. Miss Prisswell is not to know until I find out why she is giving my great-grandfather bad potions. Will you keep my secret?"

Pepper nodded. "You is helping my master gets well. I will brings you potions so you can make good ones. I will not tells anyone I will keeps your secret. I promise or I will punish myself most severely, sir."

"Just bring me all the new potions, Pepper, and don't tell her we are exchanging them, and then you will not have to punish yourself." Severus finished switching the potions and then sat back in the chair and waited. Talfryn didn't wake, but it was obvious he was having difficulty breathing and he was in pain. At least now he knew which potions Talfryn was being given.

Miss Prisswell entered and ushered Severus from the room, saying that she needed to give Mr. Prince his potions. Severus smirked and left, pausing in the doorway to see if the Healer noticed the change in the potions. She did not. Scowling, he went downstairs.

Severus walked around the house as he looked at his great-grandmother's things on the shelves and the pictures of relatives, many he didn't know the names of. When Severus was a boy, his mum wouldn't talk about her father much, except for the occasional childhood memory. In the fantasy stories she'd liked telling him, Severus was

certain that she had been alluding to her father in those with an evil king. Severus had always assumed that the beautiful queen had been his grandmother, but he had come to learn at his grandfather's funeral that his grandmother, Deidre Pince, had died when his mum was a very little girl. But there were two pictures of his grandmother on the old pianoforte in his great-grandfather's lounge. One was of his grandmother, a thin, delicate looking woman, holding a baby in what looked like a dress or a christening gown on her lap. The second picture showed the same woman holding a baby in her arms with a toddler standing shyly next to her, clutching onto the arm of her chair. The boy's appearance in the picture surprised Severus greatly; he had no idea who the toddler was.

When the Healer finally came down stairs, she had the audacity to scold him for wearing out the old man.

Severus left before the urge to reprimand the Healer for berating him took over his better judgment. It wasn't worth the added aggravation necessary. Besides, the well-practiced scowl he'd given her had made the woman recoil like a first-year, much to Severus' satisfaction.

He returned to the Manor and decided to take a walk through the gardens before entering the house. His visit with his great-grandfather replayed in his mind.

~H~

Hermione was in the workroom, finishing her last potion for the morning. George had an appointment with his finance Goblin and left her to her own devices. That was okay; the shop needed to restock the chews, and the potions were easy enough if you managed to keep up with the timing. She had just finished pouring the Raspberry Chews the ones that made you blow raspberries when you tried to talk instead forming actual words into the molds when a house-elf in a pillowcase suddenly appeared before her.

The prim elf bowed before her, even though he looked at her with some disdain. "I is to take you to lunch," he said in a high-pitched, raspy voice.

Hermione looked at the house-elf in disbelief, curiosity soon getting the better of her common sense. The last time an elf had appeared before her, it was Dobby, sent to rescue her. Having one suddenly appear was a huge surprise, especially to ask her to go have lunch with him. She regarded the house-elf's odd invitation and behavior and pondered on who might have sent him. "You want to take me to lunch? Do I know you?"

"I is to take you to lunch, miss," the elf repeated, holding out his hand, looking up at her with huge, watery blue eyes.

"Where exactly? Why would you want to take me to lunch?" Hermione asked as she stared at the elf, unsure of his true intentions as he fully extended arm, holding out his hand toward her, obviously intending for her to grasp it. "I don't recognize you."

The elf began to look nervous; his ears drooped, he started to quiver and wring his hands nervously. "Please, miss! I is to take you to lunch or I is to be punished." He extended his hand again with an apprehensive quiver to his lips.

Reluctantly, Hermione set down the ladle and crossed her arms. "Who sent you?"

The elf's expression looked like she had just struck him. He was shaking visibly, his gaze sweeping the doorway and back to her, as if desperately frightened. "I just is to, miss. I is not sure I is to say."

"Well," Hermione said, opening her hands in supplication, "I'm not "

The elf had grabbed her wrist when she'd moved her hands, Apparated her to a well-manicured walkway of a huge formal garden, and disappeared as soon as she'd released his hand. The garden was extremely lovely, made up of box hedges in neat and ordered geometrical and symmetrical lines and patterns interspersed with topiaries, statues, dwarf fruit trees, and pink and purple flowering plants. The garden was entirely surrounded by tall hedges and star jasmine borders. Hermione turned around in alarm, her wand drawn. The long gravel pathways were immaculately smooth. The main path led from a marble statue of Poseidon and horses surrounded by water sprouts at one end of the garden to the terrace of a huge manor house. A white tent awning stood next to the fountain.

The cry of a peacock broke the silence, making Hermione nearly jump out of her skin, and she pointed her wand in the direction of the noise.

"Mrs. Snape," a smooth voice said behind her.

Hermione whirled around to find Lucius Malfoy standing in the pathway, not a stone's throw away from her, his arms held toward her casually with his hands open, showing he was unarmed. Not that that would mean anything; he could still possibly use wandless magic if he had the gift. She knew Severus was rather adept at wandless magic. Lucius Malfoy looked regal, immaculately dressed and with his hair tied at the nape of his neck. Hermione continued to point her wand at his chest and kept her distance, strengthening her determination to curse him if he made any move toward her.

"Really, Mrs. Snape, I did not have you brought here to harm you," he said smoothly, standing at ease on the pathway.

"Then why am I here?" she asked suspiciously.

"To talk, of course," he said calmly without moving from where he stood. "I knew you'd never come to my home unless I took active measures to get you here, and as you know, I cannot leave to meet you at a more neutral location."

She maintained her stance, ready to cast a Shield Charm if necessary. "What do you want?"

"I am greatly distressed at your current situation and wish to be of service," he said, his eyes looking at her levelly.

"My situation?" she asked, unsure what he meant.

"Could I interest you in lunch? I'd rather we sit and discuss this civilly, if you don't mind." He raised a hand and indicated the path toward the fountain. "I have a table prepared for us under the tent."

Hermione didn't move to follow him, still specious of his motives.

He stopped and turned to face her. "Or would you prefer eating in our dining room?"

"Neither," she said, casually searching for an exit.

"I truly mean you no harm. No one will assault you while you are here," he said, dropping his hand. "You have my word." He started to walk toward her, and Hermione stiffened her arm, ready to fight. "Mrs. Snape, please."

Hermione tried Apparating away, but she realized she couldn't.

Lucius didn't even smirk at her attempt. "There are only three ways into this garden: the east entry through the gate, the west entry from Narcissa's herb garden, or the terrace from the house. No one but family can Apparate into this garden, and Narcissa has taken Draco out for the day. We are alone, I assure you."

"I don't find that at all reassuring," she said, taking a step backward.

He turned his back and casually walked to the tent. Reluctantly, Hermione followed him, her wand still held ready for any sign of trickery. "This is abduction, you know. I'm sure there are laws forbidding abduction."

"Yes, there are. However, I truly hope that it won't come to that. Please, if you won't join me in partaking of my hospitality, at least sit and hear what I have to say to you," he



said, stepping under the tent.

Hermione looked at the table set formally for two. A selection of cheeses with sliced fruit, slices of baguettes, and garnishes were sitting on a platter in the center of the table. Hermione eyed the food, suspicious that it might be poisoned.

"If you require a taster, I will have one of my servants at your disposal," he said as if reading her mind while withdrawing a chair out for her. Hermione chose to sit in the one across the table. Lucius calmly sat in the chair and laid his napkin on his lap, showing no offense to her action. "Wine?"

She calmly accepted the glass, waiting until he drank before taking a sip herself. The wine was superb.

Plates appeared on the table before both of them. "Persian Salad with Narcissa's own cucumbers and vine-ripened tomatoes in a citrus vinaigrette," Lucius stated as he picked up his salad fork. "Her own recipe. I do hope you like it." He took a bite of the greens. "Mrs. Snape, if I may be direct."

Hermione picked hers up, surprised to find it chilled. "By all means, please do," she said, anxious to know why she was really here. Lucius Malfoy abducting her from the shop just so he could have lunch with her seemed so farfetched.

"What you may not be aware of, being Muggle-born, is that arranged marriages, especially magical ones, are taken very seriously in wizarding society and are considered absolute. Some spells which create such magical alliances are unbreakable even *if* the Ministry makes assurances to the contrary."

"That is what Severus said," she replied after swallowing.

His lips curled into something resembling a half-smile. "The Moon-Song Spell that you used is one such spell its union is not retractable. In other words, you and Severus are Bonded," he explained as he ate. "What that means is that your magical cores are Bonded to each other. You will not be able to bond with any other wizard as your very magical essence will not recognize anyone but Severus Snape."

"Our cores are but how is that possible?" Hermione asked, now concerned. "Marvin Maretbell of the Magical Reversal Office said he could dissolve the Bonding, and I believe him."

"No, he cannot. I know Marvin, and he is Muggle-born just like you. In fact, many of the wizards in the Magical Reversal Office are half-blood or Muggle-born. If you'd read about the Moon-Song Enchantment in anything other than a witchtale fable, you'd be knowledgeable of this," Lucius said as he set down his wineglass. "But Severus has indicated that you used this particular potion and spell without knowledge of its consequences. Is that true?"

Hermione swallowed a piece of tomato, enjoying the light taste of the dressing. "My friend, Luna Lovegood, said her mum had used the spell when she married her husband, Xeno Lovegood. Ginny Weasley was familiar with the spell I thought that they knew... so I trusted them."

"You truly weren't familiar with the details of the spell, then?" he asked, his eyebrow rising questioningly as he watched her face. "I was quite surprised when Severus indicated that he thought you ignorant of the spell or its implications. That seems so unlike you well, what I know of you."

"Ginny and Luna knew," Hermione said in defense of her actions and furrowed her brow when she realized he'd added something akin to a compliment to his statement.

"But you didn't?" he asked, sliding his fingers on the stem of his wineglass.

She shook her head, feeling her cheeks warm, hoping that she wasn't blushing noticeably. "No, not really."

"I see. And is this why you are considering this farce of an annulment?" he asked, looking directly at her.

"I don't see it as a farce," she replied, straightening, sitting up straighter. "I see it as an option."

Lucius lowered his gaze a second as he shook his head, then met her eyes. "It isn't. It's a falsehood, meant to appease your Muggle sensibilities, because of who you are."

"Because I'm a Muggle-born?" she asked, hating what he was implying.

He nodded, still maintaining eye contact. "Because you are Potter's friend, a war heroine, touted to be the brightest witch of your generation, and extremely well known. A celebrity. Severus was a Death Eater, spy, and is an acquitted murderer, traitor, and the most unpopular professor at Hogwarts. The fact that this spell connected you two is astounding."

"So you abducted me here to tell me I cannot have an annulment from Severus?" she asked, setting down her fork.

"I had you brought here because I am confined to these grounds and could not come to you. But yes, I had you brought here to tell you that you cannot." He called his house-elf to bring him the books from his study. The elf who had brought her to the manor appeared, handed Lucius three books, and then vanished. "These books discuss magical Bondings. The Moon-Song Spell is mentioned in these two volumes, as are other plight or betrothing spells. I've marked the pages for you." He handed the two books over to her. "When you are finished with these, please return them."

"I promise," she said, eyeing the gift of the loan.

"Usually, arranged or magical unions are taken very seriously in the wizarding world, and the couples are required to work things out. Annulments are extremely rare, and divorce is nearly unheard of. Severus is well versed in our ways; you should listen to him." Lucius said, his tone firm. The plates vanished and new ones appeared. "Ah, yes, green tea poached artichokes with sautéed piquillo peppers and crispy garlic in a sherry reduction and chrysanthemum gelée. Do try this it's one of my favorites."

"I know that annulments are rarely granted, and that divorce is practically unheard of," Hermione said, watching him as he ate a delicate petal of an artichoke. "But I was under the impression that they are granted occasionally if under the right circumstances."

"I'm only trying to help you understand the ethics and social mores of the wizarding world, something most Muggle-born or Muggle-raised witches and wizards are woefully ignorant of," he said, his fork stalling over his plate as his eyes narrowed slightly. "I blame our lowered standards of training for our young in the proper etiquette and protocols, which all young people used to be taught at school in the old days. Slytherin still holds to such conducts of behavior and courtesies, and Ravenclaw used to, although they are not as stringent."

"I wasn't aware that was a course option at Hogwarts," Hermione stated, trying the artichokes and finding them delicious. "It would have been nice to have a course in ethics. Why was the course dropped?"

"It was dropped sometime in the twenties, reinstated and then dropped again in the sixties, and it hasn't been reinstated since, I believe. But among the pureblood of society, we are still raised to know the intricacies of wizard society, including magical unions and marriages." He paused only long enough to take another bite. "Severus understands our ethics and culture, and he complies in accordance with required or traditional rules, procedures, and conventionality when warranted, as well as the application of general ethical principles of conscience or conduct."

"Why are you telling me all this?" she asked, looking at him from under her lashes as she ate.

"To help you understand the culture of the world to which you have entered," he replied smoothly. "And as Severus' wife, the society in which he belongs and is accepted." He took a sip of wine. "Severus is my friend, and as such, I am now your friend, as well, although there is the necessity of developing a cordial relationship from our rather inopportune beginning."

Hermione dropped her fork, and Lucius' eyes narrowed from the sound of the fork hitting the paper-thin porcelain. "What do you mean, you are now my friend? You are nothing of the sort."

He set his hand flat on the table. "Mrs. Snape, I have explained that purebloods understand magical unions. We are raised to accept them and their finality. Many such spells have been used for centuries to assure proper, beneficial, or advantageous marriages. The one you used is rarely used anymore, but it *has* been used. The reason it's not used is because of the unpredictability of the spell. Some matches were most... shocking."

"You mean they matched Muggle-borns to purebloods?" she asked.

"I mean, the results are unpredictable," he said, curling his fingers into a loose fist. "Malvern McClivert and Ebrill MacBroon, as legend states, were bonded by the same Moon-Song Curse. Malvern fought tremendous odds to consummate the union, and the lovers ran away and tried to hide. Unfortunately, Drear is a small island. The families found them and tried to separate the lovers to no avail. It's the reason that Dugal McClivert and Quintius MacBoon had their infamous duel." He watched her face to see if she recognized the names of the combatants of the legendary duel, pleased to see her reaction that she did. "I'm sure you're familiar with the feud between the Macphersons and Montagues?" His brow creased when she gave him a questioning look.

"I know of the story about the Montagues and the Capulets. You mean Romeo and Juliet?" Hermione asked, remembering the play well.

"Shakespeare? No, his story borrows from a legendary tragic love story of *Ephesiaca*. There is another famous incident where a son of one family was Bonded to a daughter of another by this same spell. Unfortunately, the families were long time enemies of each other, a feud that had gone on for generations. The spell brought the boy and the girl together one night, and they consummated the union. The parents tried to separate of the lovers, however, by some tragic circumstances they each killed themselves, believing the other dead... But the tragic romance of the lovers and their deaths is a tale that has been told and retold for centuries."

"I don't remember this version. I don't think I've ever heard about it or read it," she said, hating that there was a famous legend behind her favorite Shakespeare play she didn't know.

"No, you haven't? I'm surprised. Pyramus and Thisbe, or more acutely, the wizarding version of the tale. Although, there are similarities to Shakespeare's play," he said offhandedly. "You distracted me from my point. The thing is that even though your union is unexpected, even seemingly disadvantageous, it is a magical union and thus must be accepted. Since Severus is a member of this family through long association, you, as his Bonded mate, are likewise to be accepted, regardless of past... associations. It is expected. You are now part of the elite, if you choose to be. However, you could very well destroy Severus' standing."

"You mean, because of my birth," she asked, knowing how he'd always regarded her.

"Because of your actions," he said firmly as the plates changed again. "Ah, quail. You'll like this. The peppery pancetta blends exceptionally well with the pommery mustard sauce. The wilted baby greens come from Narcissa's garden. Again, this is one of Narcissa's recipes and very good, if I may say so." He handed her the third book. "If I may be so bold, I would like to lend you a book by Delores Kittrell, *The Social Advantage - Etiquette for Witches and Manners for Wizards* Within it, you will find much of what has been denied to you because of your birth. I'm not saying that you lack manners, but this will polish your aspect of decorum and instruct you in the code that governs pureblood expectations of social behavior."

"I have read Debrett's version," she said, eyeing the thick book skeptically.

"A Muggle version no doubt." He set the book near her. "This is the wizarding version, and since you choose to live in our society, I suggest you read this one."

She eyed him in disbelief. "So you mean to tell me that bygones are to be bygones and that you are now accepting me as your friend? Forgive me if I don't believe you," she said.

"Is this lunch not proof? I have invited you," he said, and one side of Hermione's mouth curled in a smirk. Lucius held up his hand as if to suggest he understood. "All right, I abducted you here to dine with me in my garden because I'm told you will not willingly step foot in my house. I instructed the elves fix a meal such as would normally be served to our most important and influential guests, and I have lent you books from my private library. You have not been hexed, cursed, or tortured, and I have tried to show by example that I mean what I say."

"And the leopard has changed his spots," she said, trying to tone down her sarcasm.

"Haven't I just explained that it is expected? If Severus brought you here, you would be shown every courtesy demanded by my social standing," he said, and she shook her head laughing softly. "This lunch should be proof enough for you." The last remove arrived. "This is Coulant de Chocolat. I assure you it's poison free."

"And if I decide to go ahead with the annulment?" she asked, taking a bite of the warm molten chocolate cake with brandied pears. It was heaven on her tongue.

"Severus is trying to make your relationship work, honoring the Bonding. Why aren't you?" he asked pointedly, his tone somewhat frosty.

"I did try! For months I stood by him and gave him the benefit of the doubt and he kept shoving me away! Severus was the one who... He was horrid. He made it perfectly clear that he wasn't interested in a true Bond just sex," she said, setting down her fork a bit forcefully. "And now you expect me to simply capitulate and take his abuse? He doesn't even like me. Okay, maybe he... he doesn't love me."

Lucius looked at her crossly as if she were an errant child. "YOU hardly know the man! You are residing in separate domiciles, and you still skirt around with your ex-boyfriend."

"It was lunch with my friends!" she snapped back, tired of defending herself over something so innocent.

"It was *three* days and *two* nights with *three* couples, the Potters, the Longbottoms, and you and Mr. Weasley *your ex-boyfriend*, and you've been seen on several *dates* with Mr. Weasley in public places. Why do you think you've been making such a sensation in the papers?" he snapped back at her. "Severus is being far more lenient with you than I would *ever* have allowed Narcissa. Roquewood's daughter was matched with a plight spell, and she is being given six months to acquaint with Theodore Nott before they are to move in together as man and wife. And I understand that Mrs. Luna Longbottom has moved in with Mrs. Augusta Longbottom until she returns to school to finish her last year. I believe that Mrs. Ginevra Potter is still residing with her parents until she graduates, although she most likely spends every moment she can with Mr. Potter. Am I mistaken? They are in the same situation you are in, and yet they are spending time with their Bonded mates, making the transition. From what I understand, you will not even go to Severus' house!"

"I was there with him twice not that it's any of your business." Hermione tossed down her napkin on the table, uncomfortable that he was closer to the mark than she'd like him to be. "Thank you for lunch, Mr. Malfoy. It has been enlightening, but I must go now." She stood and tried to Apparate, forgetting in her anger that she couldn't, but Lucius was quick on his feet and stopped her. "Let go!"

"Take the books. Consider what I said," he replied, thrusting the books at her and calling for his house-elf. "Until you and I see each other again."

Hermione cradled the books to her chest and accepted the elf's hand. "I'll have Severus return your books," she said just before they Apparated.

~L~

Narcissa walked out from her herb garden through the rose-covered trellis and approached her husband. "So how did it go?"

"Stubborn, Nogtail-headed, insufferable," he growled, slamming his fist on the table.

"So, I gather it went well," Narcissa said with a smirk. "She was here longer than I'd expected. Did you tell her everything?"

"Yes," he said, refilling his wine and swallowing half the glass. "But that girl is simply impossible! My sympathies for Severus have just doubled."

Her eyebrow rose, but she smiled at him regardless. "Do you think it made any difference?"

"Time will tell," he said sharply, not meaning to snap at his wife. He turned and started walking with Narcissa to the house. "I'm sorry. Yes, I think I made her see things more clearly. Whether she accepts it or not will depend on how she reasons out and deduces what is in the books and what her friends tell her. I hope she listens to Miss Potter and Miss Longbottom and not that idiot Maretbell."

"Are you going to tell him you spoke with her?" she asked, placing her hand on the crook of his arm.

His shoulders relaxed as he walked with her. "Depends on his mood," he admitted, "as usual. But he will find out soon enough."

"So, that is a no," Narcissa said with a knowing smile.

"That is an I'll explain later," he said, sighing heavily. She looked at him and arched a perfectly curved eyebrow. "All right. Tonight."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

Menu selections were borrowed from a menu of Bistro 561 in Pasadena, the Restaurant of the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena, Ca.

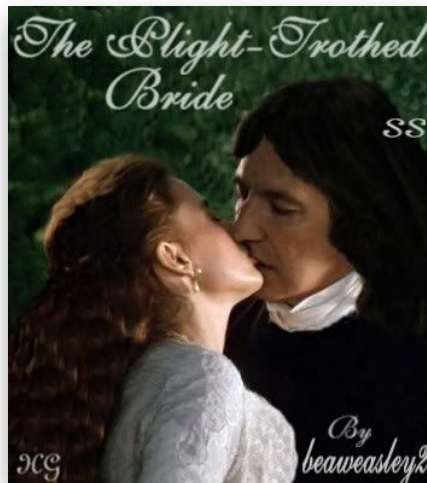
Thank you to Era1960 for being a sounding board when I had a bit of a block and his masculine advice, and to my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for helping me clean this up and fix all my mistakes.

I also want to give a big hug to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my banner. I still get that silly little grin each time I look at it.

## Tea, Books, and Answers

Chapter 24 of 63

Hermione gets more answers about her situation, and spends another day with Severus, while Maggie learns some more juicy gossip.



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Tea, Books, and Answers

~H~

Lucius' house-elf Disapparated almost the exact moment that Hermione realized that they'd arrived in George's workshop, leaving her behind and a little wobbly on her feet for a second. She found herself standing dumbstruck, holding onto three books, with nearly every male wizard she knew, plus a few Aurors, standing around, gaping at her as if she'd appeared out of nowhere. *Which, in all fairness, I just did.* They all looked up with various looks of shock, annoyance, amazement, and disbelief. Ron, George, and Harry nearly bowled her over as all three reached out to grasp her as if she'd vanish again, asking, "Where have you been?" "Who's house-elf was that?" "Where did you go?" "What happened?" as several other people were asking similar questions, mostly creating an uproar of concern.

"You just vanished," Ron said in her ear as he hugged her.

"Who does that house-elf belong to?" someone asked from behind Ron.

Harry was on her other side, hugging them both. "I thought that you'd been abducted. I was so worried!"

She stood there, her arms pinned as she tried to catch her breath, not sure what to say.

"Let her breathe," a deep male voice said, and Harry backed away. "Now young lady, where were you, and why did you take off like that?"

Hermione turned to the Auror. "I was... Ron, get off me," she said, disengaging him and setting the books on the workbench. She turned so the books were concealed behind her back. "I had a lunch date..." Several of the guys, George and Ron in particular, all started to protest that she was lying. "...I forgot about. My Portkey activated before I could tell anyone." She had no idea why she was protecting Lucius Malfoy, except that he had been very gracious, the food had been the kind she'd only seen in expensive restaurants, and he'd given her books. Why he'd gone through the trouble bothered her, but if the books did have the answers she wanted she'd forgive him. If not, well, she'd let it go, for now. He did lend her the books. That was something large, thick books.

Somehow, only Harry was buying her explanation. "You went to see him, didn't you?" Ron asked, clenching his hands into fists.

"There are no registered Portkeys for this location today," the Auror replied, crossing his arms and leaning back slightly with his feet planted apart projecting an authoritative air.

"I don't know if it was a registered Portkey or not. I did have a lunch date to discuss my Bonding, and I am back. I have work to do and some research for tomorrow." She turned, picked up the books and added a few of Fred's journals to conceal Malfoy's against her chest, then faced the group of wizards all staring at her. Ron was gawking at her as if he couldn't comprehend what she'd said. "George, the chews are done. I have the detonators to do, unless you'd like to do them tomorrow?"

George shook his head. "Can't. I have to... Are you sure you're okay? I mean, you vanished without saying anything."

"If I wasn't okay, I'd tell you. George, if it's all right, I'm going home. I want to concentrate on the spell and need quiet. I'll come back tomorrow." She started for the door, practically pushing her way through everybody. Ron tried to hold her back from leaving. "Lay off, Ron. I said I'm fine. I just got so wrapped up in everything I forgot that's all. Let me by."

"Sure," he said, standing aside to let her pass, his expression still one of hurt and confusion.

Hermione hurried out of the shop to go read the books Lucius Malfoy had given her.

~MoM~

Maggie arrived in her office a little late. She checked the ledgers on the way to her desk. There were several new betrothals, three of the engagements from very well respected families, and two deaths. Archie Peasworth had passed in the night, never having recovered from the curse he'd received from the war. There was a note on her desk in regards to her stationary supply, stating that the order would be delayed. Maggie picked up her favorite cup and headed to the dispensary for a cuppa before starting work. If she was lucky, she'd still get some of the gossip.

"I heard from Betty Patterson in the Oblivators' office that she's getting transferred," Faye Cook, a secretary from the Invisibility Task Force office, said. "She's training a new girl to replace her. I heard that she's really working out well."

"Yes, she's Mr. Chase daughter, you know him, from in the Muggle-Worthy Excuse office. She's recently returned from France or something like that," Marjorie Crouch stated. She was a good friend of Maggie's. She worked as a secretary for Madam Edgecombe in the Floo Regulation office.

"Morocco or Greece... Anyway, I heard it's a promotion or something," Elaine Farson said. She was a little thing that had worked in the Portkey registration office for years, longer than Maggie had been with the Ministry. "I know she's been working on a new pamphlet with Arthur Weasley and Gordon Dickson."

"An introductory package for all Muggle spouses," Faye said, adding some more sugar to her cup of tea. "Some kind of guide to the Ministry, St. Mungo's, and other magical places... so they understand things better and know what to do in case of an emergency. Seems like a good idea to me."

"What about the International Statue of Secrecy?" asked Yolanda Weyrich from the Broom Regulation Committee office for the last twenty years.

"Who's being promoted?" Maggie asked, filling her cup up with hot water for her tea.

Marjorie turned to Maggie and smiled. "Roberta Shelton from the Oblivators' office. It's something the Minister is promoting, a Muggle Marriage Assistance Program. He even created her new position,"

Maggie didn't know her very well, except by face and reputation. Roberta Shelton was always an impeccably dressed witch and well regarded in the Oblivators' office. Maggie had known that Mrs. Shelton had been talking about retiring from the gossip in the break room. This new promotion, even a lateral one, was news. She had no idea what the Muggle Marriage Assistance Program was, but since it had to do with marriages, Maggie would most certainly be visiting her office every day. She sipped her cuppa as she listened to the ladies talk, desirous to hear what else was going on, but also eager to return to her desk so that she could draft a letter to Rita and let her know of this new development.

~H~

Shortly after reading the spell in both books Mr. Malfoy had lent her, Hermione had Apparated to see Luna to ask her if she could borrow the diary they'd used. She wasn't at home. Hermione said good-bye to Mr. Lovegood and Apparated to a tree-lined lane where Neville Longbottom lived. Mr. Lovegood had said that Luna was currently staying at the Longbottom's whenever Neville was at home, but Hermione knew that Neville was currently in Darthmont Hills working with Felix Marchbanks in his greenhouses this week. She cast her Patronus and infused her voice into the shape and sent it to the house, hoping that Luna was there.

A silvery rabbit bounded toward her. "Yes, we are home. Come on up," Luna's voice projected from the form before it evaporated.

Hermione was greeted warmly by Luna and graciously by Augusta Longbottom as she was ushered into the lovely Victorian home. "I hope you don't mind the intrusion, but I wanted to ask you a favor, Luna."

"Oh, dear, it's no intrusion at all," Mrs. Longbottom said, directing the girls into a lovely parlor. A silver tea service and plates of pastries and fruit waited on a lovely glass-topped wicker table. "Please sit. Luna and I were just going to have tea. It's wonderful to have you join us, Mrs. Snape."

"Thank you," Hermione said, sitting on a chair close to the window. "Please, call me Hermione."

Luna set herself down on the other chair near the window facing Hermione. "I liked the picture of you in the *Prophet* this week. You and George looked happy. How is the shop doing?"

"Luna and I didn't believe a word that Skeeter woman wrote. It was a nice picture of you though. Neville wrote the editor and has a copy of it in Luna's room," Mrs. Longbottom said as if she felt Luna's comment needed clarifying. "Shall I be mother, then?"

"Yes, please. The shop is doing well. George is so busy, summer being his busiest time and all," Hermione answered, accepting a delicate, pale blue teacup.

Luna was carefully examining the lemon wedges on a small dish. "Ron is enjoying working at the shop. He said that you are making the products with George. That must be fun. I sent him a suggestion for a journal. He said that I get one as soon as you and he come up with the charms. Lemon?" she asked, handing Hermione the dish. Hermione shook her head. "So, how is Severus? Have you worked things out?"

"No, not quite yet," Hermione said. "We have a few things to discuss..."

"Sometimes these things take time," Mrs. Longbottom said with a gracious smile.

Luna looked up as she squeezed a lemon wedge over her cup. "I should get you a blue-tailed skink. They eat the Muggleknots."

Hermione had been about to sip her tea, but froze as she looked up at Luna from over the rim. "Muggle knots?"

"They muggle a person's thoughts and make the effected victim cranky and irritable if they're around them too long. I let a skink loose in the potions lab at school. He was able to get most of Addlenots before Professor Snape caught him. But they breed quickly." Luna picked up one of the plates. "Pastry? The cherry ones are really good."

"Oh, Luna, the things you suggest," Mrs. Longbottom said with a twilling laugh, making a downward flip with her fingers.

Hermione set down her cup and turned to Luna, still grinning at her comments. "Talking about Professor eh Severus, Luna, may I borrow your diary? I want to look up the spell again."

"Sure, I have it upstairs in my room," Luna said, smiling.

"Asia!" Mrs. Longbottom called out.

"Yes, mistress," a house-elf said as she ran out from beside a tall potted fern.

"Would you be a dear and get Luna's journal from her room?" Mrs. Longbottom asked offhandedly and sipped her tea. "So, I understand you're returning to school with Luna?"

"Yes, we'll have lessons together," Hermione said, hiding her surprise at how Mrs. Longbottom treated her house-elf.

"I hope they fixed the rose window in the East Tower. It made pretty patterns on my arms," Luna said, carefully examining the pastries. "Did you want to read about our weekend searching for Tipwertzels?"

Hermione couldn't stifle her giggle. "Actually, no, but if you want to tell me about it, I'd love to hear about it sometime. I want to read what you'd written about the Moon-Song Curse."

"Oh, that," both Mrs. Longbottom and Luna said, Mrs. Longbottom a bit curtly.

"Spell, dear, not curse. It utilizes more than on form of magical art. Honestly, didn't they teach you that in school? Luna told me you are being impressed upon by Marvin Maretbell in the Reversal office to annul your Bonding," Mrs. Longbottom said a bit contemptuously with a roll of her eyes and a flip with her hand. "Honestly dear, the things that man... Not to bother, dear, you're too sensible to listen to that fool."

"I don't understand," Hermione said, tilting her head and gripping her napkin tightly. "I it's just that I want to know how this spell works. I have so many people telling me it can be annulled and others saying I can't."

"Oh, you poor dear, no wonder your confused. Asia! I was too many years ago with my first husband, the goddess rest his soul, but it was a good match," Mrs. Longbottom said, placing her hand on her chest with a reminiscent expression, then inhaled deeply and regarded Hermione seriously. Her house-elf appeared at her side, waiting patiently. "As a young girl, I loved the witchtales, Isadore and Persuses... and Delfennia and Edvard the Brave, that spoke of magical unions and gallant wizards exciting demonstrations to reach their Bonded beloved... I would be happy to let you borrow a book or two. Aisa!" The elf jumped slightly when her name was called, but she still waited patiently at Mrs. Longbottom's side. "I have one in particular I love!" She finally looked down. "Oh there you are! I want my book please, the one I lent Luna." She turned back to the girls. "Oh, you'll love the stories, the romance, the trials, the adventures... Oh, and the green one! *Enchanting Your Happily Ever After...* You want to know how they work oh, and *Charms Make Wishes Come True* You should have that one too. *Aisa!*"

Several hours later, Hermione was sitting at the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place with several sheets of parchment, three colors of ink, five colors of highlighters, Lucius Malfoy's and Mrs. Longbottom's books opened up to the Moon-Song spell, taking notes, cross referencing, and making a chart.

~S~

Hermione arrived at the house precisely at eleven. Severus opened the door at her first knock and stood back to let her inside. Hermione looked around at the books as his gaze wept over her. She was wearing another Muggle sleeveless dress with a scooping neckline that buttoned all the way down the front and flared at the hemline about her calves, showing off her ankles. The bodice wasn't exactly tight, but it did accentuate her breasts. Of course, the heeled sandals made her legs look shapely. It reminded him of another dress, a purple one she'd worn when she'd visited him in jail. He turned quickly to stop himself from thinking about that day and sat down on the sofa.

Hermione walked over to the chair that faced him and sat down, crossing her legs and placing her hands on her lap. Unfortunately, the dress split open where the buttons stopped, exposing more of her legs to his view. Inhaling slowly, he forcefully averted his gaze and picked up the book he'd been reading.

"What are you reading?"

He looked up and was about to retort 'a book,' but refrained. "A comparative study of Mesoamerican Astronomy and Calendrics in relation to modern Arithmancy."

Her eyes lit up for a moment, and he hoped that she didn't expect him to get into a discussion about the subject. *Of course she'd be interested. She took Arithmancy at school, and I've no doubt received an Outstanding on her O.W.L.* To avoid any questions he lowered his gaze back to the book and pretended not to notice her shifting in her chair to gain his attention. He'd only just started the book himself and wasn't at a point where he could discuss it with her.

"Do you mind if I...?" she asked, indicating the books with her finger, her eyes sweeping the wall behind him with her eyes.

He nearly laughed. *That took all of two minutes.* "By all means, please do," he said smoothly. He watched slyly over the edge of his book to see which shelf would get her attention first.

She rose gracefully and turned to look at the books behind her. He had a hard time not noticing the way her dress moved with her or how it gapped slightly between the buttons when she moved, which exposed tiny bits of her skin, and the way the ties cinched in the waist in the back. She turned around holding a book. He mentally cringed at her choice. "That is a book on the practical application on nonverbal wandless magic. I'd prefer you not practice on my furniture."

She returned the book and selected another at random. He smirked. *So she's interested in nonverbal magic, eh* "That's on nonverbal curses and hexes; a rather odd choice considering most of the magic is considered Dark arts."

"Do you have a suggestion then?" she asked, setting the book back.

"Next shelf, thirteenth from your left. It's about nonverbal wandless magic on the theoretical level and well written," he said, turning the page. *And a good book for her to begin with. Mander's book would be a good one as would Rothschild's... and Brenner's. That's if she ever chooses to sit with me again. I might bore her... a room of books bore Hermione Granger.* He silently scoffed at himself.

Hermione smiled, turned around, and bent over slightly, revealing more of her legs. He exhaled a sigh he hadn't realized he'd been holding when she straightened, walked over to the chair and sat down. She straightened her legs, the skirt of her dress parting again, and crossed her ankles as she opened up the book. He shifted in his seat so that he leaned on the arm of the sofa so he wasn't seeing her legs displayed, or the way she curled her hair with her finger, or toyed with her lower lip as she read over the

edge of the book. After a while he caught her looking at him. She blushed and looked down when she realized it and lifted the book higher to hide her cheeks. Several pages later he saw her peeking up at him from under her lashes in his peripheral vision. He smirked and turned the page nonchalantly, making sure she was unaware he'd noticed. *She must be literally vibrating with questions by now about the techniques. Maybe I'll show her how later...*

At noon, the chime of a clock broke the silence. Severus lowered his book and stared at her until she looked up. "Are you hungry?"

She shrugged. "I suppose," she replied noncommittally.

Severus set down his book and rose. "If you decide, I'll be in the kitchen preparing lunch, unless you care to assist me."

He was surprised when she slipped through the door right after he did. She walked to the sink as he withdrew the container of coleslaw and a plate of sliced roast beef. "Pull down the skillet, please, and a small sauce pan from the cupboard," he directed her as he took out cheese, a baguette, and au jus sauce. He passed her the sauce and took the skillet. He watched her as she warmed the sauce as he heated the roast beef and warmed the bread. She tried asking him questions about things, apparently an attempt at small talk and getting him to open up. His answers were short, and he tried to keep his tone amiable. Once everything was ready, they sat down to eat.

"This is good. Did you cook it?" she asked.

Truth was he had been given the leftovers from the Malfoy kitchens. "Yes, I can cook. This is leftovers," he admitted, his eyes riveted to a little bit of juice at the corner of her lip.

Hermione wiped it away. "I used to love cooking with my mum. She and I would look up recipes in magazines and try them at home..." she started saying, telling him about a cheesecake that apparently came out looking like cottage cheese in a pie crust, a batch of burnt cookies that even the dog wouldn't touch, and a lemon bread that had become a family favorite.

He kept his eyes mostly focused on his food as he listened to her, nodding occasionally and grunting the appropriate, "Uh uh. *If this is an example of her cooking she'll never be allowed in the kitchen without me.*

Apparently, she liked cooking Cornish hens but had difficulty cooking fish... Somehow, the story led to when she'd gone fishing with her dad, and a time she'd gone camping with her cousins' family. Severus had sat and listened, once again realizing the big difference between her childhood and his. "Have you ever been there, Severus?"

"What?"

"Wye Valley in the Forest Dean? It's really pretty there. One of my favorite places."

He recalled the time he and Avery had to lead a raid in Steep Meadow in the Wye Valley. "Yes, under less desirable circumstances." She was watching him expectantly. "It was in 1979 and I was with them."

"As a Death Eater," she said, taking a sip of her soda. He scowled at her, but she only shrugged. "I know you don't want to tell me about your dark years."

"Don't romanticize it. Avery and I led a raid to eliminate two families' women, children, and the pet dog. I will not tell you the details." He pushed back and rose to take his plate to the sink. He placed his hands on the rim and leaned on them. "Hermione, I want to place that all behind me. None of it was good or heroic. Even when I switched sides, I did things I wish to forget."

He flinched when she laid her hand on his back and set her plate on his. "I probably understand more than you think. I know you had to do things' terrible things, and you had to allow things to happen."

He turned his head to look at her, ready to scoff at her, but her expression only showed her sincerity. She truly meant what she was saying.

"I understand that. You were in the thick of everything in the war, on both sides. But you did a lot of good as well, don't forget that," she said softly.

He turned to face her and she took a step back, regarding him calmly. "So what did you have planned for today?" she asked.

"Not much," he admitted.

"We could... go to a museum or... Diagon Alley?" she suggested. He cringed at the thought of parading around Diagon Alley. "How about a movie?"

"A movie? Do you have any idea what might be playing?" he asked, wondering why she'd suggest that. *Not a bad idea, no reporters, no Dolohov...*

She shook her head. "No, but the Cineplex has several theaters. We could just pick one."

He sighed and relented. They Apparated near the Cineplex and walked up to the marquee. There was an animated childrens' movie, a poster depicting violence and explosions... one with a pair of young teens gazing longingly at each other... None appealed to him. "Do you have a preference?"

Hermione was staring at the movie posters, making a grimace at the childrens' animated one, scrunching her nose at the two teens, and shaking her head at the one with the man holding a gun with exploding cars behind him. "No... no... gods no..." she was mumbling.

"So I take it nothing appeals to you either?" he asked. "What were my other choices, a museum or shopping in Diagon Alley?"

She shrugged. "Well, either of them, I suppose."

"I have an idea." He took her hand, walked back around the building between the theater and the parking garage and Apparated beside a doorway in an alley near a bookshop he liked. He led the way, and once inside, he turned to the left to the Potions section. Hermione had followed him, but stopped at the display of new arrivals. After searching through the shelves, he moved to the Herbology section, passing Hermione as she pursued through the Charms section. She was in the history section when he walked over to the Asian section. When he came to find her, she was in a large chair, flipping through a thick book. He walked around the chair and realized that she had one foot tucked under her, balancing another book on her knee as she compared something between the two books. "Find anything you can't live without?" he asked, smirking at her.

She looked up and smiled. "I can always find something I can't live without in a book shop." She closed the books and set them aside.

He picked one up and grinned. "I have this one." He looked at the other one. It looked like a reprint of a book by his old mentor, Master Kirkwell Ogden. "I have the original of this one."

She smiled, indicating the book in his hands. "That one is a comparative of Master Ogden's works and achievements with current practices in Potions. Master Terrell and Master Reynolds, who were apparently his apprentices, wrote it. They also include the potions invented in the Voldemort wars. You are mentioned."

He cringed at her casual use of the Dark Lord's name. Her synopsis of the book intrigued him. "Maybe I'll get it," he suggested.

She grinned and followed him to the register.

He paid for the book, plus two he'd selected, and arranged for owl delivery. Once outside, he suggested going to Lé Blanche Herbal, a nursery that specialized in exotic

and foreign plants for potion ingredients. Unfortunately it was closed. So was the Poimandres' Saturae Potionis. Severus scowled at the sign in the door.

"Where are we?" Hermione had been looking at the small cluster of magical shops that surrounded the pretty courtyard.

"We are in Kent. I do business here on occasion," he said, turning to leave.

"Is there anywhere else that would have what you need?" Hermione asked from behind him.

"Yes, the apothecary in Knockturn Alley," he said as he turned and held up his elbow, quirked an eyebrow when she hesitated in accepting his arm. "I'm not taking you there, Hermione." *It's too dangerous, and Dolohov's likely to be there or one of his cronies.*

"Where then?" she asked, hooking her arm with his.

"I suggest we go to the green grocer." The shop he took her to was small, but carried a wide variety of produce, herbs, and even had a back room of basic potions since it was owned by a wizarding family. He allowed Hermione to help select which vegetables and fruit she wanted for dinner as he selected his favorites. Afterwards, they walked down three doors to the butcher. It was owned by two wizard brothers who kept the more exotic meats in the back for their magical customers. Severus led her to the counter and requested cube steak and turkey breast. The next stop was a Muggle bakery he preferred, then a family store on the corner that had fresh juices and an array of fizzy drinks, as well as carrot, pumpkin, and tomato juices and a selection of fruit juices.

"So where to now, the winery?" she asked with a soft chuckle.

"Home," he simply said just before he took her back to his house. They went to the kitchen to start preparing dinner together. Hermione was continually distracted by his hands for some reason, blushing when he'd look at her questioningly or asked her why. As the food simmered in the pan, he poured her a glass of wine he had and leaned against the sink. "What made you select that particular book?" he asked.

Hermione explained her attraction and the confusion she had between the different directions between the books. "That's common, Hermione," he said. "Master Ogden's book was written over a hundred and twenty years ago. My mother had a copy in her trunk. Several of the potions have been improved upon, or techniques are discovered that enhance the potion or make it easier to brew."

They continued to discuss recent advances in potions over dinner. He was surprised at the things she remembered from his lessons and scowled when she mentioned reading Potter's potions book. "You mean my book, don't you?"

She blushed. "Well, yes, technically... except Harry would be loath to part with it, especially considering how he feels about you."

"Feels about me?" Severus scoffed.

Hermione explained about Harry's change of heart toward him after viewing his memories and the facts that came out during his trial. Severus decided to change the topic back to potions, uncomfortable talking about his hero status.

After cleaning up and putting away the leftovers, Severus went to sit down on the sofa in the sitting room.

Hermione sat on the chair across from him, looking at him expectantly, her hands on her knees. "So what do you usually do when you're at home?"

"Read. Brew potions. Cook. Sleep," he said drolly, resting his left hand on his right ankle he had placed on his left knee. His right elbow rested on the armrest of the sofa.

Hermione waited, obviously hoping for more.

"I like to listen to music, take long walks, sometimes I collect my own ingredients," he added, hoping that would satisfy her question. "Leisure time wasn't something I generally had an abundance of."

She smiled, leaning forward a little. "What?" he asked, his back stiffening involuntarily in anticipation of her innumerable questions.

"Well, I was wondering..."

He smirked that his assumption was proven astute. "I'm not going to sit here and have you drill me with questions."

"Well, then talk."

His jaw clenched for a second at the statement. "About what?"

"I don't know anything," she said, shrugging her shoulders so that her breasts squeezed together, emphasizing her cleavage.

He tore his eyes away from her chest. "Be more specific."

She relaxed, scrutinizing him as she considered her next question. "Well you won't tell me about your childhood, or your school years or your Death Eater activities... so, how about what you did after school?"

He looked her in the eye and held her gaze. "Hermione, my father was an alcoholic and my mother was a dependant enabler, constantly afraid of my father's temper. That was my childhood, trying to avoid upsetting my father by my presence or my accidental magical outbursts, or later, as I learned to control my emotions and my magic, the fact that I could do magic was enough to infuriate him."

She was staring at him, her mouth open slightly in shock at his blunt assessment of his life.

"I didn't have toys. No bike. No balls. Never made a kite. Didn't go to the movies. My clothes came from the secondhand store. I found a puppy once, and my father made me get rid of it by drowning it in the river. I used to *play* on the riverbank with rocks and sticks or in the park across the bridge." He knew he sounded bitter and didn't care. "So forgive me if I don't talk about my childhood. My school years I was a loner. I had one true friend, who turned against me when I made a mistake while being tormented by Potter and Black which by the way, was a regular occurrence throughout my school years as I was frequently the brunt of their bullying and trickery. I wasn't well accepted in my house because I loved the wrong type of girl and didn't hold the belief that pure blood mattered more than power and ability. When I did start to make friends in my house with the boys in my year I started losing the one girl I really loved."

He turned to look at the beams of light coming in through the curtains instead of continuing to watch the myriad of emotions reflected on Hermione's face. "Summer hols, I had my wand confiscated by my father and was told to go to my room or to get lost." He smirked. "I usually chose to get lost. After school, I joined the Death Eaters. I apprenticed under Master Ogden with Roger Terrell and later with Reginald Reynolds, but I served the Dark Lord."

A movement caught his attention, and he frowned as she wiped away tear. "Don't pity me. I don't want your pity," he snapped.

"I just never realized..." Her head jerked up, her hand still immobile where it had been wiping away the tear. "I don't pity you! I feel sorry that your father was like that, but it's sad that he was like he was," she said, trying to smile but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You're right, mine was different. At least you had books to read."

"I was not allowed to sit around and read." He laughed, a dry mirthless laugh. "Only a few of these books are ones my mother obtained while in school that she kept hidden from my father in her old school trunk. Most of the collection I inherited from my grandfather or are books I've collected over the years." He turned away, looking at the shelf

his mum's books sat. "As much as I enjoy hearing about your little anecdotes of your childhood, don't expect me to reciprocate."

"I'm sorry that I pried. I won't do it again." She lowered her head and stared at her hands. "Do you want me to leave?"

She was picking at her cuticle on her thumb. "No stop doing that." She froze and he smirked. "If you pick at your cuticles, you create open wounds not good when handling certain ingredients." He dropped his foot on the floor and stood up, intending on retrieving his copy of the book that had intrigued her in the bookshop.

Hermione stood too. "I had a nice time today, Severus," she said politely, turning for the door.

A thousand remarks floated in his mind. *Oh, I'm sure you did. I did too. Don't go. But of course you want to leave why would you stay... Oh, for the love of Merljistay."*

She turned and gave him a weak smile. "It's time I go home anyway. I really did have a nice time. I'm sorry I upset you."

He cupped her face and kissed her good night, just a light, gentle kiss. Hermione slid her arms around his waist effectively drawing him closer, and he'd wrapped his arm around her as well, still keeping one hand in her mass of curls. Her lips parted slightly, and her face tipped up to meet his more firmly. He took that as an invitation to deepen the kiss, and she moaned. She swayed a little and he held her more firmly, pleased when she molded herself against him. Oh, this witch was going to be his undoing. He wanted to sweep her off her feet and carry her upstairs, but knew she'd protest and struggle if he did.

The clock in the bookshelf began to chime again, and Hermione pulled away. "It's late. I really should be going."

His head dropped and he exhaled. "Will I see you tomorrow?" he asked, hating that he sounded so pathetic in asking.

"I'm having dinner at the Burrow," she said, stepping back to the door. "I'm pretty sure that you can come if you want."

"I'll consider it," he said. She nodded and opened the door.

Severus followed her through the door and watched as she walked down to the place that he'd told her use to Apparate. He turned back to the house when he heard the sound of her Disapparation.

~\*~

Hermione Apparated to Grimmauld Place and stood a moment on the pavement. She looked at the door and hesitated. Turning, she strolled down the street, heading to the gated private park a few blocks away, thinking about everything Severus had told her today. His summary of his life had shocked her. It was what she'd expected, but the way he'd said it, the coldness in his voice, the anger... He made his childhood sound so horrible, and yet Harry had told her about what he'd seen in the Pensieve: meeting Lily in the park, sitting with Lily under a tree and on the riverbank. There had to have been good memories in his life, at least some. She remembered his comments at Southend on the Sea. His dad had sat in the pub and drank while Severus and his mum had walked on the pier. It was so sad... She began to reconstruct her day with Severus as she neared the private park. With a simple Alohomora, the gate opened, and Hermione slipped inside and onto the garden path. What had started out as awkward had ended well. She'd loved the bookshop and shopping for groceries had been fun, and they liked many of the same vegetables. Dinner with Severus was nice, and she'd really liked cooking with him, watching his hands handle a knife.

Hermione strolled along the garden path as it followed the man-made stream. Goldfish swam under the water lilies and aquatic plants. The Japanese anemone, silver spears, and calla lilies were in bloom. The azalea bushes were beautiful. But her mind was too preoccupied.

She sighed and stared at the fish in the stream. She Transfigured a handful grass into fish pellets, tossing them in small pinches, watching the fish scrambling over each other to eat. Hermione started to mull over what she'd read in Lucius Malfoy's books and the ones from Mrs. Longbottom. One of Mr. Malfoy's books was old. It clearly explained all types of Plight and Betrothal Charms and even a few Matchmaking Curses. She'd been surprised to see the Moon-Song spell listed as a curse. In fact, in both of Mr. Malfoy's books, the spell seemed more like Dark magic, whereas in Mrs. Longbottom's it was depicted as romantic and the joining of soul mates. Mr. Malfoy's books each contained a warning as to the unpredictability and finality of the magic cohesion, whereas Mrs. Longbottom's books discussed the practicality of matching a couple magically to ensure true compatibility and eliminate the unreasonable expiations of a love-marriage relationship. But all four books clearly indicated the finality of the Bonding. So that meant that there was no reversal for the spell. It was a tri-binding spell since it used a potion, an incantation and one's innate magic tying one's very magical core to the magical core of the one the spell connected with permanently binding them together... Her magical core was bound to Severus Snape's and it was immutable. Severus, he was right. Kingsley and Mr. Murell had been wrong... or had lied to her. *What if people find themselves stuck in marriages with a person decidedly not of their choosing, like someone with whom they may find personally repulsive, or annoying, or insufferable?*

She tossed in the last of the pellets and sighed. Looking up, she took in the serenity of the private garden she liked so much. Hermione wanted a home with a garden or at least with a home with a view. Severus' house, even when cleaned up, was depressing. It wasn't that it was a poor home; the size wasn't the issue when things could be made more spacious with magic it was the feel of the home. It took more than clean floors, dusted shelves, shiny pots, and fresh linens to make a house feel like a home. Harry and Ginny had made Grimmauld Place homey, and the Burrow was always warm and inviting, just like her parent's home had been for her. Severus' home didn't have any of that warmth. She wondered if it was because of him or if it was her, but the place made her sad.

Hermione turned and headed for the gate. She had a lot to consider where one Severus Snape was concerned.

She noticed that the streetlights were on when she turned to close the gate. *Harry's going to worry*, she thought as Apparated to the front stoop of Grimmauld Place and let herself in the door.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

The unfamiliar Latin word used is: Satura ae: a dish of various ingredients, a medley.

My Latin resource is: [catholic.archives.nd.edu/cig-bin/lookingdown.pl](http://catholic.archives.nd.edu/cig-bin/lookingdown.pl)

Thank you to Era1960 for his masculine advice and for being a sounding board when I had a bit of a block, and to my betas, MadBrilliant and Shug, for helping me clean this up and fix all my mistakes.

I also want to give a big hug to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my banner. I still get that silly little grin each time I look at it.



# Her Knight Errant

Chapter 25 of 63

Hermione has an interesting day at the Burrow and a revealing date with Severus. Little did she know that she was going to be defended by a wizard errant, not once, but twice.



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Her Knight Errant

~H~

From the moment that Hermione and Harry had arrived at the Burrow, she'd had the feeling that all the Weasleys had conspired to play referee between her and Ron. Ginny, George, and Harry seemed to be trying to maneuver Hermione and Ron so that they were never alone or so that Ron couldn't get her in a corner by themselves. When Hermione sat down on the sofa, Bill casually sat down next to her, crossing his leg over the other and turning so that he was effectively taking up half the sofa. "So, do you follow international news, Hermione?"

"A little," she replied, cringing as Ron stood against the fireplace, watching them, very clearly annoyed that George, Harry, and Ginny were trying to engage him in a discussion about the Quiberon Quafflepunchers match against the Heidelberg Harriers and not letting him sit with her. "I get *The Sorcerers Sun* as well as the *Daily Prophet*."

"So, what do you think about Jaromir Taher and Ayman Malek demanding that we return all the pilfered magical artifacts and their claims that they were poached from the Egyptian tombs?" Bill asked, taking a drink from his beer. "Of course, the Goblins are refusing to admit that they were misappropriated."

Hermione shrugged. "Not much really, although I'm sure that the Goblins are furious."

Bill smiled and begun telling her what he'd heard at work, the controversy over the artifacts in question, which led to a discussion on everything from Ancient Egyptian magic to Goblin affairs.

When Mrs. Weasley asked Bill to give her a hand, Charlie plopped down on the sofa, taking Bill's place. "So, how are you, girl? Things flying straight?"

Hermione nearly choked on her Coke. "Fine. As well as can be expected, all considering. You?" she asked, taken off guard. He was visiting his family on an extended vacation, but this was the first time he'd ever singled her out to talk.

"So, you're returning to Hogwarts in a week?" he asked.

Hermione nodded mutely as she swallowed. They reminisced about their respective school years and his job in Romania until Mrs. Weasley asked Charlie to get Mr. Weasley from his shed. She then asked the girls to set the table, giving Hermione a reprieve from Ron's glaring stare.

After lunch, Fleur asked Hermione to sit with her and watch the children while the boys, Ginny, and Angelina played Quidditch.

When it started to get dark, everyone started walking back to the house. "So, you're avoiding me now, are you?" Ron hissed at her side, making Hermione jump in surprise.

She'd just picked up a magical toy areoplane and hadn't heard him approach her. "No, Ron, I'm not," she said with a sigh. "But I don't want any problems or arguments either. How is Auror Training?"

"It's going good. I'm not so good with Disguise, but I am getting on all right in Stealth and Concealment," he said. "Probably from sneaking around so much when we were in school."

"Probably," she admitted. "Harry was having trouble with Disguise as well. We used to work on it together."

"I would've liked that," Ron said, kicking a rock. "I liked having you help me with my stuff."

Hermione smiled, knowingly. "You used to like having me write your essays for you. If you want, come around when Harry's home. I'll help you with your Transfiguration."

"You guys okay?" Harry asked, joining them on Hermione's other side.

Ron perked up. "You mean it?"

Hermione nodded, relieved that he was talking to her like they used to and not berating her about her Bonding. "When Harry is home. I don't need problems right now."

"You mean with Snape?" he asked, frowning.

Hermione stopped and placed a hand on his arm making him turn to face her, hoping to stem off any arguments with him. "Yes, with Severus. His name is Severus, and he is my Bonded Mate. Got that?"

"Yeah," Ron said, jerking his arm free. "I got that I still don't like it, but I get it. You'd rather be with him than me."

"That's not true, Ron, and you know it," Harry said, coming to her defense. "She didn't pick him it happened."

"Yeah, and you got my sister," Ron snapped, scuffing his shoe, "just like she wanted."

"Ron, I was thinking of you when I said the rhyme," Hermione protested, but Harry held up his hand to silence her.

"Yeah, I lucked out, and Ginny is my true match my soul mate. The spell picked me for her. Hermione didn't pick Snape she'd picked you then this spell mucked things up, and you keep taking it out on her like it's her fault!" Harry said as Ginny and Bill walked over. "You told me that you knew about bonding spells, and yet, you still act like a prat. It's not her fault and *she* has to live with the consequences. Don't you get it?"

"Stop. Just stop it!" Hermione shouted, wishing that this argument wasn't happening.

She turned and ran, but not before she heard Bill say, "Way to go little brother. You really know how to carry a hinkypunk on your shoulder!"

Hermione stopped behind the bush next to the gate to wipe the tear from her face, surprised and hurt by Harry's true feelings regarding her Bonding. He'd always been so supportive and encouraging, but in fact, he'd only been pacifying her.

"Whatever that girl decides, you should be supporting her. It's time you face the facts, bro. You and her you're not a good match. I'm sorry, I know it's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. Face it. You'll be happier when you do." Bill's voice was getting louder as if Ron was walking away. "Don't throw away seven years of friendship RON!"

Hermione turned on the spot and Apparated for home. Bill was right, and so was Harry, but right now, all she wanted was to take a long hot bath with a good book and loads of bubbles. She still felt bad about the situation, and somehow Bill had just made her feel worse.

~MoM~

Monday morning, Maggie walked into her office and immediately noticed that not only did her office seem to have expanded, but that a second office space had been added. There was a new desk with a low bookshelf behind it, an extra file cabinet, and three chairs that stood behind a partition. The table with the magical registries had been moved and was now against the wall. The Marriage and Magical Unions ledger with its red quill was now sitting at the end of the table closest to the new desk with the Birth Registration ledger in the middle. It was just the opposite from how Maggie kept the ledgers, preferring the table to have the Marriage ledger in the middle, birth, marriage, then death, the natural flow of life in her opinion. The green and black quills that hovered over the Birth Registration ledger, and the Obituary and Life Termination register were busily writing away, but Maggie was distracted by the new arrangement.

Robbie Shelton walked into the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office with four wizards carrying two file boxes each behind her. "Good morning. You must be Maggie Whitmire," she said, placing a brass-plated plaque on her desk that read:

Magical Licenses and Certificates Department

Muggle Marriage Assistance Program

"Yes, I am," Maggie tried to say in introduction, but the wizards were blocking her from extending her hand in greeting. She plopped down in her chair, fuming at the impertinence.

Roberta didn't seem to notice. "Please, just set everything down anywhere, gentlemen, and thank you so much for helping me with them," she said kindly to the men, whose faces were partially obscured by the boxes.

"Our pleasure, Roberta," a broad-shouldered wizard said and stood up, as another turned around after placing his boxes on the bookshelf. Maggie was surprised to recognize Raul Aguilar and Ashton Mostyn from the Oblivators office, amazed that they'd personally carried Mrs. Shelton's boxes and not some of the maintenance wizards. Maggie recognized that one of the two other wizards was also from the Oblivators office.

"We're sure are going to miss you," Mr. Aguilar said, sadly.

"I'm going to miss all you guys too, but this is the best thing for me," Robbie said, pointing for the fourth wizard to leave the box on her bookshelf. "Victoria is a lovely girl and will fit in nicely. You'll see. She caught on quickly, and you won't have to worry about her handling everything or keeping up with you."

The Minister walked into the office, and Maggie bolted from her chair, as Mrs. Shelton tried to get around the boxes to greet him. "No, Robbie, please," he said, holding up his hand. "I just came down to see if the changes I asked for had been done."

"The office is quite spacious, thank you, Minister," Mrs. Shelton said, blushing slightly at his thoughtfulness.

"It's Kingsley, Robbie," he corrected her with a warm smile. "We'll be working together until this gets up and running smoothly."

Mrs. Shelton placed a hand on her chest, and her eyes opened wide in modest humility. "Kingsley imagine me, on a first name basis with the minister?"

"I am looking forward to seeing this project of mine off and flying," Kingsley said. "The plaque for the door will arrive this afternoon. Carlos here will be happy to help you organize things and help you set up." The thin, wiry wizard smiled and began stacking books haphazardly on Mrs. Shelton's shelves. "You'll have complete access to the Marriage and Magical Unions and Birth Registration ledgers and Stamford Jorkins in the Ministry Public Relations office will help you with your pamphlets and leaflets should you need him. And if you do nearly as well as I hope, we'll have to expand the office again and get you an assistant."

"Thank you, Minister," Mrs. Shelton said graciously with a tone of awe.

"You're very welcome." Kingsley stopped in the doorway and turned around. Maggie walked to the side of her desk, hoping to catch his attention, but Kingsley apparently didn't notice. "Oh, and one more thing, since you'll be handling all the press releases for the Muggle and Muggle-born marriage announcements and Muggle-born births, you'll be dealing with the local papers. So for now, at least for the next several months, review all of the announcements with Mrs. Whitmire." Robbie smiled and nodded, and Maggie's eyes bulged in disbelief. "Robbie, Mrs. Whitmire, good day to you," he said, just before he left the office.

Maggie sat down at her desk, fuming at the implications of what the Minister had just said, and started shuffling her files as she watched Roberta Shelton and Carlos organize Mrs. Shelton's work space.

~H~

Hermione laughed as the green powder erupted in George's face. "That's not funny!" he snapped as she siphoned the glittery powder back into the jar. "You have to contain it *while* I add the Dreamer's venom."

Hermione checked the potion. "We still have time, it hasn't turned." She looked up at him. "Are you ready?"

George glared at her, but lifted the flask of venom and the stirring rod. "Yes. Go." Hermione swished her wand, encapsulating the green glycerin powder, and moved it to hover over the cauldron as George carefully counted off three drops to each rotation of his stirring rod, being extra careful to keep his rod under the hovering powder. The drops fell through the powder, making globules slide down the stirring rod into the potion, creating a small hiss each time they touched the surface.

Hermione's arm began to shake slightly, and she struggled to maintain the slowly shrinking mass. George's face was getting sweaty, and he started to mumble as he counted. She maintained the spell even when the powder seemed to have all dissipated, knowing that the powder would start to appear clear as the mass within the orb of her containment spell grew less and less. This was the point when most people who attempted the brew this potion failed; they broke off the containment too soon, making the fine dust fall into the cauldron. She shrunk the orb of the containment spell, concentrating the powder within. Suddenly George started his count down. When George reached one, Hermione moved the orb from the cauldron and pushed it into the jar next to her as George started stirring in the opposite direction.

She handed him a flannel when he finally pulled his stirring rod out. "Thanks. Sorry I snapped at you," he said, mopping his face.

"It's okay." Hermione pulled out another cauldron to start the base for the red ones. "Two more to go, or do you want to wait?"

"Nah, let's get them done," he said as he added the dragon sulfur.

They finished the red and the blue without any incidents other than George and Hermione both feeling and showing their fatigue.

Hermione was confused when George put his hand on her wrist, stopping her from pulling out another cauldron. "I think we should stop for the day," he said, laughing. "It's really late, well past my normal dinner time. Angie is going to be here any minute, and I need a shower," he said jovially.

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face, and her stomach felt like it had rocks. "Severus! Oh, my gods he'll what time is it?"

"It's almost seven. Were you planning on going out again tonight? If not, you can stick around if you like," he said, putting the potions aside to set up for the night. "We're eating late and going to play snaps."

"He's going to be furious. I can't believe it's he's going to kill me or you! I can't believe I'm so late," she stammered, hurriedly shoving things away.

"Just do that Patronus trick," Ron suggested from the doorway. "George, Angie's here. I'm heading for home."

"Right," Hermione and George both said at the same time.

"Now you're channeling him. It's weird seeing you two working together." Ron shook his head and looked at George. "It's like you were with Fred: your heads always close together, sharing private jokes, laughing, cussing at each other, saying the same things at the same time."

She was so nervous her wand shook, making it hard to produce her Patronus. On her second try, her otter form burst from her wand, and she infused it with her voice: *I'm sorry! We got so wrapped up in what we were doing that I completely lost track of time. Forgive me?*

The otter sped out the door just as Angie walked over. "Hermione! Don't tell me he expects you to pull an all nighter?" Angie asked, holding a large covered dish.

"Oi! No. We're done," George said, urging everyone upstairs. "So, what did ya make me, eh?"

"I didn't; I picked this up from your mum. Really, George, you should learn to cook," she said, teasing him.

Hermione was torn between staying and going home or trying to find Severus. But she did not want to go to Malfoy Manor and had no idea if going to his house would be a good idea.

"Oi, Hermione are you staying?" George asked from the foot of the stairs. "If you are, you're welcome to use the bathroom first."

Hermione sighed. "I might as well. I have a change of clothes, but... What if he sends an owl or comes here?"

"Who?" Angie asked as George said, "Well, I'll hold the owl for you, or if Snape shows up, I'll invite him in to wait for you. Either way, come upstairs and get cleaned up."

Hermione agreed, feeling a sense of dread. She was rinsing out her hair when Severus' voice suddenly echoed loudly in the small bathroom, startling her. *I do not like being stood up. Tomorrow at six then. Don't be late.*

After a dinner of roast beef on rolls, George Apparated with Hermione to Grimmauld Place and waited on the pavement until she was inside the house.

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Hermione was reviewing the Moon-Song Spell in the five borrowed books and Luna's diary when Severus arrived unexpectedly at Harry's house. "Nice blue door," she heard him say as he passed Ginny in the entryway.

"Thank you. Hermione's in the kitchen," Ginny said, but by the sound of his boots, he had simply walked on past her. She heard Ginny add, "Nice to see you too, Headmaster!" sarcastically.

"Insolent twit," Severus grumbled. He stopped in the doorway, watching Hermione. "What are you doing? Surely you haven't started memorizing your school books already?"

"Nice to see you too," Hermione said, not bothering to look up from the book she was reading. "What do you want, Severus?"

"To spend the day with my wife," he said, walking into the kitchen and standing directly behind her.

Hermione was so used to the act after six years of it, it hardly fazed her anymore. "I'm busy today," she said while checking the entry of one of Mr. Malfoy's books against Luna's diary once again. It didn't match exactly. The potion wasn't the same. Not only did Luna's only use muslin to separate the potion from the leavings instead of a cheese cloth, the one in Mr. Malfoy's book added laurel glucose and plimpy secretions. *Most likely to create a nice lather in the water*, she thought, writing down the annotation on her parchment.

"I can see that," he said, laying a pair of what looked like gardening gloves next to her. "I was hoping you'd come with me. I have ingredients I need to acquire, and I like to pick my own."

"I can't today," she said, comparing the directions from the other book from Mr. Malfoy to Luna's diary and finding that they didn't match exactly either. The potion called for mountain glacier water instead.

"You are not scheduled to work. I checked," he said smoothly, although a bit coolly, and she looked up at him, not believing that he'd actually checked up on her. "I stopped by the shop first. Weasley said you were not coming in." He looked at the book and his eyes narrowed as he frowned. "What are you reading these for?"

She simply replied, "I wanted to know the truth," as she turned the page, comparing the description for the resulting dreams, which was referred to as 'the magical connection of pre consummation.'

He picked up one of the books, and his frown deepened when he saw what she was researching. "I told you about this spell. I thought we had resolved this."

"I-I wanted to know for sure who was telling me the truth..." she started to say and faltered. "Mr. Malfoy and Mrs. Longbottom lent me these books."

He dropped the book on the table and exhaled sharply. "Oh, of all the idiotic fine!" He grabbed her arm, hauled her to her feet, and dragged her from the kitchen through the house to the Floo. "Potter, I will need some of your Floo Powder. I'm taking my *wife* to Hogwarts."

"Fine, but Hermione, are you all right?" Harry said as Severus literally dragged Hermione past him. "Hey! Don't..."

But Hermione didn't hear the last of Harry's admonishment because Severus had shoved Hermione into the Floo and snatched a handful of powder. "Headmaster's office, Hogwarts."

They landed in the office. She stumbled. He cleaned them off with a few swishes of his wand, grabbed her arm and pulled her along with him out the door, making her stumble and jog to keep up with his long strides. "Severus, this is insane..."

"Yes, it is insane it has been insane since its inception," he snarled as he continued to walk purposefully down the corridor. "What is insane now is that you are questioning me."

"You're hurting me!" she admonished him and tried, unsuccessfully, to wrench her arm free of his grasp.

His fingers tightened on her arm. "Then keep up." He dragged her all the way to the library and along the shelves to the Restricted Section. Madam Pince looked up as they passed. "Don't mind us, Irma. My wife and I have a research project."

Hermione crossed her arms as she watched as Severus scanned the bookshelves, checking the book titles, opening one after another, occasionally handing one to her to hold. A book trolley appeared beside him, but Severus seemed not to notice it. Occasionally, he conjured a marker to place in the book before handing it to her. Many of the books were simply set aside as he went, and a few were stacked onto a pile that floated beside him. One book he opened and marked had the sounds of weeping, another of joyous sighs and whispers. Another one burst into music as he opened it, the music changing as Severus turned the pages. The music was a slow and dreadful requiem on the page he'd placed a marker before shutting it and thrusting it at her.

Finally, he turned and levitated the stack of books to a nearby table. He dropped the books with a loud thud, earning him a glare from Madam Pince, and opened the book on the top of Hermione's stack. Immediately, the music started again. "Read."

Hermione sat down and began to read the section he'd marked, gasping at the fact she was reading about bonding spells a blood binding bonding spell. When she reached the end of the page, he levitated the book and opened another before her. The next one was another type of bonding spell, to lock memories within an object. Severus stood over her a while then moved away, leaving her to continue reading the books. Hermione read the pages he marked in each book carefully, absorbing every word.

After having her read all the pages he'd marked, Severus sat down next her. "The spell you cast, it's what's called a triad spell much like several of these. It's not a potion nor an enchantment or a charm it's all three," he said calmly, lacing his fingers across his middle. "You made a wish the most basic of elemental magic. You said the enchantment, drank a potion, then submerged your body in another potion made from the coagulated leavings, did you not?"

"Yes," she said, unable to meet his eye, but simply stared at his hands.

"The spell was then in effect but still in its open phase, the in-between time between the intent and the affect. The dreams happen when the couple connected by the spell are at rest and are at their most susceptible state to the affects of the spell. They are the evidence that the spell is in the 'casting' phase. If you and I had not consummated the spell if the sun had risen on the day after that full moon before I'd had sex with you the spell would have been broken. Like a miscast spell, the magic would have simply dissipated. However, because of the influence of the spell on me, there wouldn't have been anything I wouldn't have done to get to you. Nothing. There would have been nothing that the Weasleys could have devised to keep us apart. I'm not bragging, Hermione, it's the truth."

Hermione remembered the tales in Mrs. Longbottom's books and the one that played music as she'd read; the Knight errant that rescued his lady fair and claimed her as his.

"Once the spell is consummated that's it. It's as permanent as the Avada Kedavra and as binding." He sat up and gripped the armrest of his chair. "So, read, Hermione. I'll be in my office when you've convinced yourself that I am not lying to you. The password is snips and snails."

~S~

Several of the portraits began to rile at him as soon as he returned to his office. "Severus, what is the meaning of this?" Black snarled.

"You cannot just drag a student into the office..."

"You know the rules! You cannot simply manhandle a student..."

"It's not even the start of school! What is she doing here?"

"That was Miss Granger, wasn't it? Where did you take her?" Whillimena Smytheson asked before leaving her frame.

"The audacity, man!"

"Quiet!" Severus snapped and stopped in front of Dumbledore's portrait.

"Severus, my boy, I assume you have a good reason for bring Miss Granger to Hogwarts so prematurely?" Dumbledore asked.

Severus turned his head slightly, exhaled and looked back up at the ex-Headmaster. "Did I, or didn't I, tell you that Hermione Granger is now Hermione Snape?"

"She is still technically Hermione Granger, although many will address her as Mrs. Snape due to your Bonding. Unless you decide to marry the girl?" the ex-Headmaster said more as a question than a statement.

"Why should I?" Severus asked in return. "Technically she is my Bonded mate, my wife." He turned around to address the other grumbling portraits. "She is in the library reading." He turned back to Dumbledore. "May I have a private word?"

"Of course, I shall await you," Dumbledore said and slipped from his frame.

Severus went upstairs and pressed his thumb on the corner of a painting of a lovely English garden. "Dumbledore, I would speak with you," he said, and the old man stepped onto the grassy green. "I am at my wits end with this girl."

"She is asking questions, prying into your past, and digging into the corners of your life," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Severus exhaled as he clenched his fists. "Yes, she is it's annoying."

"I thought so. My boy, you have lived in the shadows for too long, unable to allow anyone to see you exposed and knowing that even the slightest bit of personal information could have been used against you. You have developed a thick skin, divided your mind into a myriad of chambers and boxes, closed off your emotions to the point that numb feels normal to you what did you expect? Hermione Granger is the opposite of all of this. She is open where you are closed. She is caring and giving where you've had to be guarded and careful. She feels and expresses herself where you haven't allowed yourself that luxury for years. But you are so alike in so many ways even you must see that. I've heard you exalt her for her cleverness, intelligence, and tenacity, if not only in complaint. In time, you two will find a balance. Give this time."

Severus listened to the speech and sighed. "I don't know if I have the patience to raise a little girl into a woman."

Dumbledore laughed. "Severus, if there is one thing I know you have, it's patience. And in case you haven't noticed she's not a little girl anymore. But, alas, like you, she's only known one love before this union. One love that came from someone who was a friend by convenience and circumstances and therefore the relationship happened because of expiations. Do not compare her to Lily, my boy, who only accepted you as far as it was in her gain to do so, not unconditionally and not whole-heartedly. You have a chance to develop that kind of relationship with Hermione Granger."

Severus looked up and scoffed. "You're daft."

"I'm pigment and oils, not daft," Dumbledore teased him. "I suggest you simply let Hermione do things with you that you normally do. Let her be around you, even if it's reading or brewing. Teach her, show her, and see if she doesn't open up to you."

"She has no trouble opening up to me. It's annoying and I'm tired of teaching," Severus admitted. "And I do not compare her to Lily there is no comparison."

The old man gave him a patronizing smile and his eyes sparkled. "And yet they share similar traits. I suggest you then simply discuss things with her that are of your interest. If she is ignorant of facts, then explain them. Let her ask give her answers. Isn't that where you started with Lily?" Dumbledore plucked a rose and inhaled the scent. "Ah, I miss roses. I should have some painted in my frame. Nothing smells so sweet as something you had and lost, only to have it come back to you."

"You're nutters, old man," Severus sneered.

"So I've been told." Dumbledore's gaze turned serious. "Do you still have the ashes?"

Severus looked up and narrowed his eyes. "Yes, you know I do."

"Summon him. He will come to you," the ex-Headmaster insisted.

"I know, on a new moon," Severus reiterated.

"Yes. He came to you before when you needed him, he will come again," Dumbledore said. "Light the ashes and add your tears. Fawkes will return to you."

Severus collapsed into a chair. "It would be good to hear him sing again."

A house-elf immediately arrived.

"A Firewhisky, please," Severus said and slumped into a chair to wait for Hermione.

~H~

It was some hours before Hermione sought him out in his office. She walked up to his desk and picked up a parchmentweight. "Are you ready to go?" Severus asked casually.

"No," she said softly, staring at the patterns in the glass orb, wondering if he'd agree to her request or not, but resolving to try all the same. "I would like to see the Slytherin common room, please."

"What?"

"You heard me," she said, carefully placing the parchmentweight where she'd picked it up, and then looked up at him. "I want to see the Slytherin common room, please."

Severus regarded her a moment, disregarding Headmaster Black's admonishment at her audacity and scolding him as Severus rose from his chair. Silently, he indicated that she walk to the door.

They walked in silence to the dungeons. He stopped in a corridor and opened a door concealed within the stone of the wall. The Slytherin common room was not what she'd expected. Where Gryffindor's common room was round and lit by tall windows, the Slytherin common room was a long, open dungeon room with rough stone walls and what reminded Hermione of alabaster lamps, only green, hanging from chains. Persian rugs covered most of the floor, and an elaborately carved marble fireplace filled one wall surrounded by carved chairs with black leather cushions. Around the room, more of the same type of chair, elegant black leather sofas, and dark wood tables filled the space with sitting areas.

"It's awfully dark down here," she said in awe.

"It's brighter when the fire's lit and the lamps are turned up," he said softly from behind her.

"Where did you hang out when you were here?" she asked, still gazing about the room rather than turn to face him.

He reached around her and pointed to a table against the far wall under one of the magical windows that lined the wall. All the windows showed a view of the lake with over two-thirds of the glass appearing to be submerged like an aquatic display at the zoo or aquarium. Hermione walked over and stood next to the chair, looking out the window at the green murky water. It was eerie. Hermione waited. A shape passed by the glass. "Did you ever see a mermaid?"

"Yes," he said from right behind her.

"What else?" she asked, still mesmerized by the magical window.

He listed off the creatures of the lake.

Hermione turned around. "Would you show me your room," she requested, wanting to see more of the place he'd called home for seven years.

"What is the point of this?" he asked, scowling.

"Please, just show me where you slept," she asked again, looking up at him hopefully while holding onto the back of the chair.

Almost imperceptibly, he shrugged and held up his hand toward the other end of the room. He led her through a door on the left of the fireplace and along a long narrow corridor. He pushed open a door and she walked in. The lamps flared to life, illuminating a long, wide room with two rows of beds, four on one side, three on the other, interspaced with wardrobes and bedside tables. Each four-poster had long, hunter green drapes and multi-green colored quilts. A trunk stand stood at the side of each bed

near the foot. "Which one was yours?"

"That one," Severus said, pointing at the far end of the room. "The last one on your left."

Hermione walked down the row and stopped at his bed, holding onto the bedpost. The wardrobe was smaller than the others and set at an angle in one corner, jammed against the bedside table. A small table was tucked into the opposite corner.

"I used to sit there on my trunk and write on that table or brew potions for my housemates."

Her eyes drank in the loneliness of the space. "Your wardrobe has one door but all the others have two," she observed, surprised by the inequity of the fact.

"I didn't have a lot to put in there," Severus said resolutely. "I rarely unpacked until almost December. Although, by the third week, the elves had washed all my clothes and placed them in the wardrobe anyway, regardless..." He paused as he leaned against the wall and stared at her. "Tell me why you felt compelled to see this?"

"I wanted to see where you lived," she said, fingering the bed already made up for the returning student. "What was your favorite place in the castle?"

Severus stared at the wall for several heartbeats. Hermione had just accepted the fact that he wouldn't answer her when he said, "The library, a hidden nook on the second floor, an archway in the bailey that overlooks the courtyard that was partially hidden by a camellia bush, the potions classroom, and there is an old class room in the east tower. I stopped going to the tower room after my second year, unless I was up early enough before breakfast. It was a bad place to be trapped..."

"Because of Harry's dad and Sirius," Hermione assumed aloud.

"Yes, they would on occasion find me there," he said, his tone becoming harsh. "It was only safe on the mornings after a full moon."

"I know that archway in the bailey; I like sitting there too. I used to go up to the east tower to watch the sunrise on days I woke up early. It is a nice place to read," she admitted, smiling that they had similar retreats. "And of course the library. I love the library here."

"I'm very well aware of that," he said with a smirk. "So, now are you ready to leave?"

"Yes, Severus, I am," she replied, turning to follow him out. "May I ask you one more favor?"

"Depends," he said, eyeing her suspiciously.

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They arrived near the park with a set of rusty swings, two seesaws, and a merry-go-round. "This is the park."

"It apparently hasn't been kept up over the years," she said as she surveyed the dusty grounds, patchy brown grass and the old fashioned swing set, trying to imagine a young Severus and Lily, swinging on the swings and laughing.

"It's the same as it's always been since the factory closed." He took her hand and guided her across the bridge and down Riverbend, through an alleyway and down another street. It didn't look too much different than his street, only narrower and possibly with a few more occupied houses.

As they reached the end of the street, the sound of multiple Apparations broke the silence. "Hurry, down this way," he said, starting to run. Hermione ran as fast as she could to keep up with him. He turned right between two houses, threw his back against the wall of a house, and drew out his wand. She did the same. In less than ten heartbeats, his breathing was slow and normal while she was still breathing heavily and her heart was pounding in her chest. He Disillusioned his head and peered around the corner, then pulled back and leaned against the wall. "Damn."

"What?"

"A few ex-associates," he said, casting his Patronus and infusing it with his voice. 'Millerton Corner, Manchester. One block over from my house. At least three known and wanted. Hermione is with me. Come quickly. I will keep her safe.'

As the vibrations of his voice made the hawk ripple, Hermione heard a gruff voice shout, "He's down there," as if across the street a few houses down. "I saw him and the girl."

"The one he wants?" another asked, yelling back. Hermione heard the heavy, boot-clad footfalls of two men running.

"Yeah," the first one answered.

Severus leaned around the corner, fired off a stunner around the corner, turned back, and pulled her next to him. "We have to move. Follow me and do what I say." He didn't wait for an answer. He stepped out and fired a set of curses. Hermione didn't see anyone in the street until a jet of green hit the corner of the house near her face. Severus pushed her behind him and started backing up to the door of the house. "Hermione, get inside quick," he ordered.

"Why?"

"Stop asking and just do it," he snapped, firing another strong stunner that chipped bricks off a house.

Another shot hit the wall near her head, making her duck and turn while firing off a stunner.

"Get inside now!" he snarled as he cast a quick series of spells.

Hermione lobbed off two Reducto Curses with as much force as she could muster, shattering the wall near where the spells seemed to be coming from.

"Good aim, but move. There are two more of them," he said, fired a curse and ducked a red jet of light. "Damn it, woman, get inside. We are sitting mooncalfs out here!"

Hermione turned and entered the house. Severus quickly followed, shoved her toward the back of the dwelling and out the back door, setting off entrapment curses along the way. "Through the gate," he snapped, shoving her to walk to the fence.

"What?"

"Walk through it," he snarled, practically shoving her forward again and into the wooden fence that gave way as if not there. She found herself standing amongst biting fanged geraniums and strangling ivy. Severus pushed past her, grabbed her hand, and pulled her with him to a door. "Get inside the house." Only once inside did Severus relax. "Once I have word, I'll come back. But stay here."

She was fuming mad by his chastisement, his treatment, and his innuendo that she was a helpless female that needed protecting. "No, I can..."

"Hermione, they are after you!" Severus snarled as he whirled to face her, his face contorted with anger. "Do you understand? YOU are the target! This house is protected with every spell I know. Now, please! Stay here." And with that he left the house, slamming the door behind him.

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Hermione had been in Severus' house for over an hour, waiting for word. She had gone to the sitting room, found a book, and had tried to read, all the while wondering what, if anything, was going on. Severus had returned with Kingsley, and both men had insisted on escorting her home, but neither of them had answered her questions about what had happened. Harry had been waiting on the front step when they'd arrived. Severus grabbed her arm and forced her to go inside quickly, followed by Kingsley. They had wanted her to go upstairs, but she'd refused, wanting to know what had happened and what was going on.

"One of the attackers is dead from a blast. We dug him out from under a pile of bricks," Kingsley told her. Hermione blanched, realizing that she'd killed one of the Death Eaters with her Reducto Curse. She staggered against the wall, and Severus reached out to steady her, holding her even after she'd said she was 'fine.'

"The second one was picked up a few blocks away, seriously injured, and placed under guard at St. Mungo's," he continued as if reporting the news, which made it easier to hear, even though she was feeling nauseous over killing someone.

"The third wizard got away. From what we've gathered by the blood evidence, Severus wounded him severely enough that he hadn't been able to Apparate. There is enough trace of the third wizard for the Aurors to follow, but how he's eluding them is still a mystery." Kingsley turned to look at Severus. "I had planned on going to St. Mungo's immediately after dropping Hermione off here to question the Death Eater in custody. I'd appreciate you coming, if you don't mind?"

"Let me see to my wife first, and I'll join you there," Severus stated. Kingsley motioned for Harry to step outside with him. "Hermione, are you all right?" Severus asked.

"I'm fine," she lied. "I just killed someone. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Don't be cheeky with me," he said a bit curtly, but clearly concerned about her. "Hermione, it was you or him. Personally, I am glad it was him and not you."

She leaned against the wall and hung her head, willing herself not to cry or throw up.

"Hermione, go upstairs and take a bath or go lie down," he suggested softly. "I'll ask Potter to make you some tea. Would you like that?"

"No," she sighed, not sure what she wanted.

"You've had a shock, you're upset. Take a bath and relax. I'll go home and get some Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep Potions," he suggested adamantly.

"I have those," Harry said, entering the house again. "Hermione, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Harry," she said, refusing to look up.

Harry walked over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder, ignoring Severus' glare. "Hermione, it's like when we were in the castle during the war shoot first and ask after. You were only defending yourself."

"I killed someone. I didn't even see him, and I killed him," she said in a hushed, guilt-choked voice.

"I know," Harry replied patiently.

"Hermione..." Severus said, but she closed her eyes and hung her head agian. The day had been nice, all things considered, just before the fight in the street ruined everything.

"Go take a bath, and I'll have Kreacher bring you something," Harry persisted, gently and affectionately rubbing her arm.

"Hermione?" Severus asked, but she didn't want to talk about it. They were right; a bath would be good. That and a bottle of Ogden's.

She started for the stairs, stopping to say goodnight to Severus, but he was already gone.

Harry still tried insisting that she take some Calming Draught, which she'd accepted, but never took.

After her bath, she had a light dinner with Ginny and Harry before taking her tea and going to bed.

Hermione had slept in late, only then realizing that Harry had spiked her tea the night before with the Dreamless Sleep. Hermione rose, feeling groggy as if she'd overindulged on Firewhisky the night before. She owled George to tell him she'd be late to work and went to the bathroom to wake up in a cold shower.

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*Author's notes:*  
  
*Just a stroll down Severus memory lane...*  
  
*I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much. Shug, I hope all is going well for you, doll. You're in my prayers.*  
  
*Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

# Burgeoning Intimacies

Chapter 26 of 63

Hermione and Severus have another date, but things go far differently than either of them imagined.



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## Burgeoning Intimacies

~H~

Hermione had curled up in a ball and cried in the shower, letting the water carry away her tears. She had no idea why the death of an unseen and unknown wizard had affected her so deeply when she'd fought in a war only months before, but it had. It also mattered that she'd killed him, unintentionally. All she'd done was make a quick flick of her wand that sent a jet of light in the direction she'd wanted, and then she'd turned to duck as the wall she'd aimed for had exploded, just as she'd expected it to. She'd done the same during the battles at Hogwarts, first in her sixth year and again when she'd followed Harry back to the castle to face Voldemort. Flick her wrist while saying the incantation, duck, turn, and run without a backward glance. The pulse of her spell had flown through her, down her arm and out of her wand tip. Then she'd ducked and turned so as not to be hit. Repeat. And repeat again, just as her war-honed instincts directed her. She had never given it any thought before. Never had stopped to think how many people had died by her wand.

When Ginny had knocked on the door asking if she was all right, Hermione had pulled herself together enough to answer, yes. She was fine. Be out in a minute. She'd dressed and had managed to eat a few bites of toast for breakfast. Ginny had tried to get her to stay in the house, but Hermione needed to be busy, to focus on anything else other than the wizard she'd killed. The countless unknown others she didn't know about. Harry had understood. He had laid a hand on her back, his eyes looking at her knowingly.

Still, he'd insisted on escorting Hermione to work in the morning. There had been two Aurors sitting at the café across from the shop for most of the day, but other than that, her day had seemed rather normal.

Hermione had buried herself in making as many of the shop's products as she and George could, up in his sitting room. Ron had been sulking in the back room downstairs for most of the morning, but by noon, he'd at least started acting like his old self. Harry showed up with fish and chips at lunch, and he'd hung out with Ron in the shop afterwards for a few hours. Before he'd left, Harry came back up to the flat to tell Hermione he'd see her at the house, asking her again if she was all right. She was fine, putting it behind her and trying to forget. She appreciated his concern, but she was coping with the events of the attack, chalking it up to an extension of the war. That, and Severus was right: it had been down to either them or her, and she had been only defending herself and Severus. As long as she had kept saying that, she'd been able to force herself to believe it.

For Hermione, the day had gone by quickly. Thankfully, George had understood as well, keeping her busy and giving her little time to mull over the events of the previous night. She and George were working well together now, nearly flawlessly, and were able to keep up production to meet the demands of the shop. They were sitting knee to knee, crossed-legged on the floor with a cauldron between them, filling quills with his charmed yellow Glitter and Stars Ink. The Spittle Quills in both primary and secondary colors were a favorite item among young girls, especially the ones in the house colors.

Suddenly, George laid a hand on Hermione's wrist. "I think we should be stopping for the day," he insisted, laughing lightly. "It's late, almost dinnertime. Angie is due any minute, and if she sees you and me like this, she's is going to think I'm cheating on her." His eyes sparkled, showing his jovial mood.

Hermione blanched. "Severus! Oh, my, gods – what time is it?"

"It's after six – I know, time got away from me too," he said, rising to his feet and offering her a hand up. "Angie was going to come over at five-thirty, but she must be running late, too. You can stick around if you like."

"No, I can't! Not tonight!" Hermione rushed down to the shop and quickly scratched out a note to Severus, pleading with him not to be mad at her for losing track of time and begging him to understand. "He's going to be furious," she mumbled.

"Just send him a Patronus again," Ron suggested, walking into the back room with his arms full of owl deliveries.

Just like before, she was so nervous that it took two tries to make her otter form. She infused it with her voice: *I'm sorry! We were working, and I lost track of time again. Please don't be mad at me!*

The otter sped out the door just as Angie arrived. "Hermione! Are you joining us for dinner?" she asked, handing George a large covered dish.

"Nope, hot date tonight," George teased, giving Angie a kiss on the cheek. "Ron's staying though. You did make enough, right?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, no. I wish I could, but I can't." She tried to ease by everyone standing in the doorway so she could collect her things and get home in time to meet Severus.

"C'mon," Angie said, following her toward the back room but stopping at the door. "I have a new idea for the Decoy Detonators I want to bounce off you."

"I really haven't time. Maybe tell George, and then he can relay it to me," she suggested, stacking her books and journals. Severus' Patronus sailed into the shop, his smooth voice making Hermione hold her breath. *'Reservations are for seven thirty. I shall pick you up promptly at seven fifteen. Don't be late.'*

Hermione slowly exhaled as the silvery hawk vanished. The message was so calm, softly spoken, brief, and to the point that it didn't indicate to her if he was angry or not. She decided not to chance discussing anything now and risk being late for their date.

"I was only going to suggest that maybe you could combine the Sparkler Balls to the Detonators, or possibly the Peruvian Darkness Powder," Angie said as Hermione picked up her purse.



"That's not bad idea. It would've come in really handy last year," Hermione said.

"Already tried the darkness powder – doesn't work – counteracts the spells," George replied.

"Not if we put the powder in a timed-release capsule or a sound activated capsule on the detonator, not actually part of it," Hermione suggested, her mind already devising the best way to go about the alterations as she slid a journal in her purse.

George grinned at her then turned to Angie. "See why I love her so? What a mind!"

"Nice to know who my competition is," Angie said, laughing as she took the casserole from him and walked up the stairs to his flat.

"Well, I have to see my daytime girl home," he shouted up the stairs. "I'll be right back." He turned and indicated that Hermione use the Floo.

"Can't. I have to pick something up from The Old Candle bookshop," Hermione said, turning for the door. "Mr. Carmichael sent me a note at lunch that he'd found the book I wanted."

George escorted Hermione to the bookshop, then walked her to the Apparation site. They Apparated Side-Along to Grimmauld Place, and he waited on the pavement until she was inside the house before Disapparating for home.

~S~

Severus checked the time on the mantel in the drawing room. He was on time; she was running late. He hated waiting for women to primp. He smirked at the thundering clomps Hermione made while running down the stairs and scoffed as she came to a halt, then proceeded in a more dignified manner. When she appeared, he was momentarily stunned by her appearance, but quickly recovered. "Are you ready?" he asked.

She greeted him with a nod and walked past him into the foyer. She had braided her hair loosely, from the crown of her head down, with tendrils of curls at her temples, ears, and neck. The fabric of her dress clung enticingly to her body, though the fullness of the skirt swished around her legs. The neckline was low, but not too low, hinting without revealing too much of her cleavage, but a good portion of her back was bare. It was neither blue nor green, but a combination of both. The colors changed as she moved, which enhanced the sway of her hips and emphasized her waist. He wondered where she'd purchased such a dress and shook his head, realizing that it was a Madam Malkin fabric and design. He noticed she was wearing a perfume that smelled of both soft spices and bergamot. He inhaled the scent as he took her arm to Apparate them to their destination.

The small, quaint Italian restaurant was very busy, and the lobby area was already full of customers. When Narcissa had suggested the place, he had known that it was exclusive, although reasonable. She'd assured him that she'd made the reservations for him before he'd left. Severus was glad because between his interrogations with the Death Eater, Steele, and then his meetings with Kingsley and the Aurors, it had escaped his mind.

"Name?" the Maitre d' asked.

"Severus Snape, party of two," he said, wondering just how long he'd have to wait. The Chicken Marsala was excellent here, and he didn't want to have to go somewhere else. The restaurant was famous for its magical frescos, depicting many areas of Italy, its delicious food, and fine wines. He noticed that Hermione was getting a lot of attention, mostly from the men, and he stepped closer to her, placing his hand on the curve of her back. The fabric of her dress was soft and incredibly silky under his fingers, and he resisted running his hand over her.

"Yes, sir, the Positano niche at seven thirty. Right this way," the Maitre d' said.

Severus managed to control his surprise and indicated for Hermione to follow the Maitre d'. Several wizards in the place turned their heads as Hermione walked by, but she seemed ignorant of the attention her dress was causing. Their table was in a slight alcove next to a vine-covered pillar with a scenic fresco on the wall of Positano, Italy.

As Hermione sat down and turned to look around, Severus took the opportunity to study her face in the soft illumination of the restaurant. When the waiter came, Severus suggested the Chicken Marsala, which Hermione decided to try, and he asked for the wine Lucius had suggested. Hermione was unnaturally quiet as they waited.

"So what did you do today?" she finally asked.

Severus scowled slightly. "I had appointments for most of the day."

"With whom, if I may ask?" she asked, sitting primly with her hands in her lap.

"With the Minister. Hermione, I'm not one for small talk," he said, hoping she'd find another topic. He didn't want to tell her he'd spent the day with Kingsley and four Aurors trying to track down the third assailant. They'd found two rogue Voldemort sympathizers who had apparently taken the wizard in last night, and another ex-Death Eater, but not the wizard Severus had sliced in the fight.

"I'm just trying to have a conversation," she said, obviously unhappy with his response. After a long pause, she looked directly at him. "If you won't open up to me, how am I to get to know you?"

"Open up to you?" he asked, startled by her question. "In what way have I not opened up to you?"

"In every way," she said as the waiter arrived with their wine. Hermione waited patiently until the waiter walked away. "You're a closed book. Sure, you tell me bits and pieces, but I have to drag it out of you. You don't let me in. I don't know you at all – except as my ex-Professor. When you do talk to me of your past, all you do is drudge up the worst memories. I want to know at least something about you. Why are you so evasive?"

"What do you want to know?" he asked, sitting back, his fingers caressing the stem of his wine glass.

"Everything. Anything. Well, for starters, do you have any relatives? I know your father was a Muggle; what did he do? What was your mother like? Do you have any brothers or sisters? What aspects of school did you *like*? What *do* you like? You never talk about yourself, and it's like pulling teeth to learn what, if anything, we share in common."

"I could give you a list. I like books. I like reading about all aspects, practices, and disciplines of magic. I like brewing Potions, creating magic with the delicate balance of the ingredients," he said and stopped. He had no idea what else they shared in common.

"That's a start I suppose," she said. "What else do you like? What hobbies do you have?"

His glass froze mid way to his mouth. "Hobbies? Are you kidding me?"

"Don't be like that! Just talk to me," she said, leaning back slightly to allow the waiter to set down her plate. She picked up her fork. "Haven't you ever had anyone you were interested in getting to know? Wasn't there anyone who wanted to get to know you? Don't you understand the concept?"

He sat staring at her not believing what she was babbling about. "No," he said, finally. "Most of my friends I met in school or through... other activities. Most accepted me as I am or by my actions, few through my associations – most often because of my associations."

"What about women?" she asked, obviously hedging again.

He huffed at her statement. "Women. Oh, yes, I'm a babe magnet."

Hermione sighed. "That's not what I meant. I know you had a close friendship with Harry's mum, and I'm not prying there, but you must have opened up to her."

"I was ten," he replied. He took a bite of his chicken, wanting to savor the delicate flavors of the sauce.

"So, how did you become friends with her?" Hermione asked. She was watching him as she took a bite of her pasta side dish.

"I told her she was a witch," Severus said, watching as she licked a tiny bit of marinara sauce from the corner of her lips. "We started with that." He took a bite of his pasta, realizing that Hermione was watching him, waiting for a more complete answer. "We were kids from the same neighborhood – I'm not talking about my relationship with Lily."

Hermione tilted her head, her forehead creased slightly in thought. "Then tell me three things about your childhood. Three things you remember that were *ice*."

He set down his fork. *Was she kidding?* "There's not much to tell you then."

"Severus," she pleaded.

"You first," he said, hoping to divert her.

"No! You first," she insisted. "I don't see why you can't come up with any happy memories. Everyone has at least a few happy memories of their childhood."

His eyes narrowed. *You want to bet?* "You already know one," he said a bit too curtly.

Hermione nodded. "The pier. That doesn't count as one of your three; I already know about that one."

He shifted in his seat.

Hermione waited.

He did remember one that was benign enough. "My mum made a salve – for cuts and scrapes. The other women used to buy it from her. She would take the money, and we'd walk to the Fish n' Chippy for lunch..."

Hermione ate a few bites, watching him expectantly.

Severus looked at her and took a deep breath, exhaling loudly. "We used to walk back along the river to her favorite tree and eat our lunch in the shade. She would then tell me stories. Okay."

"Okay," she said, taking a bite of her dinner. "What stories?"

"She used to make them up," he stated, hoping that was enough.

"Now, was that hard?" she asked.

"Yes," he snapped without the vinegar he used to have. "I suppose you want another one." Hermione nodded, and he grunted softly. "When I was eight, I liked to make leaves fly. I used to fashion leaves and sticks into airplanes with string and make them fly. Once my dad caught me at it and..." He paused, didn't want to finish that part of the story. His gaze wandered to the wall and back as Hermione waited. "That year, for my birthday, my parents gave me a wooden glider, one of the cheap ones made from balsa wood that you put together. I used to make it fly." He looked at her. "I broke it once, and Mum repaired it." Once again his expression became guarded.

"Did you ever play with boats?" she asked, setting down her wine glass.

This was getting annoying. "No, we didn't have that kind of money – look, Hermione you might as well know. We were poor. My dad worked in the factory until it closed. He couldn't find work. He drank a lot and eventually got sick. Mum started doing laundry and light cleaning for some families that lived across the bridge. Dad hated her working." He forced himself to relax. "That's three."

"Well, that's two out of three," she said, her eyebrows rising as she smiled at him. "You said you made planes, I just wondered if you ever made boats from sticks and leaves or branches? You did say you played by the river."

"I didn't play in the river, only next to it, and no, I didn't make boats. I did on occasion drop leaves from the bridge to watch them float away, and there was a tree I liked to climb," he said, hoping that satisfied her.

Hermione smiled, and he was glad that she seemed appeased.

"Okay, now tell me three things you like the flavor of?"

"Is this a game?" he asked, aware that this was not going to be a nice quiet dinner after all.

"No. You won't tell me anything, so I'm asking," she said stubbornly.

He named the first three things that came into his head without considering if they were his favorite things or not. "Vanilla ice cream. Brandy. Strawberries – the fruit – not flavored stuff." He smirked at her. "Your turn."

Unlike him, Hermione actually looked like she was considering her answers. "Chocolate, anything chocolate... hot apple cider with cinnamon sticks, and... vegetables cooked on the grill." She smiled and toyed with her fork. "Okay, did you..."

"Enough," he snapped softly.

"This getting to tough for you?" she asked as if unaware that her questions were driving him nuts.

He scowled at her. "I don't like games."

She dropped her fork, making it clatter. "Then talk to me. Tell me something. Tell me about your school years, anything, but tell me something!"

"I think we should go," he said.

Hermione sighed, obviously feeling defeated. "No, you haven't finished your dinner." She sounded dejected.

"Hermione, there's not that much that was good about my childhood. I really don't want to discuss my years at school, and I will not give you the gory details about my years as a Death Eater. Most of that I want to forget. Besides, you know too much about that already." They ate in relative silence for a while. "I'm sorry. I don't like talking about my past."

"I suppose I can understand your reluctance," she replied.

"Tell me about yours," he suggested. He hadn't expected her to answer, but she did. By the time they'd finished, he knew that her parents were dentists, and her mother had joined her father's practice after working for the free clinic. Her dad had helped her make kites, bought her dolls, fixed up an old antique doll house for her, and had taught her to read. Her mum baked bran muffins, made her eat all her vegetables, and taught her how to cook. Her grandparents had taken her to museums and to plays. Her grandfather loved history and had told her about his tour in Italy during the war. Her grandmother had taught her how to knit. Hermione had a bike, a cat, and a dog, but the cat had died before she'd started school, and the dog had stayed home with her mum. She liked to ride horses, flossed regularly, loved the zoo and the seashore, and read anything she could get her hands on. "I just like knowing things."

He dropped some money on the table and rose to go. He was amazed at how easily she opened up to him. He knew he couldn't do it as easily in return.

Out on the street Hermione tried again. "Tell me about Albert Waltham."

Severus looked at her in surprise. "Where did you...? My trial." He looked ahead, as they walked. "He was a Healer I apprenticed under. I have always been rather adept at Potions, and I wanted to pursue a career as a Brewer..."

~S~

Severus watched her Apparate for Grimmauld Place and felt a sense of relief. The only problem was that little nagging bit in his mind that he couldn't push away. He had wanted to kiss her all day, to unzip her dress so he could feel her skin under his hands, and the thought was still nudging away at him. And he was still stiff from his physical reaction to her kiss goodnight. She had even moaned when he'd held her and deepened the kiss. *Bugger!*

He felt like he had to go for a walk and clear his head. He needed the peace of a garden and the solitude of the night... Severus opened his door and casually strolled down the street, turning for the river that ran through the town.

He stopped and shook his head. Living at the Manor had obviously gotten to him.

He decided to go to Grimmauld Place and apologize for... snapping at her, he supposed. For getting angry with her for digging into his past when all she was trying to do was find something to talk about. Mostly, he just wanted to kiss her and bring her back home.

~H~

Hermione Apparated to Grimmauld Place and stopped to look at the architecture of the houses on either side of Harry's. The Georgian terraced house that Harry owned still had the antique handrails, elaborate ironwork that decorated the lower third of the windows, and the sculpted brickwork of the era of which the house was built, unlike the neighboring houses that had been updated and remodeled with new windows and window boxes.

She looked at the door, which Ginny had painted blue, the new steps with the wider top landing, and hesitated. She wasn't ready yet to face questions about her date with Severus.

She turned and walked slowly down the street, looking at the various potted plants, and headed to the gated private park a few blocks away, thinking about everything Severus had told her today. Just like before, he'd made his childhood sound so horrible, and yet Harry had told her about of what he'd seen in the Pensive: meeting Lily in the park and sitting with Lily under a tree on the riverbank. *There had to have been good memories in his life, something worth remembering. At least something – some happy moments.*

Hermione opened the gate with a tiny flick of her wand and pulled an ivy leaf off the gatepost as she entered the private garden. She twirled it in her fingers as she walked.

There was so much hurt in him, so much pain, so much sorrow, and so much he wanted to forget. She knew from talking to Harry about the Dursleys that abusive parents left scars on their children, scars that Severus carried deeply. He was starting to actually open up to her and answer her questions, albeit reluctantly, with minimal sneering or snapping at her or calling her a silly girl. Still, he'd only opened up so much, revealed little, and it was obviously difficult for him to do so. Nevertheless, the time they had spent together the day before and this evening had been enlightening.

~S~

Severus arrived in front of Grimmauld Place and immediately knew that she was not inside. But he could feel her, just not from inside the house. He turned and looked both ways down the street, not surprised when he didn't see her. He closed his eyes, trying to fathom where she might have gone. He turned and started walking down the street.

He instantly had the feeling that he was going the wrong way. He stopped and tried to listen to his inner voice *Yes. She is near – but behind me.* He turned around. He shoved his hands in his pockets to appear causal to any possible observer and continued walking quickly, but not too hurriedly as to attract attention, knowing that he was indeed getting closer to her.

Severus stopped on the pavement next to an iron gate in an ivy-covered wall that apparently led to a private park or someone's garden. Hermione was in there; he knew it. The gate was locked, which didn't deter him from opening it anyway. He slipped inside, scanning the park for Hermione. The grassy landscape had rolling mounds, lush trees, benches, bushes... all great for concealment or lying in wait. The hairs on the back of his neck began to rise. Danger. Unseen. Lurking. He looked around. *Nothing.* He moved cautiously, staying off the path, his wand drawn ready for anything. He saw her heading for the gate on the path beside a manmade stream, and several yards behind her was a man in a long black coat...

~H~

Hermione looked up and realized that the light was fading. She usually didn't stay out this late, and she knew that Harry would berate her for it. She turned and followed the path in the direction of the gate, still sorting everything out in her mind.

The bonding spells Severus had selected for her to read in the library had been enlightening. The ones he'd marked for her had all been triad spells like the Moon Song Spell. The books he'd selected were mostly Dark Arts spells, entrapments, and curses. Most were designed to last for life – either the life of the caster or that of the victim. Most bonding spells bound the magical core of the individual to that of the targeted person or object. There were also a few books on plight spells and betrothal charms that explained their magic and fervent nature of the spell on those effected, as well as the consequences of consummating the spell. Everything Severus had told her had been true. She and he were Bonded. *Till death do us part* At least he wasn't being as horrible toward her as he had been in the beginning *Actually, for Severus Snape, he is being down right nice, mostly.* She resolved to try making this relationship work, too.

She didn't see either of the shadowed figures that followed her through the garden toward the gate.

~S~

He wouldn't get to her first. The other man was much closer to her – too close in fact. He recognized the man as Dragen, Dolohov's cousin. Severus quickly Disapparated, coming out on the path directly next to Hermione. She had apparently turned the moment she'd heard the crack of his Disapparation, drawn her wand, and fired a spell at the place where Severus had been. Dragen now had his wand out, taking aim, and she turned, flicking her wrist to stun her attacker with a quick defensive response.

But Severus' protective instincts took hold, and he immediately grasped Hermione around the waist, pulling her to him as the sickly lime-colored jet of light of the attacker's curse whizzed by him, and he fired a Stunning Hex as well. She protested in alarm, but he hissed at her to remain focused. Hermione quickly cast a Shield Charm, which

now protected them both, just before Dragen fired another curse. The lime-green light hit her shield with a force that nearly broke through, and Severus fired another Stunning Hex at Dragen.

Dragen blocked Severus' hex and quickly took aim again. "*Avarda Kedav*—" Dragen shouted as Severus turned, his arm snaking about Hermione's waist, and cast his Sectumsempra, making Hermione lose her footing as her spell shot out into the bushes. He heard the man scream as he continued the turn and Apparated, taking Hermione with him.

Hermione stumbled the moment they arrived in his sitting room, and he gripped her tightly to help her stand. "Are you all right?" he asked, holding her against a bookshelf with one hand to steady her on her legs as he checked her body for any sign of the curse making contact. She was still alive, so the curse didn't hit squarely, but it could have hit an appendage, effectively killing the limb.

She was shaking, white as a sheet, and unsteady on her feet, even with him holding her up. "No, no, I'm fine," she said as he ran a hand down her leg.

"You can feel my hand?" he asked, finally assured that she was actually standing on her own.

"Yes, of course I can feel your hand," she said, her voice still shaky.

He stood and checked her arms, holding her hands in his, relieved that she was unharmed. "No pain? You weren't hit?"

She shook her head.

He grasped her shoulders, holding her at arm's length. "What were you doing wandering around that neighborhood alone? You could've been killed!" he snarled at her for being so careless and inattentive.

She looked up at him defiantly, her hands on her hips. "It's a good neighborhood, Severus. Old wealthy families and that..."

"The Death Eaters know where Potter lives!" he exclaimed, cutting her off. "Even though they can't see the house—they know where it is! You took Yaxley there, remember?"

Hermione opened and closed her mouth, then looked at the floor, abashed.

"Oh, good, so you remember," he said, scowling at her thoughtlessness. He swept a hand through his hair. "Good Merlin, woman, don't you *evathink*? I know you're bloody intelligent, but you never *use* it unless you're quoting something!" She was still looking down at the floor, and he wanted to grab her and shake her... and hold her in his arms.

She looked up at him with wide eyes. "You think I'm intelligent?" she asked, astounded.

"Yes, but that's not the point," he hissed. "You damn well know you're intelligent – you just don't *think*!" His one arm fell to his side, although his hand was still clenched tightly, as he raised the other in a broad sweeping motion. "You do realize that there are still Death Eaters and the Dark Lord's supporters out there that haven't been caught, right? Or did you think last night was just some random attack? One of them escaped! Mother of Merlin, you could have been killed just now!" He looked at the wall and back to her startled face.

"That would've solved this for you nicely, wouldn't it?" she said, turning to face the fireplace.

Severus growled and turned in the opposite direction, wanting to slam his fists in the wall.

"Well, you don't have to be so angry about it."

He turned to look at her, still seething at her serious lack of judgment and her accusation.

She hugged herself and hung her head. "I'm fine. Thank you for being... by the way, why were you there?" she asked, turning to look at him.

"I went to Potter's house to see you, and you weren't there. So I... I knew you had gone for a walk, and I was concerned." He kept his gaze on the confused crease between her eyebrows so he didn't have to actually look into her eyes. "You're welcome."

"Thank you, but I could have handled him," she said, a little angry at him for scaring her like he did.

"You didn't even *see* him until it was too late," Severus pointed out in his professor's voice while raising his hand to point at the window.

She crossed her arms. "I heard him Apparate," she snapped. "I almost hit him."

Severus scowled at her, not believing what she'd just said. "That was *me* Disapparating to get to you first."

Her eyes narrowed, "But I only heard one crack, then there was another and you arrived..."

"I was too far away. He was moving in on you so I Apparated..." He didn't feel like rehashing the evening play-by-play. "Bloody, hell, woman, just take my word for it."

"Fine, yes, I am an idiot, and I wasn't being vigilant. I'm sorry. Thank you for saving me. I suppose I should go now," she said with a sigh and lowered her head.

"No," he said, his tone a bit more strained than he'd have liked.

"No?" she asked, looking up at him.

He moved forward and stood before her. He wanted to hold her, gently stroke her hair, but his hands reminded at his side. "Stay with me."

Hermione turned her head. "I'm not ready for this, Severus."

"Ready for what?" Severus wondered what the real reason was, why she shied away from him. "All I'm asking is that you stay with me for a while." He could see the uncertainty in her eyes, and a little fear. "What are you afraid I'll do?"

She looked at him, the look of contemplative thought faded from her eyes to one of resolution. "Okay, I'll stay a while longer."

He wanted to ask how long, but refrained. He'd won a victory, a small one, but one he'd accept. The problem was he wasn't tired. His adrenaline still coursed through him, making him feel like a live wire, and he wasn't going to take her upstairs with him, only to lie awake in bed and feel her lying next to him. So, he walked over to the bookshelf and withdrew his copy of the book she'd been reading in the bookshop. "I believe you were interested in this one. It was my mother's, and she gave it to me when I started Hogwarts. There are annotations and scribbling in the margins, a habit I picked up from her. Ignore them."

"Thank you," she said, handling the book with wide-eyed amazement as if he'd handed her a treasure.

He simply grunted an acknowledgement and picked up his own book before settling on the sofa. Hermione sat in front of him, kicked off her shoes and tucked one foot under her. The pose exposed nearly an half of her leg to his view, but he tried to ignore it. After a while, he got up to stoke the fire, adding another Ever-last log in the

grate. Hermione stifled a yawn as she turned a page. They read in comfortable silence, which surprised him. He'd never been this relaxed with a woman before. Hermione tried suppressing another yawn. Severus looked up and smirked. "Getting sleepy?"

"Ah, no," she said with a smile and returned to her book. A little while later she was yawning again.

"Hermione, if you're sleepy, we can turn in."

"No, I'm fine," she replied.

This conversation repeated at least two more times before he stood up. "Well, I am."

"Then I should go," she said, laying her hand on the book as if loath to close it.

"I don't want you to go," he admitted, hoping he didn't sound like a sap. He was tired. After the day he'd had, he just wanted her company. He turned to reshel his book on the shelf next to her and reached out a hand to take hers.

Hermione turned her face away, blushing. "I'm not ready for this..."

"What are you afraid of? That I'll force you? That is what you think, isn't it?" He stood back, angry at the look in her eyes. "What do you think I am – a rapist? I've never raped anyone... fine." He turned his head, crossed his arms and glared at the fire.

She didn't leave.

But then, she didn't move either.

He was torn. He really wanted her to stay, just to be here with him, but he knew that she still didn't know what she wanted just by her hesitation and the way she was looking around the room and at him. He sighed and his shoulders relaxed. "I wouldn't do anything you didn't want to."

"I can't stay. I didn't bring anything with me. I don't have my toothbrush, shampoo... a change of clothes."

"I'll make you some – or you can use mine. I'll conjure you a toothbrush. I do have toothpaste. You can borrow a shirt." They stared at each before she looked away.

She shifted, her gaze sweeping the room and back to him repeatedly, her gaze dropping to the floor each time their eyes met. He tried to tip her face up so he could kiss her, hoping to change her mind, but she wouldn't look at him – not in the eye. She was obviously nervous. He decided to take the chance and try to convince her. "If you don't want to, we won't. I won't beg – but I want you, but only if you want it too. I do want you to stay with me."

"Do you mean that?" she asked, seemingly to finally be deciding in his favor. "I don't have to if I don't want to?"

He dropped his hand. "Yes. Bloody hell, woman, I am not some rutting teenager! I can bloody well control myself," he started to say with a snarl, then controlled his anger. "Yes, if you don't... Oh, for Merlin's sake. Sex is supposed to be consensual."

She stood, walked over to the bookshelf and replaced the book. She stood staring at the shelf, then turned and walked back to him. "Harry will worry if I don't show up."

He sighed in exasperation. "You do know how to send messages through your Patronus, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I can." Hermione smiled, turned and cast her Patronus, holding the silvery otter in front of her: *'Harry, I'm fine. I am going to stay the night here at Severus' tonight,'* she thought clearly, seeing the vibration of her words rippling in the Patronus. She flicked her wand, sending it on its way. She stared at the wall where the otter had vanished, then turned to face Severus.

He held out this hand, and she walked over to him, although she didn't take the proffered hand. He shrugged and opened the door for her. She hesitated, and he turned and led the way to the bedroom.

~H~

Lucius Malfoy's words echoed in Hermione's mind as she followed him upstairs. Just like the day before, the evening had been one with both good times and bad, a few lows, but overall not all bad. Well, if she disregarded the attacks on her life, that is. Why they were after her and not Harry confused her, but she didn't want to dwell on it tonight. She was too tired, and she'd only cry if she did. It was as if the war was still raging on for her, even though she wanted desperately to start living a normal life.

When she entered the room, the first thing she noticed was that the smell was gone.

Secondly, the bed hangings, covers, and drapes had obviously been thoroughly washed.

The next thing that caught her eye made her giggle. The mattress on the bed looked like he'd inflated it, and the pillows and down comforter looked as if he'd restuffed them with new down. Hermione sat on the bed and felt herself sink in a little, but the mattress underneath was much firmer than she'd expected.

"You said it was too flat and lumpy. I'm not sure how I did on the lumps, but it is fuller and softer," he said softly, watching her reaction near the doorway.

She fell back, gazing up at the canopy as she tested the mattress. It felt like she was lying on a cloud. "It's much better."

"I'm used to firmer," he admitted.

She sat up. "How firm?"

"I don't know, firm." He walked over to his wardrobe and pulled out a shirt and pajama bottoms, handing them over to her. The wardrobe had been changed somehow, but she couldn't put her finger on what was different about it. "I'll change in the loo," he said and disappeared quickly. She sat and waited for him to return.

Severus entered the room in a pair of pajamas. Hermione was momentarily taken aback by his bare chest. "I don't sleep in much. I made you this," he said, handing her a toothbrush, then turned to look out the door as if deciding whether to close it or not. "My toothpaste is on the counter with a bar of soap and a flannel. I can make you a brush, unless you use a comb?" He turned to look at her. "Maybe you could make your own. Do you know how?"

"No, I don't know the spell," she said, surprised again at his thoughtfulness.

"Effingo Inflecto. There is an old comb of mine, change that one. It's on the counter. You make a circle over the comb while holding the image of what you want in your mind. You'll have to maintain the spell until you achieve what you want," he explained. "To modulate or alter the shape, add Inflectere Vocem, with your spell. Do you know how to layer spells?"

"Yes," she said with a nod.

"If you want to bathe, the tub is larger than it looks. I don't have that girly stuff, only shampoo," he said with a flick of his hand.

Hermione smiled. "I only washed my hair every other day at school and less than that when we were camping. I can braid it and it will be fine," she said, thinking that she

could wash it the next morning at home before going to work. Severus nodded and Hermione excused herself for the loo.

~S~

Severus watched her go and turned to the wardrobe, thinking he might consider wearing a shirt to sleep in. After choosing an old T-shirt, he closed the doors and turned the bed down with a wave of his hand. He sat on the bed, got up, then sat again. She seemed to be taking an extraordinary long time with her bedtime preparations. Scoffing at himself, he remembered that he forgot to tell her that the faucets were backwards. She'd have to turn the cold knob for the hot water, which never really got that hot, and vice-versa.

Severus finally settled on the bed and started to read a book from his bedside table. When Hermione entered the room, he was glad he had something in his hands to cling to. She had shrunken the pajama bottoms to fit her and left the pajama shirt alone. The 'V' of the neckline was dipping down between her breasts, although the hem was well past her bum, but the overall effect was too sexy. She had braided her hair, and she looked adorable, although very much like a young girl with a woman's body. As she climbed in beside him, Severus set the book on the table to turn his gaze away and extinguished the lights as Hermione laid her wand on the bedside table next to her.

He lay in the dark on his back, listening to her breathing, feeling the bed shift as she moved to get comfortable. She had the arm next to him lying across her torso, and he could sense her hip and leg lying on the bed only an inch away from his, the warmth of her body making his entire right side much hotter than his left. Even the mattress seemed to dip in her direction, urging him to scoot over and lie next to her, and his mind warred with the desire to hold her in his arms.

Only three weeks ago, he'd have tossed her from his bed after using her, but now he was afraid to touch her, least he scare her off. The irony didn't escape his fully awake mind or his fully attuned body. His penis was stiff, thankfully not uncomfortably so, but annoying so in the fact that he didn't dare touch himself, but he didn't want to go wank off in the loo, either.

Hermione shifted onto her side, and the bed seemed to roll with her, as if to pull him in her direction. Now her back and bum were next to him, and her feet were almost touching his calf. He turned his head and looked at her back, realizing that all he had to do was roll on his side and he could wrap his arm around her.

He looked back up at the ceiling and started to recite the ingredients for the Dreamless Sleep Potion to try and relax, then started listing all the ingredients in his storeroom, by shelf. He finally fell asleep by the time he'd almost gotten to the third shelf from the bottom.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

I know, no lemons yet, but I did get them in bed!

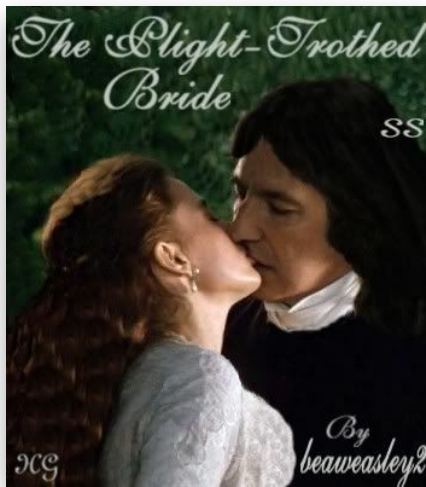
I want to thank my betas, MadBrilliant and Kallonista, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Southern\_Witch\_69 for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

## The Snakes in the Grass

*Chapter 27 of 63*

Hermione thanks Severus for showing her real intimacy, which confuses him. Pepper shows up, and Severus discovers something he'd suspected, but hoped was unfounded. George gives Hermione a reality check.



~~~~~o 27 o~~~~~

The Snakes in the Grass

~S~

*The fire grew bigger, engulfing the house in flames, spreading to the neighbors' houses on either side. His friends raised their brandy glasses, toasting the sight of the Dark*

*Mark as the snake undulated from the mouth of the huge skull above the flames. The head of the snake slithered through the flickers of orange and yellow flames mixed with grey and black smoke. Severus' arm burned from the searing heat of the fire, but he ignored it.*

*If the other Death Eaters felt their Dark Marks burn, they seemed oblivious, cheering and sneering at the screams and cries coming from the houses. They sat down in plush black leather chairs to watch the row of houses burn, as if watching a play, sipping on fine cognac and smoking cigars from Lucius' private humidior. Severus could see Rabastan, Antonin, and Lucius in front of him, making bets on which windows would burst first.*

*A small hand slid across his bare chest, flicking a nipple, and long hair draped over him as the girl laid her head on his shoulder. One leg slid between his thighs, missing his engorged penis in a tantalizing way. "Severus," her soft voice murmured. "Hold me."*

*The roof crumbled on the house before them, and the Death Eaters raised their glasses in salute, but Severus was otherwise occupied, kissing the woman climbing into his lap.*

*"Oh, Severus," she moaned, shifting her leg and pressing her groin to his... The heat of the fire was making his Dark Mark burn, and he inhaled sharply, trying to jerk his arm free...*

He bent his arm at the elbow, and his finger brushed a mass of something warm and soft. The morning sun was shining through gaps in the curtains, the shaft of light cutting across the bed in an angle that almost touched his face. He realized that he'd left the bed hangings open, and the light would soon be in his eyes. He could feel the sun's heat and the oppressive weight of something holding him down. Groggy and still only half awake, he tried to roll away from it, but the arm across his body tightened as the leg from his dream slid along the inside of his thigh. His first thought was of Annabelle Nott, who used to sneak into his bed because she knew that her father would murder them both if he found them.

He tried to roll over onto his side and became aware that the girl in his arms was real, not a figment of his dream-muddled mind. He bent his elbow to reach up and touched... hair. Long, yes, but curly, soft hair not the long, straight hair of Annabelle, but a mass of curls that didn't belong to her...

She moaned, her head rolling on his chest as she sighed, "That's nice," and then snuggled back against him.

He was now fully awake. The searing heat on his left forearm had only been from the sunshine. He was on his back with his arm outstretched and Hermione snuggled up to him, her foot sliding down his leg and her arm snug, as if she were hugging him in her sleep, her face nestled on his chest and her hair tickling his nose. He was so stiff, his penis throbbled. He lifted his head so he could look at her face, so serene and innocent in slumber... and so young. There was a thin scar on her cheek and worry lines by her eyes. Lines someone so young shouldn't have. His mind took note that their bodies were mostly on his side of the bed, which meant that she had rolled over to him. He smiled, reasoning out that if she was turning to him in her sleep that meant that deep down she did, in fact, have feelings for him.

She mumbled something, barely audible and turned her face into his shoulder as if to bury her head. "No, Severus..." he made out, then a soft mewling and, "please, don't leave," followed by another incoherent murmur, then, "Go. Go now. Don't want..."

She was dreaming, just as he had been. He wondered what haunted her dreams. His penis twitched again, needing her moist warmth, and nature called him, the urge both urges warring in importance. He knew that he had to get up. He contemplated waking her, but his mind rejected the idea, since he didn't know how she'd react to him. Her refusal for intimacy of late bothered him, but she'd been adamant that she wasn't ready. He had no idea why she wasn't ready, considering their association had been little else than sexual from the start. But something in the back of his mind kept telling him to have patience, that tiny voice that sometimes defied logical reason but had saved his life countless times in the past. So he chose to listen to it, more out of instinct than understanding.

He watched her for a few minutes, fixing the image of her in his arms, sleeping against him as if a lover *My wife. This could happen every morning if I want it. If I don't blow it.*

Using the Levitation Charm, he slid out from under her and stuffed his pillow in his place as he lowered her back down. The clock told him it was after eight. He had a staff meeting at ten.

He decided to let her sleep. He watched her for a few more minutes as she held his pillow. She had a slight crease between her brows as if something bothered her. He sighed and went to the bathroom to relieve himself, wank off, and freshen up. Hermione had rolled over in his absence, still clutching his pillow in her arms.

He was frying eggs and making toast when she padded into the kitchen in the dress she'd worn last night. "Morning," she said, walking over to lean on the counter beside him.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, more for something to say than anything. She still had that sleepy softness to her, and she'd fixed her hair back into a loose braid.

"Yes, thank you," she said as she stretched.

He turned his attention to the task at hand. "Sunny side up, easy over, or scrambled?" he asked, indicating the eggs.

"Sunny is fine," she replied.

He slid her eggs onto a plate, adding two slices of toast. "Butter is in the crock on the table," he said as he handed the plate to her. He cracked two more eggs into the skillet. "I have a staff meeting today. Would you like to come? You can spend the time in the library, and then we can go shopping for..." He paused. She'd told him that she had her school supplies already. "There is a used bookshop I like."

"I have to work today," she said, but he could detect a hint of remorse in her voice that was at least promising.

"You could Floo to my office at noon. We could have lunch together," he suggested, Levitating the teapot to the table. Hermione reached out and took it, setting it down carefully. He flipped his eggs over since he hated runny eggs.

"I have an appointment in London," she said, and he hung his head. "It's with a dentist. I always get my teeth cleaned every six... I'm sorry. How about if I come around after work?"

He dumped his eggs on his toast and turned around. "I have no idea where I'll be this afternoon," he said as he carried his plate to the table. They ate breakfast together, having short snippets of conversation between bites. "I'll be very busy for the rest of the week. School starts on Monday. I'll have to pack up my things and move to the Headmaster's suite in the Headmaster's tower either today or tomorrow. Hermione, I want you to stay with me."

"But Ginny and I will share a room!" she blurted out.

He sighed heavily and looked at his plate.

"I didn't know that students could live with their professors."

He picked up his cup and cradled it in his hands. "You can if you wanted to. You are an adult and not required to return even though you chose to take your N.E.W.T.s. There are bylaws that permit a student married to a professor to cohabitate in the professor's quarters as long as that student is not in the professor's class. Had I still been teaching, you would have had an interim professor brought in to teach your lessons. But that's not the case with us. I cannot force you to, but I want you to." He took a sip and waited for her response.

She ate several more bites as she contemplated what he'd said. Severus could almost see her mulling it over. "At least come to my sitting room in the evenings and weekends," he suggested, knowing that would be a start.

"I can do that," she agreed. "I wanted to thank you."

He was taken aback, but controlled the urge to react. "For?" he asked softly.

"Last night," she replied, tearing her toast in two.

He was watching her as she broke her yoke open with her toast, making the yoke run. "You're welcome. I won't let anyone hurt you if I can "

"Well, yes, that. I never did thank you for saving my life. Either time, and I certainly never thanked you for all the times you did so when I was a student." She looked up at him earnestly. "But I was referring to last night. I really appreciate what you did."

He was racking his brains trying to figure out what in the world she was talking about.

She stared at the cup in his hands. "The way you held me last night without pushing me into anything. It was like real intimacy the fact that you only held me." Her gaze dropped to her plate. "I'm sorry that I ever thought that you'd... I really liked it, and I wanted to say thank you."

He was gobsmacked.

"When I woke from a bad dream, you held me. I just... thank you." She picked up her teacup and sipped the steaming hot beverage carefully.

He didn't remember her waking up or his holding her. But apparently he had. He'd had a raging case of blue-balls that morning, but he realized that last night was what she'd needed to be simply held. *Well, I'll certainly do that again if that's what it takes to get her in my bed.* "You're welcome. Hermione, I don't want you wandering around alone anymore." Her head snapped up, and she opened her mouth to say something, but he cut her off. "You've been attacked twice now. I think they were after me the night before, but last night, that was Antonin Dolohov's cousin, Dragen Dolohov. I think I cut him, but I'm not sure. The thing is, you're not safe walking around alone. It doesn't matter where you are, you have to be vigilant, and I want you escorted, by two Aurors if necessary, until these Dark wizards are caught."

"Why are they singling me out?" she asked, sipping on her tea.

He noticed a slight shake to her hands. It dawned on him that the attacks bothered her more than she was letting on. "You aren't the only one. Potter is in Auror training, and his mentor goes with him whenever they leave the Ministry. Same as Mr. Weasley. I believe they use the Floo go to the Ministry and home, which cuts down on the opportunity for attacks. Even Mr. Longbottom, Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood, and Mr. Finnigan are being watched. But for some reason, Dolohov has a personal grudge against you. He's dangerous I should know. He was one of the Dark Lord's thugs, a devout follower, and is a brutal killer. His specialties include a purple spell with a zigzag pattern that causes severe internal injury, a lime-green slashing spell that slices internally, and a red spell that solidifies the victim's blood. All of them are nonverbal, deadly, and irreversible. His cousin, Dragen, uses these spells, too."

Hermione's eyes went wide as she recalled the color of the spell that nearly broke through the shield.

"Exactly," he said, tucking back into his food. "Eat up. I have to go."

~H~

When Hermione arrived at George's shop, she was visibly shaken. Severus had escorted her home to change clothes and then had taken her by Side-Along Apparation to Diagon Alley. He had greeted each Auror they passed by name, which had made her stomach turn as if filled with pixies. Even Gringotts had two Aurors standing guard by the doors, next to two goblins in fighting armor.

"Remember what I told you. Someone will come by to take you home. Make sure you check their identity," he said, holding her face in his hands. He kissed her tenderly and then walked away.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Verity asked as Hermione stood staring out the door, watching the two Aurors camped out at the café across the street.

"I'm fine," she said, hugging herself. She nodded and walked through the shop to the backroom, avoiding talking to anyone.

"Hermione, Verity said you're upset. What's wrong?" George asked, entering the backroom right after her.

Hermione turned and hugged him, unable to stop the tears from falling down her cheeks. "I-I want to connect Harry's Floo with yours," she said as he wrapped his arms around her.

"That's not a problem. I'll have it done today," he said, stroking her back in a brotherly way. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I k-killed someone. Dolohov's cousin is going to kill me. Severus saved me. I-I'd be dead," she stammered between sobs. "The war is over for everyone but me! Everyone gets a normal life except me."

"Hush, it's not just you," he said, handing her a handkerchief. "Ginny, Ron, and me we have restrictions too. Well, mine aren't as restrictive, but I'm watched, in case you haven't noticed. There are men staying at the Burrow to watch my family and here in the street. The Aurors and Order members are spread out all over the place, trying to protect the public. Every effort is being made to round up the last of the Death Eaters, but they are in hiding and good at covering their tracks. I have to do a Ministry check before we sell any defensive items, did you know that? I have to send in a copy of the receipt on everything I sell that can be used to evade capture."

Hermione looked up in shock.

"Why do you think Ron is here instead of in Auror training? Most of the new recruits spend time guarding public places likely to be attacked. Even Bob isn't merely a shop assistant he's an Auror rookie."

Hermione backed up to lean against the worktable. "So it's everyone I know."

George laughed. "You happen to have made friends with people who stood up against Voldemort and his followers, so yes, everyone you know. We Weasleys are targets, Harry, anyone who was in the DA are all being watched and followed. Most of the surviving Order members are assisting the Aurors or taking guard duties. Diggle and Dodge are official Auror support here in Diagon Alley. And now, after your attack, things are getting even tighter. Blimey, what were you thinking walking the street after you and Snape were attacked? Cor, girl, you got a death wish I don't know about?"

"No," she said, glaring up at him. "It's a nice neighborhood. I thought it was safe enough."

George crossed his arms. "It isn't. Boy, did I get an earful from Mum. She sent me, Harry, Kingsley, and even Ron Howlers telling us to keep a better eye on you or she'd throttle us. She had one with Snape's name on it, but Persistence, her new owl, couldn't find him."

She lowered her head, feeling abashed.

"I'm really sorry about the guy you killed. I heard about it from Harry and Ron, of course. But I know you. You didn't use the Killing Curse or any curse that causes severe injuries. It was a Blasting Hex, wasn't it?"



She nodded. "Reductor. Ginny and I got really good at it... fighting. I usually use a Stunner... but I was aiming at the wall where the spell came from. I thought it would make the guy jump back and give Severus and I time to escape."

"And it did. From what I heard, you and Severus were in a tight fix," he said, putting his hand under her chin to make her look up at him. "You did what you had to. It's hard living with everything we have you, me, everyone we love and care about, are still having to deal with the aftermath of this war while everyone else seems to be settling back into a normal life. It's not fair, but we have to make the best of it, stick together, and keep strong. Constant Vigilance!"

Hermione laughed at his imitation of Moody.

"See, happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if you're only willing to laugh," George said, dropping his hand. "I think I'll make that a poster for the window. You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine," she said, making one last swipe of her eyes. "I think I'd like to check the stock board to see what you're low on."

"Skiving Snackboxes."

"Oh, goody," she said, rolling her eyes. They were not her favorite things to make.

"That's my girl!" he said, turning to leave.

~S~

Everyone settled down for the meeting in the Great Hall so Firenze could attend. Tigran Avoian, the new History of Magic professor, stared at Sybill, aghast at her warning of his impending doom and then waved his hand to brush her off, mumbling in Russian as he walked away, shaking his head. Her next try was John Dawlish, the new DADA professor, as she cautioned him about something disastrous happening to him. He'd scoffed at her and yelled across the room to Professor Avoian about sharing a Firewhiskey in the pub if the crazy bat's predictions came true. After that, Sybill sat sulking in her seat with her arms folded until Severus called the meeting to order.

Severus introduced the new professors as his first order of business. He announced that Reginald Reynolds, the only other Slytherin on the staff, would hold the duties of Head of House for Slytherin. Cuthbert Binns had been incensed at having to share teaching History of Magic and was politely informed that as a ghost he didn't need to continue teaching, but that he'd be allowed to continue teaching the History of the Goblin Wars to the N.E.W.T.-level students if he liked. Each professor, except professor Binns, gave a report regarding their course curriculum and the arrival of his or her supplies. Severus collected copies of each syllabus to present to the Board of Governors at the next meeting.

Hagrid announced that the new animal pens and the new stable were in ship shape. Pomona proudly stated that the greenhouses were in fine condition and that she had restocked all the plants for her lessons and the needs of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey indicated that the hospital wing was fully stocked and ready for the start of the year.

Severus then broached the subject of discipline, assuring the professors that he wanted the approved standard of disciplines used at the school. Filch grumbled about the new restrictions regarding punishments and stated that he'd updated the list of banned and restricted items to include all the new Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes products. Severus informed Filch that the chains and shackles he kept would be disposed of if he didn't lock them away. Filch sulked the rest of the meeting.

Severus thanked Minerva, Filius, Pomona, and Hagrid on the fine job they did protecting the students from the Carrows. He likewise thanked the rest of the staff for making huge allowances in regards to doling out detentions. "All your efforts were noticed and appreciated. By now you all know that I had little choice but to maintain the appearance of adherence to Dark Lord's wishes. But this is a new year, the castle is rebuilt, and hopefully we can all begin anew," he said, and then he handed out his schedule for staff meetings, patrols, and Hogsmeade weekends.

Irma Pince handed him a file of book requisition forms, asking for many newly published tomes to update the library and to replace the books the Carrows had destroyed. He promptly handed the pile over to Minerva. "If it's reasonable, I approve," he said and moved on to new business with a satisfied smirk at Minerva's shocked expression.

The Fat Friar and the Bloody Baron informed the staff that two of the children who'd died in the battle had returned as ghosts and were trying to settle in, one Gryffindor boy and a Ravenclaw girl.

For the most part, Severus thought the meeting went well. It ran well past lunch, but Severus was pleased with how well the staff received him and accepted his authority. This year was definitely shaping up to be a much better year than his first as Headmaster. However, only a year in Hades could have been worse than that one.

Severus finished signing the requisitions in his office after the meeting and checking over the lists of supplies that had yet to arrive. "Everything seems to be in order," he said, setting the papers aside to file and looked up at Minerva who was sitting patiently in front of him. "When do we expect the rest of the potions ingredients? Did Reginald give you the confirmation letter?"

"Yes. We expect the final shipment by Monday," Minerva said, handing him another folder. "I have here the "

Minerva was interrupted by a loud pop. They both turned to see Pepper bow and Disapparate. "Minerva if you'll give me a moment," Severus said as he rose and hurried up the stairs to his sitting room. "Pepper, where are you?"

Pepper returned, shifting her weight nervously from foot to foot, holding four potion bottles in her arms. "Pepper sorry to disturb you, sir, but you says..."

"It's all right, Pepper. Show me the potions," he said, sitting down. She placed the potions on the coffee table and backed up, looking at the bottles as if they'd explode any minute. He uncorked the first and immediately moved it away from his face. "That bitch!"

"Sir?" Pepper asked, freezing in mid-shift.

"This has digitalis and narcissus," he snarled, opening the second to check it and grimacing, not recognizing the potion. "Did Mr. Prince take any of this?"

"OH NO, Sir! I sees Miss Prisswell brings them just now, sir, and I takes it aways as soon as her back is turns, sir!" Pepper explained, wringing her hands together. "Pepper had to finds you, sir, but had to guess where you is, sir.

Severus tried to give the elf a reassuring smile. "Will she know they are missing?" he asked, wondering how much time he had to replace the potions.

"Miss Prisswell's in the kitchen, sir, reading," Pepper said, shaking her head as if disapproving of the woman's laziness. "She will be reading for a while, sir. Pepper takes care of her master, sir, not Miss Prisswell, sir. She only gives him potions and reads."

"Pepper, you did extremely well bringing these to me," Severus said, grabbing the other two bottles and rising to his feet. "I'll be back... No, come with me." He turned heel and entered his office, crossing to the door without breaking stride. Pepper obediently following behind him. "Minerva, I'm terribly sorry, but I must see Madam Pomfrey immediately."

"Is something wrong, Severus?" Minerva asked, turning in her chair as Severus opened his door. She jumped to her feet to follow him. "Is it Hermione?"

Severus took the stairs two at a time. "No, it's a relative." Without bothering to say anything to Pepper, he ran through the castle to the hospital wing, barging into the office and startling the Healer. "Poppy, I must be quick. Do you recognize this Draught?" he asked, handing her the second potion. He opened another, recognizing it as the watery puce-colored potion. The last was the dark sienna-colored pain potion.

Poppy had already dumped the contents of one bottle into a cauldron and was quickly segregating the ingredients. "I'd hardly call this a potion, young man. It's all filaments... Wait. Oleander milk? Narcissus bulb..."

"And digitalis," Severus stated. "I need to take some Pain Potion and Bronchodilator Potion, if I may. I'll, of course, replace it this weekend. I'd also like some of your infamous purple Restorative Sleeping Elixir."

Poppy waved her hand dismissively as she stirred the contents of the cauldron. "This was a Rheumatoid Potion... Why in the Goddess' name..." She looked up and nodded to Minerva. "This was turned into a poison!"

"The Pain Potion would mask the discomfort," Severus said, handing her the fourth bottle. "And this one would mask the symptoms of the digitalis and oleander, I believe."

Poppy looked up alarmed. "Where did you get these?"

Pepper made a nervous sound, but Severus spoke up first. "I cannot say at this time. I will need your assistance for a personal matter a personal favor, actually. But first, I need you to examine these potions and make a full report of your findings. I'll need it when I press formal charges." He turned to Minerva. "I know I haven't explained anything, but would you please send a message to Kingsley, requesting that he meet with me in an hour? I must leave, but I will be back."

Minerva nodded, her eyes full of concern. Severus searched through the potions cabinet and pulled out the potions and elixir he sought. Turning his head and leaning around the doorframe for a moment to compare the bottles Pepper brought him, he found ones that were the same or at least close enough to not attract the Miss Priswell's notice. He filled them and magically replicated her labels. When he returned to Poppy's office, she was examining another potion.

"Severus this last bottle isn't a potion at all," she said, looking up. "It's only herbs, some insect parts, and... dirt."

"Thank you, Poppy. I really appreciate you doing this for me," he said and turned to leave. He stopped in the corridor. "Pepper, take these back and put them where Miss Priswell left the bad potions. I will be along shortly, but I want you to behave *exactly* as you did when I examined the potions the first time. Do you understand me?"

Pepper looked confused, but nodded. "Yes, sir. I is to behave irrationally, sir."

Severus hurried to his office and used the Floo to travel home, then Apparated to his great-grandfather's house from his back garden. Miss Priswell answered the door the second time Severus pounded on it. "My, this is quite a surprise," she said, moving aside to let him in. "You certainly have decided to ingratiate yourself to Mr. Prince after all these years."

"He's dying, Miss Priswell," Severus stated smoothly. "I am hoping to ingratiate myself into the will." He watched the play of emotions on the Healer's face with a smirk. "I'll show myself up." She followed Severus up to Talfryn's room. Despite the efforts of Miss Priswell, Talfryn looked somewhat better.

"Back again are you?" the old man asked. "I suppose you think you need to worm your way back into my good graces?"

"I was concerned for your well being," Severus said politely as he looked about the room, running a finger on the dresser, and examined the wardrobe doors on his way to the bedside table where the potions sat.

As soon as he picked one up, Pepper tugged on the hem of his robe like she had before. "What is you doing?" Pepper squeaked, scolding him while trying to pull him away from the bedside table. "You leave my master's potions alone. Put down! No! Master needs his potions!"

"Stop this irrational behavior at once," both Talfryn and Severus said, Talfryn falling back on his cushions with a coughing fit.

Miss Priswell was smirking from the doorway, walked into the room. "You are not to come here and bother my patient. You will leave immediately!"

"If you insist, madam," Severus said, preceding the woman out of the door. He smirked inwardly at the look of smug satisfaction on her face. He rounded on her before they entered the foyer, his robes swirling about him dramatically. Severus' eyes were hard and cold, his anger seeping from him in waves as he cornered her against the wall. "You, madam, had best watch your step around me," he snarled.

Her eyes narrowed as she glared back at him. "You don't frighten me," she spat back at him. "You cannot do anything to me. I'll tell the authorities..."

"Go right ahead, witch." Severus pulled his sleeve up and showed her the scar left from his Dark Mark, his dark eyes boring into her as if to read her soul.

She looked at his arm and gasped, then looked up at him, her eyes widened with fear. "But you're... they made you Headmaster again!"

"That's right, they did," he said, his voice cool and silky. "I walked away free and clear, a full pardon fo*all* my crimes. Even the ones they *didn't* know about." He pulled his sleeve back down, buttoning the cuff as he stared into her eyes. "I don't know who you work for or why..." He slipped into her mind easily. "But I will find out, and when I do mark my words, you will regret crossing *me*." He could see images of a thick, square-jawed man handing her two potion bottles and another man, not too dissimilar in features to his grandfather. The second man appeared in another vision, and another. Miss Priswell knew this man with the ash-brown hair well. He had a long, pallid face, heavy eyebrows, and thin frame so much like his mum and grandfather. He withdrew from her mind as he leaned forward so his nose was an inch from hers. "If I discover anything untoward, madam, know that the authorities will be my last resort."

Severus turned on his heel, his robes swirling, and strode from the house. He returned to his home, traveled by Floo back to his office, and asked the portrait of a prim lady to inform the Deputy Headmistress he'd returned. He opened the cabinet that held the Pensieve and slowly withdrew the images he'd seen in Miss Priswell's mind, as well as the memory of the pictures in Talfryn's home. He sat at his desk and waited for Kingsley's arrival.

It didn't take long for the Auror to arrive.

Severus told him about his concerns and brought him up to date with his suspicions. He withdrew three memories, one of which he thought might be relevant, and dropped it into the stone basin as well. "The first is my memory; it's of some family photos. The second is the images I obtained from Miss Priswell," Severus explained.

"Do I want to know how you obtained them?" Kingsley asked.

"No, but they will be distorted and rather quick," Severus stated. "The third is a conversation with an Ashton Foulkes. I want to know if you recognize the other wizard."

~H~

At an hour before closing, an Auror arrived and walked straight up to Ron, indicating they should talk in private. Bob looked up from the Wonder Witch section, set down his boxes and followed them to the storeroom. From her place at the worktable, Hermione could see them but not hear a word. Ron's shoulders went stiff; he ran a hand through his hair and held his neck before letting his hand fall at his side in a fist. Bob leaned against the shelves, his arms crossed, his face set with a stern concentration, glaring at the floor and the wall, then glancing in her direction and back to the Auror several times. Hermione couldn't see anything but the Auror's back and occasionally his hand when he'd point either at the wall or swing his hand behind him, but she could tell that whatever he was saying, it wasn't good news. After ten long minutes, the Auror turned to leave, glancing at Hermione and nodding to her as he passed. Bob drew his wand and turned to leave, a look of what might be concern on his face, which he schooled quickly into a benign smile at the doorway before entering the shop.

Ron turned and leaned against the doorway with his arms crossed, looking at his trainers. "Hermione, I need you to stay in the shop after hours."

"What? Why? What's going on?" she demanded to know, tossing her knife on the counter. Hermione hated being left in the dark. "I'm not a child, Ronald, you "

His head snapped up, and he looked at her beseechingly. "Will you give a bloke a chance to tell you!" he snapped at her. "I need you to stay in the shop after hours and have dinner with me and George."

She fixed him an angry glare. "Why? Severus "

"Is with Kingsley right now," he interrupted her. "Would you listen to me and stop interrupting. I'm trying to tell you. Harry's coming over, too. A wizard was seen in the Apothecary down Knockturn Alley, trying to get a salve for a curse-made laceration. It went across his body, Hermione it's a really deep cut, and he's hurt bad. We think it's the wizard who Severus cursed."

"But why "

"The Aurors are going to let him go. They want to follow him..."

"Follow him!" she shrieked, falling against the worktable, feeling a bit faint. "They are letting him escape?"

"He is *here!* In Knockturn Alley, and he wasn't alone. The witch he was with moves like a guy, so they suspect Polyjuice." Ron looked at the door to the shop and back. "Yes, they are going to follow him. Myers said that the wizard is unable to Apparate because of blood loss. He used Borgin's Floo and walked to the Apothecary, leaning on this witch. Myers was able to place a Tracking Charm on them so they can find out where they are hiding and try to apprehend him and his friends."

"But if he's leaving then... I'm supposed to meet Severus tonight," she said, crossing her arms.

"Will you for once be reasonable?" he snarled in frustration. "I'm not making an advance here not this time. I'm concerned for you, Hermione. I still love you." He held up his hands in supplication. "I know that you are trying to make this Bonding work with Snape. I realize that the spell didn't match us, and I'm dealing with that. That is not what this is about. Dolohov's organized the last remaining Death Eaters. We don't know how he's evading us or where he and his gang are hiding out. Even Snape and the Malfoys don't know, but Lucius has been contacted twice now. We don't even know everyone who's sided with him. So, until we get a break, I need you to be more careful."

"You're saying that the Aurors are trying to track him?" she asked, and Ron nodded. "They are wizards, pure-bloods likely, so they won't be living anyplace they can't use magic."

"We know this. We have every possible means to track places where magic is preformed. My dad's entire department, the Improper Use of Magic and the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts offices, as well as Magical Equipment Control and the entire Department of Magical Accidental and Catastrophes, are all watching for any magic used in any residence a registered wizarding residence or not. Even hotels, taverns, and inns. All magical activity is being investigated, even young wizards playing pranks on their friends' houses."

Hermione held up one finger, her hand bouncing up and down slightly it in the air. "Cabins, cottages in outlying villages, fishing huts, highland dwellings, tents..."

"Hermione, we're monitoring all areas, even the campgrounds, forests, lake shores, and such. I didn't spend months in a tent not to realize that as an option," he said, tilting his head and looking at her with a smirk.

Hermione looked at the worktable. "What about caves?"

"Hermione!"

She gave him an incredulous look. "Mongoloths dig their own caves, and so do graphorns and some gryphons. Trolls, gryphons, and graphorns fight over the larger caves. Sometimes the trolls capture the graphorns, sometimes the graphorns win. Gryphons will also kill trolls and mongoloths and take over their caves," she tried to explain.

"Of course I remember! I had to write an essay about them for Care of Magical Creatures, remember?" he asked exasperatedly. "Of course, I was mad at you at the time, so you gave the books we needed to Harry..."

Hermione smiled and then became serious again. "Yes, but because these are magical creatures, if the graphorns or gryphons kill the trolls and take over the cave, their magical residues reside in the caves for ages, especially if these creatures have used the cave for a long periods of time, just like the mongoloth and dragon caves. And due to the way that the caves are dug, the magical signatures rebound and reflect back into the depths of the cave, not outward through the opening."

Ron's eyes widened as he caught on to what she was implying.

"Severus told me that Dolohov created curses that inflict severe internal damage maybe enough to incapacitate one or more of these creatures?"

Ron stood up excitedly. "Of course, and we wouldn't look at gryphon, graphorn, or troll lairs!" He grabbed her arms as if to hug her. "Hermione, have I ever told you that you're brilliant?"

"Oh, once or twice," she said, laughing at him, and he dropped his hands.

"I have to go in to the office," he said, crossing the room quickly, stopping to turn around at the door. "Promise me you'll stay and have dinner with us."

"I promise," she relented, as if put out by the imposition.

"Thanks," he said and disappeared.

~L~

Lucius was about to come downstairs for dinner when a house-elf popped in to tell him that Severus and Kingsley arrived at the front door. Curious, he told the elf to take them into his study. As he approached, both wizards were standing by the fireplace, having a serious debate. "And this is the first time you've ever heard about him?" Lucius heard Kingsley's distinctive baritone voice. There was a soft muffled response Lucius couldn't quite grasp. "He's used a number of names in the past."

"I never knew about him," Lucius heard Severus say once he was closer to the door. Unfortunately, his shadow could be seen on the floor, so lingering wasn't an option. "The old man and I were never all that close when I was young. After I joined the Dark Lord, I severed all ties."

The conversation immediately stopped when Lucius appeared at the doorway. "Don't stop on my account," he said jovially, belying his curiosity of the bits of the argument he'd heard before making his arrival known.

Severus turned and nodded to his friend, and from the look on Severus' face, Lucius could tell immediately that whatever had brought the wizards here was serious. "Luc, have you ever heard of a Clemet King or a Clemet Richfield?"

"Yes, a Clemet Richfield. He's a grafter a streetwise conman and swindler," Lucius said abhorrently. "I have never personally crossed paths with him, but I know a few who have and lost. The amusing thing is that he generally gets away with his scams. Why?"

"I believe he may be a relative, and I need to find out for sure," Severus stated coolly.

Lucius stared at him in surprise, taking in Severus' cool demeanor and his rigid stance. After a few seconds, he burst out laughing. "You're telling me that you think you're related to that gutter rat?"

Severus exhaled sharply and stood stiffly, as if insulted by the idea. "Yes, I believe I might. Luc, if I may utilize your Pensieve, this will go faster. I have a few memories I need you to see."

"I never knew you had any living relatives," Lucius stated as he walked across the room.

"Lucius, my great-grandfather is being looked after by a woman who may or may not be a legitimate Healer. She is giving him poisonous concoctions and passing them off as potions. I saw a man in her memories who bears some resemblance to my grandfather and mother and another that I have seen in my past. What I need is to make a positive identification of these men," Severus stated. He looked away for a moment, then followed Lucius with his eyes. "He is my last living relative that I know of. My mother was estranged from her family before I was born. When I joined the Dark Lord, I severed any connection to Mr. Prince to protect him from my associations because I had no idea as to his ideology."

The last part was a half-truth, but Lucius could read the inflections in Severus' tone to know it bore enough truth to trust him. "And you believe that this ~~relative~~ is trying to kill off your great-grandfather?" He slid his hand on the boards of a shelf and released the concealed door. A section of the bookshelf opened, revealing a closet. Lucius withdrew his family Pensieve, then turned, closed the bookshelf with his boot heel, and carried the stone basin to the desk. He was pleased that both men only moved forward when he approached the desk. Of course, both men already knew what he kept in the closet, but the show of trust was appreciated.

Severus pulled three small vials from his pocket, telling Lucius briefly what they were.

"I recognize one of the men as Clement Richfield, also known as, Clemet King. The other man I don't know, but I have seen his face before. We are hoping you might recognize him," Kingsley said. "It's a long shot, I know, but I'd appreciate the help."

"The memory is rather distorted and rather quick," Severus stated. "The second is a conversation with an Ashton Foulkes."

Lucius' quirked an eyebrow at the name, and Severus nodded. "The same." When they entered the Pensieve, the scene swirled a few times in quick succession, but Lucius identified the man in question as being Clint Richman. The second memory swirled into focus.

*A second Severus Snape wearing a wool frockcoat and robes sat at a table in what was obviously the Hog's Head with a bottle of Ogden's in front of him. Moments later, a wizard in brown, ragged robes sat in the seat across the table from him. "You're choosing the wrong company. Go away," Snape sneered, holding his glass of Firewhiskey in his hand.*

*"Nah, yer Edgar's grandson," the man stated. "I knows who yeh are."*

*Snape narrowed his eyes and regarded the man coolly. "And who might you be?"*

*"Name's Ashton, Ashton Foulkes," he stated, clearly expecting Snape to recognize him. "I knows about yer uncle."*

*"You're drunk. I haven't got an uncle," Snape sneered. "Go away. Now."*

*"Yeh is wrong, yeh gots one all righ'. He's a piece o' work, 'im," Mr Foulkes insisted. "If ya were ta play yer cards righ', yeh can make a good inheritance, see."*

*Snape rolled the glass lazily in his hand as if watching the liquor swirl in the glass. "And what is in it for you?"*

*"I wanna cut," he said, grinning as if he'd persuaded Snape to go along.*

*Severus looked at him, and his lips curved back into a cold, calculating smile. "Sure. Why don't we go somewhere private and talk about this some more."*

*Mr. Foulkes nodded eagerly and rose, following Snape out the door.*

What Mr. Foulkes didn't see, but that was clearly seen by the three men watching the scene, was Snape drawing his wand as he led the wizard to the side of the pub.

*In what should have been an ambush, Snape quickly incapacitated the man who stood up from behind the rubbish bins and turned around quickly to hit Mr. Foulkes with a Body-Bind. "You insignificant gutter snipe."*

"You were always quick in a duel," Lucius said, walking around to see Mr. Foulke's face.

"Never mind him, come look at the other man's face. Do you know him?" Severus pointed to a square-jawed, barrel-chested man with cropped sandy blond hair in a brown calf-length coat and trousers and worn out black boots.

"Yes, I know him," Lucius said with a sneer. "Ludwick Graven. You would know him as my old dorm mate, Jude Graven. Rowle and Gibbon's mate."

"Was he a Death Eater?" Kingsley asked, staring at the man until the image faded.

All three men stood up at the same time. "I had always assumed so, given his associations," Lucius stated, "but he never circulated in my social circles."

"Would you know where I might find the man?" Severus asked as he put his memories back into his head.

Lucius grinned. "Of course. He frequents the House of Rose and Thorns." Lucius smirked as Severus quickly masked his revulsion. "If you go there, have at least three or more wizards covering the back and cellar doors. You never know who might crawl out."

Kingsley nodded in understanding. "Lucius, once again, thank you."

"Just remember this at my hearing," Lucius said and asked if either cared to stay for dinner.

"No, thank you," Severus said with a wicked smirk. "I have a house of ill repute to raid."

"We," Kingsley corrected him.

Severus nodded in mock politeness. "I was hoping you'd be inclined to bring some friends along. The more the merrier."

Lucius laughed as he showed them out. "Have fun. I'd offer my wand, but alas, I'm unavoidably detained."

Severus nodded at him, his dark eyes showing his suppressed anger. "Expect me for drinks after."

"I'll be up and waiting," Lucius replied.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*I'm so sorry that this took so long to update. I will accept any scolding and flailing you see fit. I hope to have my next chapter out to you sooner!*

*I want to give a great big thank you hug to MadBrilliant for combing through this and to Shug and Kallontista for helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know. I'd be ashamed to show my story to anyone without your invaluable help.*

## House of Rose and Thorns

*Chapter 28 of 63*

Severus and Kingsley lead a raid on the House of Rose and Thorn, and Hermione testifies at Narcissa's trial.



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### House of Rose and Thorns

The House of Rose and Thorns looked more like an old two story tavern than a house of ill repute: covered in white stucco with exposed wooden beams, shuttered lead glass windows, a wood-shingled roof sporting a dozen stove exhaust pipes, and six brick chimneys. On the inside there was a reception desk in the entry beside a large staircase that divided the inn from a partially hidden tavern and smoking lounge on the left, and a respectable sitting room and restaurant on the right. However, the upstairs had more than one hallway: one lined with doors that opened onto simple but comfortable rooms for guests, and another hallway with doors to rooms that met the needs and desires of the brothel's clients. The stairs to the brothel were between the smoking lounge and the tavern, magically concealed behind one of the many red plaid curtains. The brothel had two other exits, one at the back of the building and one just off the kitchen door that allowed clients and the ladies to exit, but only allowed the ladies to enter.

The plan was to have the Junior Aurors and those in Auror training, lead by Hayward Blume, a long time veteran, make an inspection raid on the rooms, allowing the over eager blighters a chance of apprehending their first bad guys. "They'll make enough noise to wake the dead and flush out the undesirables," Kingsley said. "I remember my first raid. I blasted a hole through the wall large enough for an erumpent to pass."

"Let's hope that them kids don't blow the place up," Perkinson stated. "Vivian likes to eat here. I ain't ever told her there's a brothel."

Loraine Matsuno, wearing an apron over black slacks and a white shirt, appeared from the kitchen doorway and nodded to Kingsley as she set down a bucket. "Graven, Broadmoor and Pucey left the lounge for the stairs when I arrived. Got a positive on Richman and maybe three more. Kids are coming in by Floo now," she said softly and then reentered the kitchens.

"That's seven," Severus said softly as the door slammed closed.

"Unless Broadmoor and Pucey aren't supporters," Dawlish said, scowling as if he didn't believe they were.

"Matsuno wouldn't have mentioned them if she hadn't seen a positive connection. Be ready to stun them regardless. We'll ask and apologize after, if necessary," Kingsley said with an authoritative air that ended all discussion. He divided the Aurors, Dawlish, Savage, and Maygora, to cover the door that opened to the alley, Rivas, Perkinson, and Carr to stand at the door near the street as he, Severus, and Auror Pugliese staked out the door beside the one to the kitchen.

A cluster of activity was heard from the open windows as Hayward Blume led three training Auror teams into the inn to flush out Ludwick Graven and Clint Richman and any possible Death Eaters in residence.

Severus and Kingsley waited, standing casually on either side of the wall where the secret door would open. Pugliese sat on a crate by the bins, slumped over like a drunk, a most deceptive pose as it belied his eager anticipation in his eyes.

A crup barked in the distance. Two women passed on the street, smiling in greeting to the Aurors who stood on the corner facing each other as if in deep conversation. A door slammed closed inside the building Severus faced.

Suddenly a scream rent the air, followed by another and another and another. The men in the alley tensed, wands at the ready, ears alert.

From up in the building the sounds of several bangs followed by more slamming doors, more screaming, and a few explosions set Severus' nerves on high alert. Even after three years as a young Death Eater on numerous raids and Muggle attacks, followed more recently by another three years in the same situations as Dumbledore's spy, he had never totally managed to control the instant reaction of his body. His heart raced in anticipation as adrenalin surged through him, his fight instincts highly attuned and

ready, and his sense of hearing straining against the sound of his own pulse in his ears. Outwardly, he knew that he looked every bit as calm and controlled as both Kingsley and Pugliese, although Severus knew that both men felt as alive and wired as he did at the moment.

The walls shook as those inside tried to Apparate, the anti-Apparation wards the Aurors had added to the one the proprietor had in place keeping everyone inside.

The door opened and two men stumbled out, one in dark brown trousers and an open robe being dragged by the collar of a burly, dirty, sandy blond wizard in grey robes who was using him as a shield. Pugliese aimed and rolled, Kingsley turned as he snapped his wrist, emitting a bright flare from his wand as Severus brought his wand up with a flick and twisted his wrist letting off another stunner in quick succession, just as another man burst from the kitchen door. The wizard in the open robe being used as a shield tripped, and the burly blond wizard jerked him around roughly as he aimed at Pugliese. Severus' mind registered the face, Thortenson, when the wizard brandishing the human shield turned his head in his direction. Kingsley turned, robes flaring as ropes shot from his wand tip, smacking the plaster off the building by the black-haired wizard who'd exited the kitchens. Thortenson turned and fired a pale blue jet of light from his. The man in Thortenson's grip, trying to free himself, had fired a shot that cut across Severus' left arm, just as Pugliese disarmed the wizard.

Severus squatted and lunged left, aiming for Thortenson as another wizard fired a shot from the door at Pugliese. Pugliese fired at the door as Kingsley fought to restrain the dirty, sandy blond wizard. The moment the dirty, sandy blond wizard turned, Severus' attention wavered as he recognized the man. Graven. The spell he'd cast to deflect Thortenson's wavered, and Thortenson's spell grazed his knee, making Severus kneel.

"That's it, traitor, bow," Thortenson sneered before Severus, used to firing from any position from his teen years, hit him in the chest with a Full Body-Bind.

Graven sent a sickly yellow pulse at Kingsley that set his sleeve on fire as Kingsley fired more ropes from his wand. Pugliese doused the flames as Graven spun out from the reach of the ropes and fired again. Severus had anticipated the movement the moment Graven raised his arm above his head. He drew back from his lunge to his knee, aimed and sprung to his left, just in time to deflect a spell cast at Kingsley's side. But the distraction allowed Graven to Disapparate.

Pugliese turned to his right, firing a spell into the doorway as a flash of green shot out from the kitchen door while behind Severus, sounds of approaching duelists echoed closer. Suddenly, the wizard in the doorway collapsed forward, falling on his face as Pugliese collapsed on the ground from another jet of green fired from the doorway.

Severus turned and fired at the wizard in black robes rushing toward him from the end of the alley, ducking the spell that came shooting past. The black robed man, fired, sidestepped, and ducked between the bins as another spell whizzed down the alley, missing Kingsley by inches. Kingsley aimed for the doorway, making several long whip-like tendrils of light lash forward, and the man in the doorway screamed in pain, collapsing to his knees on the front step. The bands of light turned into thick ropes, binding the wizard helplessly where he knelt.

"Kingsley, fire low," Severus shouted as he aimed for under the bins. "*Reducto*," he shouted, making the earth erupt, sending the bin shooting upward from the blast. The wizard fell over as Kingsley's spell shot through the falling dirt, hitting the man where he fell.

Sounds of fighting ceased as the dirt and dust settled. Kingsley tightened his knots on the ropes holding the wizards bound in front of the doorway as Severus reached out his free hand to help the hapless wizard, balled up and cringing by the wall, to his feet.

The man looked up with appreciation until his eyes fell on the scar on Severus' left forearm and shrunk back again. "Y-you-you're a one of t-them!" he stammered.

Loraine Matsuno exited the doorway as she pushed the man in ropes aside. She stepped over the man sprawled on the ground and rushed over to Pugliese. "Oh, my gods, Pugliese!"

Severus ignored her. "I'm Severus Snape, and I'm not one of them I'm with the Aurors," he said softly, extending his hand closer to the man as Kingsley approached Pugliese. "Long story. Are you all right?"

Matsuno turned and ran for the end of the alley as Perkinson approached Kingsley from the street.

The man curled up on the ground shook his head. Severus sighed as he reached down, saying, "I won't hurt you," as he hauled the man to his feet. "Is anything broken bleeding are you in pain?" he asked, helping the man to lean against the building.

"No," the man said as Kingsley walked up them.

"Pugliese is dead. I sent a message to Blume to wrap up things inside and sent a message to St Mungo's. Carr is dead. We got Pucey and Jugson." He looked at the man staring fearfully at Severus. "He okay?"

"Seems to be in shock, but it might be because of me," Severus stated and indicated the man on the ground. "Who's that?"

Kingsley flicked his wand to turn the wizard over. "Broadmoor," they said in unison.

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Back at the Ministry Severus sat in the chair behind a desk in the Aurors' office, facing the cubicle across the aisle where Matsuno sat giving her report of what had happened inside the House of Rose and Thorns. "... in twos and moved to the positions just as Blume had instructed them to do. My group stayed in the lobby to block that exit as Blume and Lerman led the other two groups upstairs. I returned to the kitchen after Weasley indicated to me that Graven had slipped by them from the guest rooms. We tried to stop him, but the cooks were in our way... not an excuse, but I tripped on some nosh that had spilled on the floor. Weasley engaged a wizard in the kitchen that tried to stop us by hurling the kitchen knives at us."

"The one Weasley stunned killed Pugliese," Kingsley stated solemnly, sitting on the corner of the desk in front of where Severus sat.

"The very one," Matsuno stated, her pride in her trainee apparent in her tone even though she mourned the loss of the two Aurors. "He shot the Killing Curse only a second before Weasley brought him down."

Dawlish and Savage, who both leaned against the partition beside Severus, listened on quietly. "Not the boy's fault," Severus stated. "Good man, Pugliese. Carr too."

"Weasley and Potter identified the one from the kitchen as possibly being Rowle," Matsuno said. "Weasley claims to recognize him from the Battle of the Department of Mysteries and the final battle at Hogwarts, although I dunno. The man's face is scarred up fairly bad; it's hard to tell if it's the same man."

Severus smirked, knowing why she'd have doubts. "The Dark Lord had Draco use my Sectumsempra Curse to remove his ear."

Matsuno's head snapped in Severus' direction with a look of horror on her face, her hand clasped over her mouth, and he could hear Savage inhale in disgust beside him. Dawlish shifted on his feet, and Kingsley looked at him as if expecting more.

"Punishment for a mistake," Severus said calmly, his fingers laced together as he continued to look in Matsuno's direction. "Draco wasn't able to control it, and he cut off half his cheek in the process. The burns came from the raid on the Tarmar Bridge when his Fiendfyre got away from him."

Maygora whistled as he slowly turned his head. "I remember that one what a mess cleaning up after that attack." He was straddling a chair in the aisle between the desks with his arms crossed over the back. "Took nine of us to modify the minds of the Muggles into thinking that the fire was caused by a truck collision carrying toxic stuff... Toxic spill don't know where the Muggle Worthy Excuse office came up with that idea, but the media people bought it."

Kingsley indicated Severus. "Who else? So that gives us Rowle, Thortenson, and Delsey in holding, Jugson's in St. Mungo's for now, and we can cross off Broadmoor and Pucey."

"I want to question Rowle before you send him to Azkaban," Severus said coolly.

"As do I," Kingsley stated. "But I'll be happy to *allow* you to question him when I do, and not alone. I don't want you doing anything that will prevent him from serving his time that includes a stay in St. Mungo's. I want this one behind bars."

Severus checked his immaculate nail beds. "I'll be gentle. Thorough, but gentle."

"Do they make gentle poisons?" Savage asked with a chuckle.

"Sure, and the Headmaster here would be able to brew it," Dawlish replied with a smirk. "Man's right wicked with a cauldron and a few roots."

"Oh, I have just the thing," Severus replied, looking up at Dawlish with a smirk and producing a vial from his pocket.

Dawlish held out his hand and examined the potion, swirling the vial to see the filament whirl on the bottom. "What's this one do?" he asked, holding it to the light. "What's with the filament? I thought you were good."

"It has special properties," Severus said with a devious curl to his lips, taking the vial back. "Dicentra for one causes convulsions and other nervous symptoms, plus a bit of nightshade for its hallucinogenic benefits. The filament is the extra bit of raw nightshade for added efficacy."

"*Severus*," Kingsley growled out in warning. "Alive. You cannot poison him."

"Yet," he answered as he pocketed the vial.

Kingsley shook his head and said, "Ever," in a firm tone, but he was smiling somewhat, all the same.

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Severus left the Ministry after another interrogation session with both Rowle and Thortenson before they were to be carted off to Azkaban. There was enough evidence to shut both up for life with or without a trial. Thortenson had been uncooperative, that or he didn't have much information to give.

Through Rowle, they'd found out that he'd stolen a wizard's magical tent and pitched it inside a small cave near Poole's Cavern outside Buxton. The tent made the accommodations comfortable enough for him and his son. Apparently, his wife had chosen to flee the country after the final battle. Rowle did confirm that Antonin Dolohov was now in charge, and that they had a new way of communicating that he wasn't able to talk about. He did, under duress of Severus' potion, confess that MacTavish, Mulciber, Torrington, and Rosier had joined Dolohov and his cousin Dragen, but he was unable to say where. Avery and Bulstrode were also with the group, but he didn't know where they were either, and Hornby was hurt badly from a curse and dying.

When Kingsley pressed him about mongoloth, troll, and dragon caves, Rowle's mouth opened and snapped closed, then he turned nearly blue in the face and passed out cold. The location was obviously under the Fidelius Charm and the means of communication had a variation of the Confidentiality Charm combined with the Asphyxiation and Dumbstruck Hex.

However, Severus had found out that Graven had been helping Rowle and his friends get food and supplies, not that that was surprising at all. Nevertheless, he'd been unable to say where Graven was holding up these days.

"So it was Hornby you sliced," Kingsley said with a grimace. "Your Sectumsempra specialty, I presume."

"Of course. There is a cure, but it leaves a nasty scar. However, he'd have to ask me for it, and that would mean turning himself in." Severus cut a chunk of Rowle's hair and pulled Kingsley aside. "Can you keep him out of sight for a few days?"

Kingsley looked at him suspiciously. "Why, what did you have in mind?"

"To trade clothes with him," Severus suggested, "or have one of your Aurors do it. I want to check his robes for hidden pockets. I'm sure that he has something on him with a Protean Charm on it or there is a communication device of some sort on his person. He'd have it on him." He leaned in close to Kingsley. "Dolohov isn't stupid, but some of the men following him are and reckless. Act first think second. I have Polyjuice at the house..."

"And do you know him well enough to impersonate him?" Kingsley asked, his head turned slightly to watch Rowle, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Yes," Severus stated, then shrugged. "I know most of them well enough, unless they've devised a secret handshake or code words. But it would be good to have me or your Auror impersonate him and seen in public."

"I'll consider it," Kingsley said and turned to look at Rowle. He smiled as he caught on. "And the others will think we let him go from lack of evidence or on a technicality. I can have my Auror followed with a Tracking Charm on him and he just might lead us to the hideout."

"Or lead us to Graven. George Weasley has a novelty toy that has the Protean and Conjointment Charms on it so that they can be used for listening, sending codes, and verbal communication. You wear it in your ear. My wife came up with them. I suggest Mr. Weasley procure a pair for your Aurors," Severus suggested. "He should also have a Portkey, as well."

Kingsley's smile widened. "I'll send someone over there today. What about Hornby?"

Severus shrugged. "Write him off. If he was the wizard who went to the Knockturn Alley apothecary, he hasn't long anyway. The only other person who knows how to cure the cursed cut is Molly Weasley, and I doubt he knows that."

When he'd returned home to finish packing, three house-elves were scurrying around the room busily collecting his clothes, books, and personal items. Several times, Severus had to insist that the little female, directing the two larger males, to leave the Muggle clothes in the cardboard boxes where they were. The elves were more than efficient, finding many things in his home that he didn't want with him at the castle. He pulled the light blue, polyester trousers from his trunk, growling for the fourth time, "I don't wear these! They were my father's," as he threw the polyester work trousers back into the box. "For the last time, **ONLY THE CLOTHES IN THE WARDROBE!**" he growled as loud and distinctly as he could. "I am getting rid of the clothes in the boxes! The ones I wear when I venture out into Muggle society are in the wardrobe! The junk I boxed up is to go back into the box room, immediately! And stop taking all the books from the bookshelves!"

The other two stopped immediately and turned to face the female, Mippy, My-pee, Me-pee... something like that, for directions; the one male dropping the book he'd pulled down off the shelf on the floor with a thud.

"But, sir, we's your house-elves, sir. We's always serves the Headmaster, sir, whoever the Headmaster is, sir," the female elf said as she pulled the trousers out of the box.

"I understand that, but I can pack my own belongings," Severus growled angrily, snatching the offending trousers again and tossing them angrily back into the box.

The female only smiled, taking the trousers out again. "Headmaster, master, sir, doesn't have to packs his self. Mippy, is to do it for you, sir," she said, carefully folding the trousers.

"Headmaster, master, sir, which books *is* you wanting, sir?" the male tugging his ear by the bookshelf asked as the other elf cradled the book he'd dropped in his arms, looking up at him earnestly.

Severus took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Only the ones I had stacked on the bed. The others stay here. The towels stay here. The rug stays here. That pot of dirt, Merlin only knows where you found that, stays here."

Mispy nodded and the rug was removed from his trunk, and one of the elves carried away the pot of dirt with two leaves sprouting in the center.

Severus walked over to carefully check the titles of the books now piled up in his trunk. Several of the tomes were ones that didn't like to be handled except by their rightful owner, two had to be coaxed with a charm to be touched, let alone read, and one that was so old it didn't like leaving the bookshelf, usually putting up a struggle to be brought out. How the elf managed to coax it, and the others, down was a mystery to him. He gently laid the old book back on the shelf and heard the old tome literally sigh with contentment. He scanned his shelves, selecting a few more common novels, handing them to the house-elf to pack. Finally, he turned and looked him squarely in the eye with a firm expression. "Those are all the books of my private collection I wish to take. If I need or desire any of the others, I can always come home to retrieve it. Is that understood?"

"Oh, yes, Headmaster, master, sir," the elf said with a deep bow. "Kirch sorry to touches books on shelves, master, sir. Kirch will punishes himself most properly, sir."

"You may hit yourself six times with a slipper," Severus said in exasperation. All three elves nodded and bowed, vowing earnestly to use the slipper.

Finally, his two trunks and cedar cube were closed and all of his personal belongings he would need for the next nine months vanished with the elves for Hogwarts.

~H~

Hermione calmly sat in the chair facing the Wizengamot bench. Both Dean and Luna had already testified and were waiting for her in the atrium with Neville. Hermione hoped that this wouldn't take long. Mrs. Malfoy was sitting primly in the Chair of Chains in the middle of the room, the chains clanking softly on the floor. Mrs. Malfoy had watched Hermione take her seat with thinly veiled contempt, however as Hermione continued to answer the questions put forth to her from the members of the Wizengamot, Mrs. Malfoy's expressions changed to introspective disbelief with occasional flickers of surprise.

"Except for some insults, Mrs. Malfoy has never actually done anything to me," Hermione insisted yet again, speaking as clearly as she could, and immediately a murmur rose from the bench, again.

Balfour Lufkin, a sharp-nosed wizard with an orange-stained, grey goatee, stood in front of Hermione, scowling at her from under his bushy grey eyebrows. "Are you telling me that during your abduction and detainment at Malfoy Manor during Dark War II, Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy never did *anything* to you?" he asked, brandishing his scrawny finger at her. "Really, Ms. Granger-Snape, surly she raised her wand at you during your entrapment? It is well documented that you suffered the Cruciatus Curse while you were her captive."

"I was. However, it was Bellatrix Lestrange that used the Cruciatus on me not Mrs. Malfoy," Hermione stated calmly with her hands resting in her lap. "The worst I can say is that Mrs. Malfoy has on occasion insulted me, but she has never *assaulted* me."

"She insulted you?" Mr. Lufkin asked, trying to mask his displeasure.

She was obviously not saying what he wanted her to say. Regardless, Hermione was not going to lie. She may not like Mrs. Malfoy, but she had sworn to tell the truth. "Yes. She called me a Mudblood." There were several mumblings from the bench above her.

"A Mudblood?" Mr. Lufkin scoffed.

"Yes. That is worst I can attest to," Hermione repeated for the third time that day. "Actually, there are a few faces on the Wizengamot that I've heard use the epithet before as well." She shouldn't have said that, judging by the reaction from the bench, but the two she was looking at diverted their gaze and blushed.

Mr. Lufkin cleared his throat to regain Hermione's undivided attention. "In all the encounters you've had with Mrs. Malfoy, there has never been any aggressive action against you?"

"What encounters are you suggesting?" Hermione asked amused. "I've only seen her a few times. I saw her once in Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, again in the Minister's box at the Quidditch World Cup, and once in her home. I've told you everything I can remember of those three occasions to the best of my ability."

"And when your Bonded mate, Severus Snape, took you to the manor, what then?" Mr. Lufkin asked, his eyes accusational.

"Then nothing," Hermione said, slightly exasperated. "I didn't even *see* the Malfoys either time Severus took me to the Malfoys' home." She still hadn't mentioned to anyone about the time Mr. Malfoy had abducted her for lunch. But as they were discussing Mrs. Malfoy, she didn't think it pertinent to her case.

Mr. Lufkin looked down at his notes, his thin lips pursed tightly. "But you do know her to be a Death Eater?"

"Actually, no, I don't. I couldn't say if she was or not. Not under oath," Hermione stated calmly. There were fair amount of murmurs in the room at her comment. "I can't say I saw her fighting except defensively. I did see Mrs. Malfoy standing among Voldemort's supporters before the battle." Several gasps, soft exclamations of outrage, and some swooning could be heard when Hermione said Voldemort's name, and she smiled inwardly. "Mostly, I caught glimpses of her in the castle when she was protecting Draco Malfoy and some of the other students from the Death Eaters. I did see her jinx a wizard to turn his hand limp, or possibly boneless... Oh, and she used a tapestry to help some people escape through a fire, or so Neville told me. You'll have to ask him about that."

"I did see her stun a wizard who'd taken aim at two fifth-years and made a door fly off its hinges to use as a shield to protect herself and those behind her... I do know that she cast a Shield Charm in another corridor and threw a nasty hex at a witch aiming at Draco but that's just being a protective mother in my book. Those are the only times I saw her during the battle. Truth is, I know that she was in the forest when Harry went out to see Voldemort. She lied to Voldemort, told him that Harry was dead when he wasn't. Well, that's actually hearsay from Harry, so you'd have to ask him about that, but I believe Harry. Oh, and I saw her in the castle when Harry confronted Voldemort the second time, standing behind Professors Calhoun and Sprout. She stunned a wizard who was about to attack Harry in the back, just before Harry killed Voldemort. Truth is, I didn't actually *see* Mrs. Malfoy harm *anyone* on *our* side. As far as I know, she only attacked Death Eaters. Well, not seriously, nor did she kill anyone, that I know of. When the battle was over, she was sitting with her family in the Great Hall, holding hands with Mr. Malfoy, if I recall."

"She has the Dark Mark on her arm," Mr. Lufkin stated as if that was conclusive evidence enough.

"So does my Bonded mate, Severus Snape, and it was proven that he'd switched sides. I also know Draco has one, but he fought on our side in the final battle as well." Hermione kept her face as impassive as she could. "If Mrs. Malfoy does have the Dark Mark, I have never seen it," she stated honestly, looking at Mr. Lufkin calmly with a benign smile.

"Fine," Mr. Lufkin said as he tossed down the pad of parchment he'd been holding and turned to the bench. "I'm through with this witness."

Kingsley, who had been taking notes, looked up and smiled at Hermione. "Ms. Granger-Snape, you are free to go. Mr. Lufkin, you may call your next witness."

Relieved, Hermione rose. But just before she was about to turn to leave, she caught Mrs. Malfoy's eye. Mrs. Malfoy was looking at her with an expression that showed both surprise and disbelief at what Hermione had done for her. Mrs. Malfoy nodded her head slightly to Hermione in what could only be regarded as a 'thank you,' and Hermione nodded as if to say 'you're welcome' back. As she left the courtroom, Draco slipped out the door right behind her.

"Granger! Er, Hermione," he called out.

"Yes, Draco?" she replied, turning to face him.



"I you didn't have to do that in there," he said softly.

"What? Tell the court the truth?" she replied in disbelief.

"Say those things about my mum. You could have... Thank you," he said, looking at a loss. For the first time Hermione could remember, Draco was talking to her without sneering.

"That must have really hurt," Hermione said sarcastically and then mentally berated herself. He didn't deserve her cheek with all he was going through with his family. "Draco, I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

"Well, yes, it did actually," he said with a slight smirk. "Look, I know my family I haven't been all that... nice to you, ever, but I appreciate you standing up for my mum."

"It was Auror Lufkin who subpoenaed me, but I understand," she replied, trying to soften her tone. "You're welcome."

Draco smiled, but it didn't remove the sadness in his eyes. "Thanks." Hermione turned to walk away from him but he reached out a hand as if to stop her. "Oi, Gr...Hermione, did you...?"

Hermione smiled at him. "Yes, I had been subpoenaed in regards to what I knew about *your* Death Eater activities. However, I told them the truth about you as well. Harry told me you were given an acquittal. I'm happy for you."

He looked suspicious as if he thought she'd retaliate against him, so she quickly told him what she'd said. "I know that you were ordered to kill Dumbledore, but I know that you couldn't do it, and the attempts you made, the ones I heard about, were half-hearted and careless. Hardly the work of a killer. I also told them that other than general animosity towards Harry, Ron, and me and every other Gryffindor but most particularly me, you haven't done anything all that untoward. A few hexes and pranks at school, but that was it." He smirked at her, and she added, "More or less," as an afterthought. "Besides, you did help us in the end, and you weren't fighting for Riddle in the Final Battle, at least as far as I remember."

"You're all right," he said, looking at the wall instead of at her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I hope everything works out for your mum," Hermione said, feeling sorry for him, but hoping that it didn't show.

"Thanks," he said, spinning on his heel to return to the courtroom.

Hermione felt a little better as she headed up to the atrium to see her friends. She decided that before she had to return to Hogwarts, she was going to invite Dean to the house for lunch as well as Luna and Neville, hoping that Ginny and Harry wouldn't mind.

~S~

Narcissa returned home and immediately rushed into Lucius' private study. Severus and Lucius both stood, Lucius looking torn between expecting the worst and hope flashing on his normally calm face. "Released. A full Pardon for the final battle and I oh, Luc, it's over!" she said as she ran across the room and threw herself in his arms.

The crystal goblet he'd been holding crashed to the floor as he embraced his wife. "Cissy," was all he could say.

Severus felt like a gooseberry, watching the scene until she turned to face him. "Please, whatever it takes, please invite Mrs. Snape to dinner, Severus. I owe her... so much."

Severus' eyebrows rose the same time Lucius asked, "What?"

"All of them, your wife, Severus, Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, Mr. Potter... they came to my trial. Even that young man who we had to hold in our basement, Mr. Thomas Mr. Lufkin subpoenaed them all." She looked up at Severus with tears swimming in her eyes. "But your wife, she and her friends they stood up for me. After everything, they didn't lie to put me away."

Lucius led her to the sofa, keeping an arm about her waist and handed her a handkerchief. "Tell us everything."

Severus repaired the shattered crystal and refilled the glass to offer Narcissa a drink. She accepted the drink and related to her husband and friend what had happened in court. "I have to serve on some committees for community service for the mistreatment of Mr. Ollivander, Mr. Thomas, Mrs. Longbottom, and that goblin, but that's not too horrible. And I will have to pay a fine," she explained, cradling the glass in her hands. "But I'm pardoned for my involvement and for taking the Mark."

Severus stayed to listen to her account and excused himself so they could celebrate in private. As he approached Grimmauld Place, hoping that his wife was inside, he felt a great deal of admiration and pride in his Bonded mate. The house-elf led him to the library door, and he knocked softly rather than to barge in on her. "Hermione, we have to talk," he said as she opened the door to greet him.

"Okay," she said, opening the door wider to allow him in. "Did I forget...? I didn't think we had plans tonight."

"I just came from the Malfoys. Narcissa was deeply touched by what you did for her," he said smoothly and held up a hand to quiet her rebuke. "You told the truth. I never doubted that you wouldn't, but what you said, Mr. Potter and your friends as well, possibly swung the Wizengamot's decision, and she has been released. I wanted to..." He stood, looking at her proudly, still amazed that despite her feelings toward his friends, she testified on Draco's and now Narcissa's behalf. Her sense of honor and generosity astounded him.

Hermione waited patiently, looking up at him with a calm expression.

Her silence unnerved him, as if she had no idea the import of her action. He had precious few true friends due to his secretive nature; Lucius and Narcissa were his closest. "Hermione, they are my friends, even when things all turned upside down we were friends. The Dark Lord tried to play Lucius against me numerous times and Draco... Thank you."

"I only told the truth," she said, making that familiar questioning twitch of her brows before her face relaxed again.

"I'd heard about what you'd said at Draco's hearing and now Narcissa..." he said softly. "Others will try to have you subpoenaed, thinking you'll be able to do the same for them. I fear that you'll receive a lot of subpoenas in the next few months." She opened her mouth but he held up a finger to quiet her. "As Headmaster, I can insist that all subpoenas come through me. I can ask you what you know and have a formal deposition taken or have you record your statements on a letter, much like a Howler. You will not have to attend any trial of any witch or wizard you are not acquainted with."

"And if I want to testify?" she asked, apparently under the opinion it was a civic duty.

"I will accompany you," he stated. He looked down at her casual attire and caressed her hair. "May I stay with you awhile?"

"I was only reading before dinner," she replied with the slightest shrug. "Kreacher is making roast beef. It's really good."

"You're welcome to stay, if you like," Potter said from the doorway.

Severus turned to face him, debating the offer. "Thank you," he said and was surprised to see Potter smile.

He walked into the room and looked up at Severus hesitantly. "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Harry," Hermione corrected him. "He's my best mate, and if you and I are going to do this us, you'll have to get used to calling him by his name." She'd moved around him so that she could face both guys. "And you two will have to be *amiable* toward each other. I won't have it any other way."

Severus turned to look at her. "And likewise, you will have to come to terms with my friends, the Malfoys. Besides, I'm to extend an invite for you and... Harry for dinner." He turned to Potter Harry. "I believe she wanted your wife and the Longbottoms as well. Narcissa wishes to thank you all personally."

Harry's mouth opened as he gaped at him, and Hermione sucked in her breath, gasping, "Surely..."

"You should be safe enough with all of your friends present, my dear," Severus said smoothly. "And this time if you say no it would be considered most discourteous of you."

Hermione blanched. "I'll think about it."

"I'll inform Narcissa that you've accepted?" he said questioningly with a raised eyebrow.

"I can speak for Gin and me when I say yes," Harry said firmly, also raising his brow at Hermione as if to challenge her to decline.

"Fine. I'll go."

Harry looked up at Severus expectantly then looked at the floor. "Yes... Harry?" Severus asked, wondering what the boy could possibly want from him.

"Professor... er, Severus, may I call you that? I was wondering... would you please tell me about my mum?" Harry stammered out nervously. "I won't ask you about my dad. I know you weren't friends well, I know he was a right prat towards you. But I would really like to know more about Mum."

Severus stood rigid, his expression stony as Harry rambled through his request, as he warred with his desire to tell him to mind his own business or to simply leave.

Hermione moved closer and wrapped an arm about his waist, gazing up at him expectantly. "I would love to hear it too. You don't have to give away any confidences I won't ask you to say anything that's too personal, but you could just tell us what she was like. What subjects she liked best, some things she did or..."

The deep longing in Harry's eyes held his gaze as Hermione listed off things she'd like to know about. Most of it was reasonable, and he could avoid the more personal memories. He looked down at Hermione and saw the same longing in her eyes, only not nearly as needy as Harry's. "Fine. I will tell you what she was like."

Hermione's smile literally lit up the room as she took his hand and guided him to the sofa, sitting down next to him. Harry eagerly sat on the chair opposite.

Severus inhaled slowly, exhaling with such slowness it might have seemed as if he were a statue as he considered where to start. Thankfully, Hermione and Harry both waited patiently, although Harry fidgeted slightly, while he figured out where to start. "I met your mother when I was nine. You already know that from the memories I gave you. She and her sister used to play in a park on the other side of the bridge from where I lived. I was the first wizard she'd met. She was gifted, although you've been told that frequently enough. She had a natural talent for potions, a propensity and real intrinsic understanding for the subtle art of brewing. She loved flying..."

Harry smiled at that, but Severus only laced his fingers together and stared at them. "She was... she had a light laugh, smiled easily, innately curious, slightly bossy but usually asked for things she wanted politely. She had a fiery temper, quick mind, and sharp wit and a good sense of humor. She was popular in school, although she preferred revising with me in the library or in the arches of the cloister along the courtyard, and, weather permitting, up on the parapet." Severus smiled slightly as he remembered how brave Lily was when it came to heights. He looked up and caught Harry's gaze. "Your mother was frequently worried that she had to prove herself worthy of being a witch; I think that's why she always strove to learn everything she could and drove herself to be competent at every spell we learned. She was a capable witch, and her achievements gained animosity from many of my housemates..."

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Author's notes:

I want to give a great big thank you hug to DutchessOfArcadia for helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

# Unwillingly Trapped

Chapter 29 of 63

Severus takes part in a set up to trap Rowle's friends, but Hermione gets caught in the fray.



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Unwillingly Trapped

~D~

Draco checked new stirring rods and new quills off his list and looked at the remaining items his father had requested before he tucked the list back into his pocket. The only thing left was to place an order for taper candles for his mum and order the new book *Aviaries of the Wizarding World* by Endell Harper, a renowned author of magical and exotic birds, for his father. His father's aviary and prize peafowl were supposedly featured in the book. Draco also wanted new boots and broom wax. He looked down the street, deciding whether to go to Belladonna's candle shop first or Alderton's Kwik-Repair Shop or to Fire-Draker Cobblers, and saw Hermione walking up the street

from the stationary shop. He knew that she was working for Weasley for pocket money, which really amused him. He watched her, amazed that Severus allowed his wife to be out on the street unescorted, considering that many of his dad's past associates hated her. He figured that he had enough time to socialize, so he started to walk in her direction. "Oi, Granger!" he called out, increasing his speed to catch up to her.

Hermione turned, saw him and turned back around. She snapped her head in his direction when he touched her arm, looking exasperated. "What?"

Her tone was sharp but, considering their history, Draco wasn't the least bit surprised. "Do you have a minute?" he asked, coming to a stop in front of her. Considering his parent's change of attitude toward the girl, he figured he might as well try to be friendly, too. Besides, she'd helped him avoid Azkaban.

"I'm busy, Draco," she replied, adjusting the packages in her arms. "I'm expected back at the shop."

From the shape of the packages, he assumed that they were double reams of parchment, possibly for Weasley's colorful flyers. "I was hoping to, I dunno, have you join me for tea." He sounded like a berk, but managed to control the reflex to cringe.

She looked at him with an incredulous expression and then smirked at him. "Tea? You and me? What would your father say?"

Her manner was irritating him. Here he was trying to be civil, even friendly, and she looked at him as if he were still an arrogant first-year. "I don't care what my father would think if I had tea with the likes of you. I can have tea with whomever I want to." Her eyes narrowed in anger, and he mentally cursed himself. *Damn, why does she always rub me the wrong way?* He took a breath and held out a hand to stop her from walking away. "I simply wanted to talk. You are capable of talking to me, aren't you?"

"Of course, I'm capable. It's your abilities in question," she replied tartly, turning her shoulders to make his hand drop from her arm.

He shoved the hand in his pocket. "Look, we really need to start over, you and I, considering that you are Bonded to Severus Snape and all. He's practically a member of the family."

"And all of a sudden your family finds me acceptable? Blimey, you Malfoys are unbelievable!" she said incredulously, smirking at him. "First your father, then your mum, and now you. What makes you think I want to be friends, considering everything I've had to put up with from you?"

Draco didn't like the slur on his family; they were at least trying. "Oh, yes, and you have tried to let bygones be bygones, have you?" He took a step away from her. "I know that my family has been rude to you in the past, but you stood up for me and my mum anyway, and I thank you for that. I just thought we could..."

"You're welcome," she replied politely enough, although the sincerity didn't reach her eyes. "I have to get back to the shop."

"You can spare a minute, can't you?" he asked, hoping to get this on a better footing.

Hermione's eyebrows rose, mockingly. "Why? So you can show the world that the arrogant Draco Malfoy has turned a new leaf by having tea with the Mudblood best friend of Harry Potter?"

"Maybe I'm simply thirsty and want company!" he stated, trying to keep his frustration in check.

Hermione pointed to a shop girl, standing outside Belladonna's Illuminaries and Candles, having a smoke. "She's available. I need to get these to George."

Draco took a step closer to her and held up his hands. "You're impossible," his said, his fingers fully extended, not to strangle her but to make her see reason. "You want to know why? It's simple." He dropped one of his hands, using the other to point aimlessly down the street. "Severus is my godfather, well, second godfather. Mum and Father asked him when Lestrangle was sent to Azkaban. I admit that Mum suggested I get to know you," he said, now pointing at her. "Really. Don't look at me like I'm some child being told to play nice with the daughter of a guest. It's not that." He was trying, but it was really hard for him to let go of his old habits.

Thankfully, Hermione recognized the effort and giggled softly. "My parents used to do the same thing. I hated playing with Stephanie Grousman."

He assumed that this Grousman was a Muggle because the only Grousman he knew was a ninety-year-old, curmudgeon hermit. "Crabbe and Goyle weren't too bad. Nott only wanted to read when he came over, but Ephraim Lestrangle always broke things and then blamed me."

She gasped in shock, nearly dropping one of the packages. "You mean Bellatrix had a baby?"

"Nah, Rabastan's," Draco said with a smirk. "He went to Durmstrang. Crouch had Uncle Rab's wife Kissed when I was two, and she died in Azkaban." Draco was surprised to see the sympathy in her eyes for the crazy wench, although in all fairness, she'd never met the loon. *Maybe Granger isn't so bad after all.* "How about if we just agree that the potion's botched sludge and start over. Maybe we can find some common ground."

She started laughing.

"What is so funny?" he asked, crossing his arms and glaring at her, insulted by her hysterics.

She stopped laughing long enough to say, "You just equated our past to sewage treatment waste."

"I did not!" he exclaimed, affronted.

~S~

Auror Hayward Blume, Polyjuiced to impersonate Rowle, stood outside of Cabochons Lapidary, pretending to be looking at the minerals, crystals, and gemstones in the display window. Severus was next door at Gambol and Japes, currently leaning against the wall between the door and topiary dragon in a large pot with an Auror's Anti-Notice Charm on his person. Galvin Darthmyer and Loraine Matsuno likewise lingered along the shop windows across the street, currently gazing at the window of Incense Wondrous, both in disguises. At least they appeared to be a couple waiting for something. In contrast, for someone trying to be casually inconspicuous while browsing, Blume was inept. He'd been constantly looking over his shoulder, scanning the shoppers and passersby as he slowly moved from shop to shop, and watching everyone behind him in the reflections of the windows. Severus had given up listening to Blume's babble on the hearing device in his ear.

A wizard approached and passed by Severus, wearing a floppy-brimmed hat and nondescript patched robes, attracting Severus' notice. Even with his face mostly obscured by the brim of the hat, he was trying to be inconspicuous, head slightly down, stoop shouldered and barely moving his head to peer from under the brim, but Severus recognized him regardless. It was Alberic Gibbon, older brother of Rowle's best mate, Adrian Gibbon, who'd died from a Killing Curse that had been intended for Lupin the day Severus had killed Dumbledore. Severus swore, ignoring the admonishment from the mother herding four kids out of Gambol and Japes. He waited, watching Gibbon as he stopped at the magical instruments shop. Several seconds later, Gibbon crossed the street and approached Auror Blume. He tried to signal Matsuno, but she wasn't watching him, or Gibbon. Her attention was on something in the other direction, something Darthmyer was discreetly pointing out.

Severus adjusted his hearing device to increase the volume and focused on what Gibbon might say. Thankfully, Auror Matsuno turned to check Blume. She nudged Auror Darthmyer and indicated toward Blume with a subtle lift of her chin. Showing a great deal of restraint, Darthmyer observed the pair across the street in the shop's window.

"So, you now into healing stones and crystal divination, eh?" Gibbon asked, moving to stand next to Blume as if the display was his destination. Unnoticed by Gibbon, Matsuno and Darthmyer moved in Blume's direction to the next shop, directly behind him, although still managing to appear more interested in the window display than the pair across the street.

Blume paused, as if trying to think of what he should say. "No, that was Dumbledore's thing," he finally said in Rowle's gruff voice.

Apparently, that was the right response because Gibbon smiled and turned to face Rowle. "What are you doing here?" Gibbon asked softly.

"Shopping, what else?" Blume responded slowly, still facing the windows.

Severus scowled at the conversation. Blume was hesitating before answering, and he seemed to be trying too hard to act indifferent, and failing, which would only aggravate Gibbon.

"What's gotten into you?" Gibbon snapped.

Severus considered easing closer to the pair, but Gibbon was the jumpy type, suspicious, and generally alert. The Auror's version of the Anti-Notice spell allowed those who knew you were there to see you, but if he got too close, Gibbon's senses might detect Severus and thus make him visible. If that happened, he'd run, and they would lose the opportunity of the set up.

Blume turned to face Gibbon finally, a smile stretching on his face. "Nothing," he said.

"What is with you? I know the Aurors picked you up. Are you Confused or something?"

Matsuno took the risk to glance at Severus, her brow creasing as she shrugged. He made a single nod to acknowledge her, but didn't move from his location because he was close enough should Blume need his assistance.

Blume's slow reaction only seemed, in Severus' opinion, to prove that Rowle was under the Confundus Charm or suffering the aftereffects of Veritaserum. "I was let go."

"Is that so? Why's..." Gibbon was suddenly distracted by something down the street.

Severus turned to look in the same direction and swore again. Hermione was walking toward Weasley's shop with Draco Malfoy.

"Oi! There is that Mudblood! Just my good luck!"

Severus watched as Gibbon reached for his wand just as a bunch of snot-nosed kids blocked his path as they clustered together to enter Gambol and Japes. As Gibbon took aim at Hermione, Blume acted quickly, ramming his elbow in Gibbon's gut and drawing his wand. Severus shoved his way through the boys, knocking two of them down just as Gibbon fired the Killing Curse. Down the street, Draco pulled Hermione to him, making her lose her footing as she fell into him. Severus shoved another woman aside as he frantically tried to close the distance between Blume, Gibbon and himself, his wand now in his grip.

Gibbon let out a hiss and smacked Blume, pushing him away. "What's wrong with you?" he snarled as he tried to cast another Killing Curse at Hermione and Draco.

Down the street, Draco pulled Hermione with him against the wall of the ice cream parlor and wrapped her in his arms as Blume tried to wrestle Gibbon.

Severus heard Blume snarl, "I got you, now," as he grabbed Gibbon's arm, aiming his wand at the man's stomach.

"Oh, yeah? We'll see about that." Gibbon tried to jerk his arm free and disappeared suddenly, setting off the Apparating alarms for that section of the street. Down the street, the Apparating alarms activated again.

Both Gibbon and Blume and Draco and Hermione disappeared. Severus let out an animalistic snarl as he followed the pull of the Tracking Charm on Blume.

~H~

Hermione looked up, suddenly went pale, and grasped Draco's arm as she gasped, her packages falling to the ground unnoticed. Draco turned to see what had startled her so and saw Rowle and Gibbon standing bold as you please in front of a shop window. Unfortunately, Gibbon also saw Hermione, and he was drawing his wand. Draco took action quickly, grasping Hermione and yanking, pulling her over closer to the shops, hoping to use the shop's bay window as cover. The jet of sickly green light passed behind Hermione and killed a potted rose. She stumbled, but at least she didn't fight him too much. "We have to get out of here," he told her urgently, trying to hold her tightly enough in his arms to Apparate.

She struggled, her foot landing hard on his boot. "Stop manhandling me!" she snarled.

Gibbon was taking aim again as Rowle grabbed his arm and finally drew his own wand. Draco had no idea why Rowle was trying to protect them, but he'd not spurn an owl bearing gifts. Gibbons' Killing Curse rebounded off the wall inches from where they were standing. Ignoring her protests, he Disapparated, taking her with him to the first place that came to him. Home. His room to be precise.

"Get off let go of me this instant!" Hermione snarled, shoving him away.

"I was only saving your life, you ungrateful wench," Draco snarled back. *Of all the ungrateful...*

"Well, wench is much better than Mudblood, I suppose," Hermione snarled at him from over her shoulder as she surveyed his bedroom.

"I'm trying to turn over a new leaf," he snarled back, furious at the girl's lack of appreciation. She'd be a corpse if he hadn't acted so quickly.

Hermione whirled around to face him. "By abducting me to your *bedroom*!?" she snapped at him as if just now realizing where he'd taken her to.

"It was the first place I thought of," he snapped back, wishing he'd thought of the koi pond. Then he could have dumped her in it.

"Convenient," she snarled, hands on her hips, glaring at him as if he'd brought her here to molest her. "Let me go!"

"Gladly," Draco said, moving aside to let her pass and holding out his arm. "There's the door."

Hermione jerked the door open and came face to face with a shocked Lucius Malfoy. "Draco, what is all the shouting? Oh, hello, Mrs. Snape," he said, his surprise making it more a question than a statement. "Welcome back," he said civilly with a polite smile, recovering quickly.

"Hardly," she snapped. "Let me pass."

"By all means," Lucius said, standing aside chivalrously.

Draco watched her storm past his father and his fists clenched. "Ungrateful bitch."

His father had raised his eyebrow questioningly at him until his outburst made him scowl. "Draco, manners," Lucius said smoothly. "Regardless, of how uncivil she is, she *is* a guest in this house. I'm assuming she's a guest... You didn't abduct her, did you?"

"NO!" he answered, then sighed, his shoulders relaxing as he watched his father's expression darken. "Yes. But I had good cause and no time to think before acting. Gibbon and Rowle were in Diagon Alley. Gibbon tried to kill her, but oddly Rowle tried to stop him..."

"I think we had best see to our guest," Lucius said, cutting him off with a wave of his hand. "You can tell me what happened later, after dinner. Let's make sure she's not too upset with us, shall we?"

~S~

Severus arrived at what looked like a karst-landscape region not twenty feet away from the entrance to a megalithic dolmens. Blume was being held by the scruff by Gibbon, who was arguing with none other than Ashton Foulkes.

Severus thanked Merlin that he'd had the good sense to maintain his Anti-Notice Charm although the sound of his Disapparation was as loud as a gunshot in the wide open rock and grass terrain. He quickly Disillusioned himself as he lunged, ducking into the grass as both wizards turned immediately in the direction of the sound. Foulkes drew his wand while Gibbon fired a Killing Curse at the place Severus had stood. Severus fired a Body-Bind at Gibbon, but the wizard had swung Blume in front of him when he'd turned, and Severus hit Blume square in the chest.

The twin pops of Matsuno and Darthmyer rent the silence, and Severus used the distraction to take aim at Gibbon again. Gibbon and Foulkes both shot off a spell at Darthmyer. Darthmyer fumbled, apparently either having been hit or from losing his footing. But Matsuno knocked Foulkes on his arse with a powerful spell. Severus took aim at Gibbon as Gibbon fired again, this time at Matsuno, and Severus hit him in the side, immobilizing Gibbon.

Severus removed the spells on his person as he watched Matsuno run over to Blume and release the Body-Bind. "Nice shot," she said as Severus approached.

He looked around but assumed that the megalithic dolmens was empty since no one else had joined in the fray. "Loads of practice," he said and indicated Gibbon with a nod of his head. "He's Alberic Gibbon. I confirm him to be a Death Eater and one of the inner circle. The other," he said, pointing, "is Aston Foulkes. I have to go, but I want to interrogate these two. I have a personal interest in them."

Matsuno's eyebrows rose and she smirked. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"No," Severus replied as Darthmyer walked over, limping badly.

"I'll inform Shackbolt," Matsuno said and hurried over to secure Foulkes.

Severus pointed at Darthmyer's leg. "I can do a quick check to ascertain if there is a break," he said, his wand held casually in his direction.

Darthmyer squinted his eyes in suspicion as Severus knelt down beside him. "I know it's broken," he snarled. "I can barely stand on it."

"Then it wouldn't hurt to check, would it?" Severus annunciated the diagnostic spell to detect broken bones clearly rather than doing it nonverbally. Darthmyer flinched, his own wand aimed at Severus. The light surrounding Darthmyer's lower leg pulsed with a red glow just above the ankle.

Severus calmly looked up at the Auror, ignoring the wand pointed at his face. "If you want I can heal this."

Darthmyer looked at him skeptically, but nodded, never lowering his wand. "So'l-right," he slurred through clenched teeth.

Severus held his hand beside the injury and aimed his wand at the fracture site. "*Talocrural Emendo*," he said smoothly and distinctly while envisioning the proper anatomical structure of the tibia, fibula, and talus. The glow around Darthmyer's ankle brightened and then faded. Severus sat back as Darthmyer moved his foot, testing the joint.

"Thank you," he said, finally lowering his wand.

Severus nodded, noting that Matsuno had both Foulkes and Gibbon bound in ropes, almost ready to Apparate with them to the Ministry. "I'll be in the office in an hour," he said to her.

"Oh, they'll be waiting," she replied with a smirk.

Severus arrived back at Diagon Alley and walked to where he'd last seen Hermione and Draco. *What was Draco doing here, and where did he take my wife?* She had looked upset, but then she'd just seen Auror Blume posing as Rowle talking to Gibbon, and Gibbon had tried to kill her twice. He closed his eyes a moment and his intuition said, 'Southwest.' Severus opened his eyes and turned in the direction his intuition was directing him. He could feel an urge, not dissimilar to a feint tug, which seemed to pull at him southward, getting stronger the harder he focused on wanting to find Hermione. It was just like the feeling he'd had the night he'd followed Hermione to the park. His gut was telling him, Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, in southwest England.

Choosing to trust this gut feeling, he Apparated, letting his intuition guide him. He arrived in a hallway of the East guest wing in Malfoy Manor. Severus inhaled slowly, his senses drawing him down and to the right. He knew she was here, just as he had known she'd been in Weasley's flat the night of Weasley's party. The implications were not lost on him.

~H~

Hermione hated being called a guest. She was *not* a guest in *this* house she was a captive again! *Being brought here against my will into a bedroom Draco's if I were to guess does not equate to being a guest!* She fumed as she stormed down the hall and turned left, making another left and followed the hallway. The hall ended at a window between the doors to two bedrooms. Grunting in frustration, she turned and stormed back. She had no idea how the floor plan was laid out or where she was in the huge manor.

"And where do you think you are going?" a portrait asked imperiously.

"Away from his bloody bedroom," she snarled. Not only did she lose the parcels George had asked her to pick up, she was stuck in bloody Malfoy Manor.

The arrogant blond followed her into the next painting. "Well, then you are going the wrong way."

She turned to glare at him, surprised to see a handsome man in a tailored cotehardie that revealed his v-shaped torso under his open tunic, which was so short and tight, it emphasized his bulge in his striped tights. He hooked his thumbs in his belt, his fingers framing the bulge, and smirked at her for noticing. "If you are wishing to avoid the private residences of the heir, follow the hall to your left. However, if you go too far it will take you to the master's suites."

"And if I want out of here, which way *should* I go?" she asked the wizard as politely as she could.

"Where do you think you're going?" Draco asked, seemingly to materialize from out of nowhere.

"Home!" she snapped as she tried to decide whether to go right or left. The smirking image of the wizard had said that Mr. Malfoy's rooms were to the left, Draco's to the right. Behind her she knew to be a dead end. So she chose left, swearing softly when both the painted wizard and Draco followed her.

"In the East guest wing?" Draco asked amused, catching up to her easily. "Severus' rooms are down and to the left there."

"No, I mean *my* home," she replied, tired of the game he was playing. She stopped in front of a stairway that went up not down.

"You mean Spinner's End?" Draco asked bemusedly from behind her.

"Gr... Grr..." she tried to say and couldn't, due to the protection of the Fidelius Charm. "Harry's, okay! I want to go home!" Just then, to make matters even worse, Severus appeared down the hall walking toward her. "Perfect!"

"So, you *did* want to see your husband?" Draco chided her, crossing his arms and leaning next to the frame holding the blond wizard and a bemused white-haired witch in a high-waisted, heavily embroidered gown of contrasting silks and brocades from the late medieval period.

"*She's* married to Severus Snape?" the witch asked the wizard in her frame, her brow arched and pointing to them with a delicate, ring-adorned hand.

"I'm not sure. She lives at Grr House with someone named Harry," the wizard replied smugly.

Draco turned to look at his ancestors. "Nope, she's magically Bonded to Severus Snape."

The witch and wizard looked confused, and Hermione scowled at them. She didn't like the smirk and condescending tone of the witch, or the smugness of the wizard, which matched Draco's bemused expression perfectly. She rolled her eyes and turned to leave.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Severus asked, coming to a halt in front of her and grasping her by the arms. "You weren't hit, were you?"

"No. If she'd been hit, she'd be dead. Gibbon cast the Killing Curse," Draco said nonchalantly. "What I want to know is why Rowle was trying to save her?"

"He what?" Hermione asked, turning to look at him.

"It wasn't Rowle," Severus said smoothly, turning her to face him again. "Are you all right? Come with me; let's get you out of here." He put an arm across her shoulders and led her away. However, he stopped in front of the open doorway to his rooms.

Hermione took a step back. "I'm not going in there!" She wanted to leave, to go home. She was not going to shag Severus.

"I need to talk to you, and you should freshen up for dinner," he replied, opening the door and shoving her inside. She heard Draco's laughter before the door closed behind him. "What were you doing wondering around Diagon Alley unescorted? You are *not* supposed to be wandering around anywhere"

"I was *with* Ron! Well, sort of. He was behind me, or so I thought," she snarled. "I bumped into Draco and realized Ron had ducked into the Quidditch shop; ~~he~~ prevented me from returning to George's shop..."

Severus leaned over her, his eyes narrowed dangerously, "Do not interrupt me! I know that Draco intercepted you. I was on the street. Had he not you'd. ~~Be~~*Dead*. What will it take, woman, to make you see how precarious your life is right now? Rowle was an Auror under Polyjuice. Two other Aurors were on the street with us with five stationed in strategic positions for crowd control and back up if needed. It was a planned trap. Thankfully, it worked. Two more were apprehended today, out of ten that we know who have joined up with Dolohov. Not only do they want to kill you for your part in the war they want to kill you for *mine*. They know that we are Bonded. If you are killed, it will weaken me, temporarily, but enough. Bloody hell, witch, what will it take to get this through your thick head. *They. Want. You. Dead.*"

Hermione staggered and fell back, thankfully, into a chair. "I was in a public there were kids around! Families!"

He ran his hands through his hair. "Do you think that matters? Alberic Gibbon killed the Walsh family; Amycus Carrow blasted down the door, killed the father and one son while Gibbon took out the mother, another son, and *an infant*. He killed Amy Colin and her flat mate in a green grocer. They were only nineteen. On Hyde street, he made a car swerve and kill Orinda Blume, wife of Auror Blume in broad daylight on a crowded street. He killed Walter Green and a postman on the front step of his house in broad daylight on a Saturday. Gibbon was on the raid of the Ashley Magical Primary School that had been targeted because they'd accepted Muggle-borns after the Dark Lord's first fall, and he killed two teachers and two passersby. He killed three Muggles on the Penwortham Bridge in Preston, Lancashire to get James Ponce, who had testified at his brother's hearing. He stood on a street corner to blow up a car belonging to a half-blood who married a Muggle, killing his wife and two kids as they drove by. He was on the raid with his brother in Buxted, killing a family in the local park, and in Newhaven, East Sussex they raided the home of Laura and Stephen Madley because their daughters, Debbie and Laura, had been admitted to Hogwarts. He was..."

"Enough!" she shouted, cutting him off and covering her ears. "Okay, he's evil," she moaned, desperate to make him stop.

"He's only one, Hermione," he said, forcing her arms down and kneeling to look her in the eye. "He was tame compared to some and earned the Dark Lord's favor frequently for his brazenness. I know these men; I was one of them."

"What sort of things did you do, then? Kill kids in their home? Blow up cars with families in them? Attack primary schools and play grounds? Blow up bridges?" she asked and realized that he'd avoided her gaze as she listed off the possibilities. She recoiled in shock when he didn't deny any of it. "You did, didn't you?"

"I joined the Dark Lord after leaving Hogwarts in 1978. I was sent to a Potions master for my training, because Avery, Rosier, Mulciber, the Lestrangle brothers, and Lucius Malfoy all told him how promising I was in Potions. But I served him. So, yes, I did some of those things and more. In 1980 I overheard something, a prophecy that I knew meant the death of Lily Evans Potter. I turned to Dumbledore, but at a price. I was Dumbledore's spy, the Dark Lord's minion a sycophant. I *am* a killer, Hermione. Mostly, I was very adept at magically manipulating others."

"Was," she tried to correct him, but it came out as a weak squeak. She looked at him imploringly, hoping to see that he was exaggerating.

"I was a Death Eater, one of the inner circle, a favorite, and extremely well versed in the Dark Arts," he stated firmly. "I told you not to romanticize it. I created potions, poisons, and curses to kill and cause harm. I was very skilled at manipulating and bending people to my will, making them do what I wanted them to do. I'm not proud of my early adult years, but that's what I had become until he went after Lily." He paused as he glanced at the floor. "I was everything you hate about them."

Tears slid down unbidden on her cheeks as his words sunk in. He reached out to wipe them away, and she jerked her head back. "And after, after Harry won the Triwizard Tournament? You were on our side!"

He summoned a chair and sat, facing her, his arms on his legs and hands laced together between his knees. "Dumbledore sent me to him after we got what information we could from Barty Junior, before he was Kissed. I presented myself to the Dark Lord. I carried out his plans all summer relaying what I could to Dumbledore. I was told to reside here, at Malfoy Manor, to train Draco, and the new recruits. When school started, I was told to return so I did. Happily, might I add. During the Christmas holidays, I remained in the castle but I was summoned frequently, for my... specific talents. The following summer I was remanded to my own home, but I was forced to house that vermin Pettigrew in my home. The Malfoys were in disgrace because Lucius was unsuccessful in retrieving the prophecy and had been arrested. As you know. That year, Dumbledore gave me the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, which made the Dark Lord very angry with me. He knew the position was cursed and that I'd have only one year in the position if not the school. It forced him to escalate his plans to take over. He wasn't ready there weren't as many wizards and witches flocking to him like the last time. Too many people remembered. Over Christmas holidays, I was again summoned frequently. He wanted hundreds placed under the Imperius or made into Inferi. I invented a potion that mimicked the blank expression of the Imperius but allowed the individual to retain their mental faculties. It was a risk... As you know, for every potion or poison I created I created an antidote. You met my contact at St. Mungo's, although you might not remember him."

"Vaguely," she said softly.

He was staring at his hands and he continued, his voice solemn. "The end of that term, I killed Dumbledore. The Dark Lord was furious. He had wanted Draco to attempt it and to fail. Again, my actions forced his hand to take actions he was still not ready for. He wanted to wait until Potter was no longer under Dumbledore's protection. I was remanded to my home, but I was to train Draco in the Dark Arts, and I had to house Pettigrew again. But I was summoned for raids and for whatever the Dark Lord asked of me. That summer I didn't have any contact with the members of the Order. I still had a job to do protect the students, but no backup. I managed to sway Draco during his seventh year, barely, and Narcissa. She knew that the only way her family would survive was if Potter won, and she'd have to do something to help him. Draco knew it too. They hated it, but in the end, they did try." He finally looked up at her, his expression unreadable. "You know the rest."

"Except how you survived the snake bite. I saw you die!" she exclaimed.

He shook his head. "You saw the muscle and respiratory paralysis caused by the hemotoxic and neurotoxic properties of Nagini's venom; it caused some minor damage, but I had taken the antidote. I'd had the antidote ever since creating it for Arthur Weasley. It takes multiple doses, but I had taken one just before entering the shack. Lucius was waiting outside, just in case, with another dose. A previous arrangement we had. He waited until the Dark Lord had summoned everyone to the forest and slipped away to get me, called a house-elf, and had me taken to his home. Not all that dramatic, but that's what happened. Narcissa nursed me back to health."

Hermione leaned back in her chair, her mind processing everything he'd said. It was an honest accounting of his activities, without really giving her any of the details details she now knew she didn't really want to know about. "Thank you," she replied honestly.

"So, dinner here, or would you prefer somewhere else?" he asked, his voice laced with uncertainty.

She was shocked to see his guard down, his body relaxed and his expression questioning. "I would prefer somewhere quiet and alone," she said. She was certain that she saw a flash of relief in his eyes. He must have thought that his statements would have made her turn away from him for good. "How about something light, soup and sandwiches take-away from a deli I know and go to your place?"

His mouth quirked into an amused half smile before he rose elegantly to his feet and extended his hand to her. "I have one better, Hogwarts and a small room overlooking the lake." She placed her hand in his and he pulled her to her feet. "My house is secured and warded for the school year," he added quickly.

Hermione nodded. "I will need to send a message to Harry and George," she replied. "They are probably thinking the worst about now."

"By all means," he said with a sweep of his hand. "A Patronus is faster than an owl and cannot be fabricated or falsified."

She sent two, one to George apologizing for going missing and losing his parchments and one to Harry saying she was all right and with Severus. Severus led her from the room and down into the main foyer. Draco came out from the drawing room, holding Astoria Greengrass' hand, followed by his parents. Severus made their apologies for not staying, stating that Hermione wanted to be alone after her near death excitement.

"Draco told us what happened. I'm glad you're all right," Narcissa said graciously to Hermione. "I look forward seeing you and your friends again tomorrow."

Hermione didn't know what to say so she simply said, "Thank you."

Lucius wished Hermione well and bid them good night before he and his wife walked away. Astoria greeted Hermione and Severus with a shy smile. Hermione thanked Draco and apologized for behaving so childish. He simply smirked, told her not to think on it, and shook Severus' hand before leading Astoria to the dining room.

Severus Apparated them to the gates of the school. They walked in relative silence as Hermione gazed about the grounds, pointing out that Hagrid was home as they passed his hut.

"He lives here year-round, Hermione," Severus said with a bemused smile. He summoned a house-elf when they reached the Entrance Hall, asking the portly elf what had been made for dinner and requesting a table set up in a room on the seventh floor. When they entered, a table set for two next to the window with steaming bowls of stew, fresh bread and an open bottle of wine awaited them. Severus helped her with her chair and sat across from her. "Before you start, I ask you to please, let my past stay in the past. I realize that you are curious about me, and I know I'm secretive, but there is so much I simply want to forget. I'll try to be more forthcoming with some memories, but this is very difficult for me."

She watched him as he poured the wine. "I know. I'm sorry for being so pushy about it, but I hardly know you. I don't mean my stern, snarky professor, I mean you and we're practically married! Okay, we're married Bonded whatever. Apparently we're soul mates, according to the spell, but you have to admit we hardly liked each other well, I never hated you, but you couldn't stand me. That was very apparent."

He simply watched her, his eyes boring into hers, making her uncomfortable. "You hated me," she repeated before she tasted the stew. It was fabulous, the gravy rich and beefy, the potatoes and carrots soft but the peas were not at all mushy.

"I never hated you; you were annoying as a student. Parroting the books back at me perfectly without thinking for yourself," he said smoothly, his fingers sliding on the stem of his goblet, the other hand holding his spoon. "And I was unable to pull you aside as I wanted to do and force you to expand your mind, to challenge you and see how far you could go in Potions. I knew that you could brew any potion you saw in a book adequately enough. Just as I knew the other professors wouldn't push you to see how far you could go. They admired you too much."

Hermione gaped at the almost compliment laced between insults.

He smirked at her and swallowed some wine. "I even wanted to join your army in your fifth year and instruct you work on your Defense skills, show you things that would really have made you fighters. But I couldn't risk it."

"Like what?" she asked, dropping her spoon as she looked at him with an eager curiosity, wondering what he'd have taught them.

"A moot point now, we won," he said and smiled at her disappointed stare. "Yes, I wanted Potter to win. I was banking on him to win."

"Would you still teach me?" she asked, taking a bite of her supper.

"What would be the point? You're not following Potter and becoming an Auror. In fact, I don't know what you want to do." He took a bite of his stew as he watched her intently.

She stared at the food in her bowl. "I don't know yet. No, I don't want to be an Auror, but I want to be able to make a difference in the world." She looked up at him. "There is so much that needs straightening out, so many wrongs."

He scoffed softly. "A crusader. You have eight months to figure it out. Applications should be sent in April, May at the latest, if you want an apprenticeship, although, I'd prefer if you didn't go that route."

She looked up and tilted her head slightly, her brows creasing in confusion. "Why?"

"I don't like the idea of my wife apprenticed to some shmuck. I want you at home or, better, here with me," he said. He scowled when she'd snorted softly at his comment. He turned to look at the window and back. "Enough of this. What else would you like to talk about?" he asked, his tone wary.

"How about the changes you've made to the school or the staff or curriculum?" she asked, taking a small bite of the stew. It was still very hot.

For the second time he seemed to relax, his mouth curving into a smile. He began to outline the changes he'd made, the newly acquired staff, and the things that he'd had to rescind from the previous year. "When the castle was rebuilt, the third floor was remodeled into large classrooms. The biggest change is that we will have a revision hall on the fourth floor, and there will be clubs for each subject and more inter-house activities so the students get to know one another without house rivalry. We will have individual competitions with honors given for individual achievements in each subject. The prefects have a lounge across from their private bathroom on the fifth floor. Also, we're going to have apprentices for the staff..."

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Later that evening, after Severus gave Hermione a tour of the renovations done to the castle, they sat together in front of the fireplace in the headmaster's suite, sipping on a glass of elf-made wine. As long as she didn't ask about his past, Severus seemed to be relatively at ease with her, although he still reminded her of a predator ready to spring.

He obviously preferred silence, which Hermione found awkward, and she fought against her urge to engage him in idle conversation. More than once, she saw him smirking in his glass as he took a sip during the lulls of conversation.

Hermione wasn't used to drinking, and as she sipped on her third glass, she began to feel drowsy. However, Severus was discussing a theory on using anchovies verses shellfish in memory potions. She closed her eyes, trying to picture the rationale. "Isn't it a huge risk considering the use of a creature known to have the marine biotoxin domoic acid, which normally causes permanent short-term memory loss and brain damage, in memory restoration potions?" she asked.

"Bloodworm and Fire-boring chigger secretions neutralize the neurotoxin, but make the potion unstable. The powdered bicorn horn, if added to the potion in small amounts, should stabilize the potion, but timing its introduction is tricky," he said and started to explain why.

He was stroking her hair as he talked, giving her a warm fuzzy feeling intensified by the wine and the rich velvety sound of his voice...

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"... It's not something I'd show a student," Severus said and realized that Hermione had fallen asleep against his side. He smiled, tucking her more comfortably beside him and transfiguring settee to a more comfortable recliner. Satisfied that he hadn't woken her, he then Summoned a book.

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In the morning, the clock on the mantle began to chime again, the fireplace flared, and two newspapers popped out onto the carpet unnoticed by the sleeping couple. On the front page of the *Daily Prophet* was an article by Rita Skeeter complete with a picture of Hermione repeatedly falling into Draco's arms and vanishing away with him.

**Hermione Granger-Snape's secret infatuation with Draco Malfoy**

*After years of hurtful, derogatory comments and bullying, did the Prince of Slytherin win the heart of the Gryffindor Princess? I think so, if what this reporter has witnessed is true. Has our brilliant star of the Golden Trio harbored deep-seated feelings for the scrumptious young Malfoy? She certainly seems to have been glad to see him. Is it possible that they have held secret crushes for each other after all these years? You all know what it means when little boys pull on little girl's braids, don't you? Maybe that's why Mrs. Granger-Snape has refused to sign her Bonding certificate and legalize her union to notorious ex-Death Eater, Severus Snape.*

*Wonder what Severus Snape thinks about his Bonded mate's tryst with her childhood flame, the heir of the Malfoy money?*

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*Yes, I know I cheated you out of some of the dinner conversation. Don't fret, I'll make it up to you.*

*I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and to DutchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.*

*Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!*

# Facing Friends

Chapter 30 of 63

Hermione has breakfast at Hogwarts, meets her new professors, and has dinner with the Malfoys. Severus interrogates Death Eaters, discovers some new information, and enjoys Hermione's company at the Manor.



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Facing Friends

Hermione awakened, finding herself snuggled against Severus on a huge recliner, fully dressed except for her shoes. She rose off him, stretching, and gaped at the sight of her toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, hairbrush and a change of clothes sitting on the coffee table in front of her. "When...? Who? Did you...?" she stammered, turning to look at him.

"The Hogwarts house-elves are efficient," he stated as he turned the page of his morning paper.

A loud crackle in the fireplace caught her attention, drawing her gaze to something moving in the fire. What was left of the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* she noted, was turning black as the pages curled in the flames while it burned. "Something they printed bothered you?" she asked, indicating the paper.

"Malignant falsifications and ridiculous innuendos," he stated contemptuously as he glared at the paper in his hands. "If you'd like to freshen up for breakfast, you may use my bath."

Hermione shook her head. "I should be returning home," she replied, wondering what had been printed in the *Daily Prophet* to make him burn it.



He closed the paper as he lowered his hands to his lap with an exasperated sigh. "I would like you to at least stay for breakfast, Hermione. I know that your professors would be delighted to have you join us."

Hermione considered his request for a second, deciding it might be nice to have breakfast with him, then contemplated whether to go shower and if she'd have enough time.

Severus audibly sighed, sounding more like an annoyed huff, and tossed his paper aside when she pocketed her tooth- and hairbrush. "Fine, I'll—"

She looked up at him, holding her wand to shrink her clothes, wondering what set him off. "No, I want to, but I think I'll... What?"

His eyes narrowed and his brow creased.

"You did say I could freshen up," she stated, watching the minute flickers of confusion change to an expression of comprehension on his face.

"Yes, I did. I'll show you where." He stood and she followed him up the stairs at the back of the sitting room to a bedroom.

Hermione froze in the doorway of the room, staring at a huge bed, the only piece of furniture the large round room seemed to hold. The head of the bed was recessed into the thick stone wall with the canopy of the bed actually carved out of stone, which appeared to have grown out of the wall and echoed the shape of the vaulted ceiling, and was ornately decorated with gold leaf, lots of abalone, and mother of pearl. Heavy dark blue curtains were tied back to reveal a large headboard bearing the Hogwarts coat of arms, and two tree-like posts, complete with branches and roots, stood at the foot of the bed as if to anchor it from ceiling to floor. A padded bench sat beside the bed like a step and a beautiful upholstered bench at the foot between the trees...

"Impressive, isn't it?" Severus said with a hint of mockery in his tone from behind her.

"It's..." she gasped, completely at a loss of words. *Frightening. Imposing... and if I move in here with him... Oh, my gods! He wants me to sleep with him in that?!* Hermione turned slowly to gaze about the room, seeing a huge wardrobe that curved to fit against the wall and a large marble fireplace, both that took up a good section of the walls. The bed and wardrobe were both flanked by diamond-paned windows with dark blue curtains. There was another doorway across the room, obviously the bathroom.

Somehow, the very idea of walking across the room, around that bed, with Severus watching her made her legs feel rubbery. "Like a room you'd expect for a... king," she said softly, eager to leave.

"It was designed by Carolus Theodald, the first Headmaster of Hogwarts, around the time of the Third Crusade. The Headmaster's office was his design as well. This room was updated during the Baroque era," Severus said, moving away from the doorframe as he approached her. "The bathroom is through there. Please, you're holding up breakfast."

Hermione swallowed back her reservations and strode purposefully to the bath. Once again, Hermione stopped in the doorway, surprised by what she saw. In contrast, the almost normal-looking bathroom was quite shocking compared to the lavish royal opulence of the bedroom. It was bright: everything was white against pale yellow walls: white counters, cupboard with shelves, and a large white clawed-foot tub with brass fixtures that reminded her of a bathroom out of *Real Homes* magazine. Yellow towels hung on a brass bar and also filled two of the shelves. The floor, made of sand-colored tiles, had plush, yellow Muggle rugs lying in front of the tub, the shell-shaped washbasin, and even on the lid of the toilet seat. What really tickled her was the bowl of lemons and potpourri on the counter.

She washed her face, then brushed her teeth, and contemplated brushing her hair, knowing that would only make it fuzzier. Severus was waiting for her by the door. "So am I to believe that you like dark blue and yellow?" she asked, blushing at his dark scowl.

"I like dark colors," he said and grit his teeth. "The office and Headmaster's room don't change much, as you can tell, except in the color of the drapes. Albus has some curse on the bathroom so I can't... that I haven't had time to undo. He liked yellow – and purple." His brisk manner on the subject made Hermione hold her tongue on any further questions regarding the décor.

When Severus opened the door for her to enter the Great Hall, the conversation stopped. At first she thought it was due to Severus' entry, but Hagrid's booming cry of, "Look! It's Hermione!" made her smile.

"Blimey, girl, I'd not expected to see you until Tuesday," said Dawlish, a wizard Hermione knew had been in the Order but had only met once.

She was interrupted from answering by Professor McGonagall's, "My dear girl, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Professor," Hermione replied as Severus guided her to a seat. He quickly introduced her to the new professors as his Bonded mate as the food arrived. Severus turned to speak to Reginald Reynolds, who Hermione was introduced to as the new Potions professor.

"You are Bonded to the Headmaster?" Professor Tigran Avoian, an Armenian wizard with a Russian accent asked, holding his knife poised over his sausages. "I think I see you in the paper with a blond... or a red-haired wizard. No?"

"Don't always believe what Rita Skeeter writes in the *Prophet*," Severus answered for her. "The red-haired man is a friend of hers, Mr. Ronald Weasley. The blond is my godson, Draco Malfoy."

She turned to gape at him in astonishment. "What was in it?" she asked, her stomach lurching.

"An exaggerated fabrication of the facts and a shameful misrepresentation of the occurrence in the image," Severus stated indifferently.

"In other words, Rita lied," Professor McGonagall stated, adding cream to her tea.

Severus turned his attention on her. "When has she not?"

"Well stated," Madam Hooch replied. "So, if Master Draco was not in fact absconding with your wife, what was he doing?"

"He saved her life from the attack of a Death Eater," Severus said, in Hooch's direction as he casually spread marmalade on his toast.

Minerva dropped her fork, making bits of her eggs flip off her plate. *He what?!*

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but Severus calmly recounted the facts concisely as if reporting the event to the Order.

Dawlish snorted in his juice. "Well if that don't take the pasty! So the ferret did change sides after all. I'll be dragon flamed."

Professor Flitwick turned to Hermione. "I'm so glad you've decided to return. I was hoping to have you join my Charms Club."

"Did yeh really fly on a Dragon," Dawlish asked, stuffing his face. "Or was that Thestral shite that Skeeter wench thought up as well?"

"John!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed affronted. "Language."

"School ain't started, and I wanna know," he said gruffly to her, then turned back to Hermione.

Hermione swallowed down her eggs with a sip of juice. "Yes, Harry, Ron, and I broke into Gringotts and flew out on a very old dragon."

"Rides dragons, brews Polyjuice, produced a Patronus in fifth year, and Bonded you," Professor Reynolds said to Severus with a smirk, then turned to Hermione. "What am I supposed to teach you?"

"I'd suggest how to research what a potion does before brewing it would be a good start," Severus said, smirking at her.

Professor McGonagall glared at Severus and turned to Hermione. "So, how are Messrs Potter and Weasley?"

Professors Flitwick, Sprout, Avoian and Hagrid all turned to her with expectant faces. "They are both doing well. As you know, they accepted the honorary N.E.W.T.s being offered by the Ministry and went straight into the Auror's program."

"Naugh' that I blame 'em," Dawlish stated with his mouth full. "Not like they need much else here that they can't get in training if they defeated ol' snake face, is there?"

Hermione, Severus and several of the professors gave him rueful glares. "Wha'? He don't do he? Boy's a natural at chasing after Dark wizards."

Hermione decided to ignore Dawlish and struck up a conversation with Professor Avoian. After a while, she really regretted that she'd dropped History of Magic. The man was a bloody encyclopedia of knowledge and funny as well. When the meal was over, she sought out Professor McGonagall to see if she could possibly add his class to her schedule.

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Two hours later, Hermione stepped from the Floo at Grimmauld Place. She was dusting the ashes off her clothes, listening to the thunderous footfalls grow louder on the stars, knowing that any minute Harry and Ginny would burst through the door. Harry arrived first, followed by Ron, Neville, Ginny, Dean, and two other wizards she didn't know.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked as he rushed across the room and grasped her by the shoulders. "I waited up all night..."

"She was with Severus," Ginny said, placing her hand on his arm.

Harry turned his head to look at her but didn't release Hermione. "I know that; Draco told me."

"So what's the problem? She's fine!"

Neville stepped forward, asking, "When did Draco tell you?"

"We came here first, thinking she'd come home, then went to St. Mungo's, thinking she'd been hurt and then to Malfoy Manor, trying to find her," Ron stated from across the room.

Harry was still talking to Ginny, "She could have told me she was going to be gone all night!"

"But we knew she was all right," Ginny said, trying to reason with him.

"She was attacked in—"

"Do I need to be a part of this?" Hermione asked, gently removing Harry's hands from his death grip on her arms. "Harry, Draco saved me from Gibbon. So did Rowle, but he was actually—"

"Hayward Blume, my Strategic Defense instructor," Harry interrupted. "I know about that part. Then Draco took you to his house. Aaron Brodes and I were standing guard outside George's shop when Draco Disapparated with you, and we knew that you left from Malfoy Manor with Severus after he apprehended Foulkes and Gibbon...."

"So you know more than I do," Hermione said and squeezed his hands. "Severus and I went to Hogwarts for dinner, and I fell asleep in his sitting room."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Did you see the new Great Hall? I hear that the windows are gorgeous!"

Hermione smiled. "Oh, Gin, wait until you see them! There is a new rose window over the huge window behind the staff table, and each of the other twenty-eight windows now have stain glass insets of magical beasts. I think they used Firenze for the centaur; it looks just like him. It's all so amazing."

"Ooooh, what else?" Ginny gasped, grasping her arm. "Tell me! I remember that the South wing, south courtyard, and the West Tower had been demolished."

"It's all rebuilt, and except for the new gargoyles it's the same. However, the stairs to the owlery are deeper and much easier to ascend, and there is now a covered walk colonnade until you reach the top and spells so you don't get wet when it rains. Professor McGonagall told me that the dorms were all refurbished with new beds, drapes, and carpets. Even the common rooms all have new tables, chairs, and sofas, and the portrait hole for Gryffindor is an archway behind the Fat Lady now! No more stooping to scramble through."

"Can you believe this?" Harry snarled as he threw up his hands and turned to Ron and Dean. "She's more concerned with how the castle was redecorated and that you can send a letter without getting wet than the attack on her life!"

Hermione ignored him, continuing as if he hadn't interrupted her. "The restoration of the marble in the Entrance Hall was done so well there isn't any evidence that a battle ever took place." Hermione looped her arm around Ginny's and started walking with her to the stairs. "The second and third floors were totally renovated into large classrooms, the fifth floor has a lounge for the prefects and Quidditch captains, and the library is *huge*! There are easily two thousand or more new books. It nearly takes up the whole floor now!"

"Oh, I can't wait to see it!" Ginny said, smiling.

"Well, mate, she was with Severus. We knew she'd be all right," Ron said, and then shrugged when Harry scowled at him. "Okay, knew she was all right."

"And you were supposed to be with her!" Harry shouted, his hands in fists by his side.

"She was right beside me when I stopped to look at the new Nimbus – I asked her to wait, but she didn't," Ron argued back. Apparently this was an argument they'd had before. "Look, mate, I fucked up. She didn't wait, and I didn't see her walk off."

Hermione froze, now listening intently. "I messed up," Ron said and Harry yelled, "She could've been killed!"

"Guys, she's fine now!" Dean shouted to gain their attention. "Luckily Draco Malfoy decided to protect her. What I wanna know is why?"

"He's Severus Snape's godson," Hermione stated, making the guys all turn to look at her. "He took me to the Manor, all right? Ron, I'm sorry I walked off. I should've stayed and admired the bloody broom – but I don't live and breathe Quidditch."

Hermione walked over to Ron. "I'm sorry. I – it was irresponsible and stupid of me to walk away. I'm sorry."

"Don't do it again," Ron said and gave her a quick one-arm hug.

"Hi, Dean," Hermione acknowledged him finally. "It's good to see you. I just want to freshen up, okay? I'll be back down in a minute."

"In girl, that means half an hour," Ron told Dean with a smirk.

Hermione pulled Ginny out of the room with her. "Let the guys talk. Just think, a few more days and we'll be returning," she said, letting go of Ginny's hand.

Ginny took a step backwards, beaming. "Go shower, and I'll go calm Harry down. He's only concerned that you were attacked. I told him you said you were fine, but he was really upset. The report was you were hit with a curse but he couldn't find you."

"No – wait, you told him?" Hermione asked, creases forming between her brows. "I sent the message through my Patronus, Gin. How did you know...?"

"I was here when your Patronus arrived. Harry had just Apparated, so I intercepted it," Ginny admitted. "Go shower and we'll talk."

"Harry's been so possessive, overly protective lately. I don't get it. Why?" Hermione asked with a deep sigh.

Ginny raised her eye brows and shook her head. "Well, you haven't been very vigilant lately, have you?"

Hermione buried her face in her hands, then peeked through her fingers at Ginny. "Did you see what was in the *Prophet* this morning? Does that have anything to do with it?"

"No. No one is buying that tripe! At least your friends aren't. My mum has been on a writing campaign to have Rita write a retraction and tell the truth, and apparently Narcissa Malfoy sent a letter to the editor. She said so in her letter to you. Here." Ginny pulled her hand down and shoved a letter in it. "I'm sorry; I read it thinking it was... It's odd, her being nice to us all of a sudden. Oh, and don't forget, we have dinner with the Malfoys, sooooo... I need to buy decent robes. We're going shopping. It's why Dean is here."

"Dean is taking us shopping?" Hermione asked, looking at Ginny with a start.

Ginny started to laugh. "No. Neville, Ron, Harry, Aurors Hobday and Fairley and Dean are taking us shopping. Luna said she's wearing the dress she wore to Bill's wedding."

"What?" Hermione gasped, staring at her friend in disbelief. "Three Auror trainees and two Aurors just to escort us shopping? Is Severus mad?"

"Nope, Harry and *Kingsley* are mad," Ginny stated, "and its only *two* Auror trainees, Dean is returning to Hogwarts and needs new robes. Neville needs to get some clothes for his trek in the northern Mediterranean mountains with Felix Marchbanks, but in Harry's mind, two more DA members mean two more wands, especially since you tend to wander off without telling anyone."

"It was mid-day on a busy street. How was..." Hermione turned her head with a deep sigh and then shot Ginny an exasperated glare. "Fine. I was in the wrong, okay? By the way, Neville said they were leaving for the expedition in two weeks, right?" she asked.

"Neville will be here until mid-September; he's getting married on the first Saturday of the month. Oh, and you and I are bridesmaids, well, Luna's attendants as Mrs. Longbottom put it. So we have to wear a bright sunny color. Luna suggested yellow," Ginny said with a grin, turning her back and bounding down the stairs.

Hermione burst out laughing, recalling Severus' bathroom. "Oh, yes, definitely yellow."

~S~

After breakfast, Severus asked Kirch to take a letter to Kingsley for him and to wait for a reply, allowing the timid elf to use his Floo. Already there were letters arriving in response to Rita Skeeter's article. He didn't read any of them, simply checked for exploding or malicious contents that he could turn over to the Aurors. Three contained minor curses and one contained some substance even he was hard pressed to identify. Kirch arrived as he'd incinerated the last letter.

"Headmaster, master, sir, I is to tells you that the men you wanted to see is still being at the Ministry," he said with a bow.

"Thank you, Kirch, you were most expedient," Severus said as he stood up. "Take some lemon drops." The elf happily helped himself, popping out the same time he put one of the candies in his mouth. It was one way to dispense with the confections in the ever-refilling bowl. He scooped up a palm full of Floo powder and tossed it in the fire. "Ministry of Magic."

Kingsley met him in the atrium and took him to the Auror holding cells. "Who did you want to see first?" Kingsley asked indicating two doors with small, one-way windows.

Severus looked into one window at Alberic Gibbon sitting chained to a chair, and then stepped across the hall to look at Aston Foulkes. Unlike Gibbon, Foulkes was slumped in his chains and appeared dejected, whereas Gibbon sported a fresh cut lip and was sitting up straight. "I'll start with Foulkes," he said with a hitch of his thumb at the door.

"All right, but no poisons, no curses, no physical contact, and no Dark Arts or Unforgivables," Kingsley warned him. "I hate the paper work, and I don't want to arrest you."

"You are taking the fun out of this," Severus said with a smirk. "If I find out anything, I will want to use the Pensieve in your office."

Kingsley unlocked the door with a sweep of his hand. "Only if I get to watch too."

"I'm counting on it," Severus stated and entered the room. Aston Foulkes eyes widened in surprise then narrowed, the exact reaction Severus had hoped for, recognition followed by suspicion.

"I aint tellin' yeh, notin'," he spat.

Severus sat on the chair across from him with ease. "How do you know what I want to ask you?"

"I isn't one of 'em," Foulkes spat with a bit of blood spittle.

*He'd been roughed up. Good.* Severus assumed a relaxed pose often mistaken for nonchalance. "Your companion in the other room says otherwise," he stated smoothly.

"'E did naugh!' 'E wouldn' say nothin'," Foulkes spat out angrily.

"I beg to differ," Severus said, pleased by the man's anger. *This will be easier than I thought.* "Besides I happen to know that you *are* associated with some of my ex-associates. However, if you will not tell me what you know, you will face the Dementors of Azkaban. I hear that they are quite loving this time of year."

Foulkes' eyes widened in fear. "I ain't done nothin'," he repeated without the same fierceness as before.

Severus pulled a small, clear phial from his pocket. "This says you have," he said smoothly, rolling the tiny bottle of clear liquid in his fingers. "It would go easier if you simply tell me what I want to know." He set the phial on the table, staring at the man's eyes.

He slipped into his mind easily enough. Frantic images of faces and dark places flashed incoherently: the rough hewn stone doorway leading into a dimly lit room with exposed beams, crude furniture, and plaster-coated walls, Rabastan Lestrangle, MacTavish, and Torrington sitting around a small campfire talking softly; Mulciber and Rosier eating what appeared like goose legs; Dragen talking quietly to Rosenthal several feet away... Rabastan and Rosenthal stopping their conversation and turning to look at him – Foulkes – and obviously changing the subject of their conversation... Mulciber and Foulkes in an alley in an industrial town...

"You can't force that on me, I got rights!" Foulkes shouted.

"Who is to know, it's only a few drops, enough to get you to spill your darkest secrets to me and then some," Severus said in a dangerously low tone. "What association do you have with Gibbon?"

"We is friends," Foulkes replied, still eyeing the phial.

Images of a sitting room of a small house across from Gibbon flashed in the wizard's mind, then having drinks with Gibbon and Mulciber in a seedy tavern, eating soup with Gibbon in a pub, walking along the shops in Knockturn Alley and meeting Gibbon in a wooded area...

"And why would he be friends with the likes of you?" Severus asked, trying to draw more images. He saw a meeting with Mulciber, Dragen, and Broadmore taking place; the same rough hewn doorway, this time from the inside looking out, but the view was blocked by Dragen, Lestrangle and McTavish... there was another memory of the same sitting room as before, this time with the back of a man that changed quickly.

Ashton Foulkes' hands clenched into fists as he glared at Severus. "We is friends for a long time, he and me."

"Fine then," Severus said casually, feigning disinterest. "Then tell me about Clemet King."

Anger flared in Foulkes eyes, and the images in his mind became a turmoil. The ash-brown-haired wizard with the long, pallid face, heavy eyebrows, and thin frame Severus knew as Clemet came into focus and Severus smirked, pushing deeper. Flashes of Ludwick Graven in the Knockturn Apothecary; Ludwick Graven in a kitchen with Clemet and a new wizard with ash-blond hair, a hooked nose and dark blue eyes appeared several times; this new wizard appeared several times with Miss Prisswell as well. This new wizard with the ash-blond hair was stockier than Clemet but was obviously acquainted with Foulkes, although not in a friendly way – the man seemed stiff and aloof as if uncomfortable with Foulkes. Several quick images showed this wizard opening the door for Miss Prisswell, touching her in a solicitous manner, another resting his hand on her back in a possessive manner.

Foulkes growled in frustration, making Severus momentarily lose his connection. The knuckles of Foulkes' fists turned white as his arms strained against the chains holding him. "I ain't tellin' you nothin'! I's got's righ's! You canno' ask me nothin'. You is naugh' an Auror."

"But you introduced me to him, remember, back a few years ago when I was teaching," Severus said coolly. Immediately Ludwick Graven appeared in Foulkes' mind.

"I did nothin' of the sor' ever," Foulkes snarled. "I asked you if you wanted to go in with me on makin' some money and you ambushed me."

"By insinuating that I had a grandfather we could extort," Severus said, sitting up and glaring at the man.

"I never said no such thin'! You is settin' me up for somethin', an' I wan' yeh ou' o' here now!" Foulkes yelled at him, bloody spittle falling on his chin and the table.

As he ranted, demanding for Severus to leave, he forced his way through Foulkes memories, knowing that the invasion would not be noticed due to the man's anger. Images of Graven and Gibbon, or Clemet and Graven flashed quickly with images of the third wizard and Clemet, meeting in various places moved though Foulkes' mind as if Severus were watching a slide show. It became quickly apparent to Severus that Graven, Clemet and the third wizard were in league together, and Foulkes' association with Gibbon was generally associated with Dolohov's group. Clemet and Foulkes were obtaining the potions for Miss Prisswell and the third wizard. But who this third man was eluded him.

"I wanna see my solicitor!" Foulkes shouted struggling against his chains. "You leave. Now. I ain't talkin' to yeh no more!"

"That's fine by me," Severus said, snatching his phial off the table and rising elegantly. "I got all I needed from you anyway."

Foulkes was so furious, struggling against the chains that bound him he didn't even seem to register what Severus had said.

Kingsley was leaning against the wall by the door to Gibbon's room. "Find out anything?"

"Enough," Severus replied. "He doesn't know very much, actually. I don't think he's in Dolohov's inner circle, more like they use him for their dirtier jobs and errands to Knockturn Alley."

Kingsley looked at Foulkes, still fighting against his bonds. "He really became agitated?" He looked Severus in the eye. "Are you sure he doesn't know much? You were in there a long time."

"I'm guessing that Dolohov is holding up in an old stone house or a thatched house. The view was blocked, but in a Pensieve we'll get a better view of the landscape. He's confirmed that Rosier, Torrington, Mulciber, and MacTavish are all in league with the Dolohov cousins, as well as Rabastan Lestrangle and Rosenthal. I think it's safe to assume Ludwick Graven is, too," Severus said, smirking, pleased by Kingsley's hopeful expression. "I also saw the tavern Gibbon frequents and a pub, both of which might be advantageous stakeouts."

"Good. And we know Avery and Bulstrode are," Kingsley said, clearly pleased with the possible leads. "Shall we go in and visit with Gibbon and see what he knows?"

"I'm sure he'll be delighted to see me," Severus replied with a smirk.

~\*~

Severus left the Ministry for the Manor, feeling exhausted, as only an hour of Legilimency and two of Pensieve use can do to a man. Kingsley had patiently stood back and allowed Severus to review his memories taken from Aston Foulkes' mind until Severus was certain that he was only confusing himself. He truly wished that the Pensieve replay could be frozen, rewind, or slowed down so he could really examine the quick succession of images. He was missing something and couldn't put his finger on it.

Ashton Foulkes was a thug, a pawn of Ludwick Graven's and Clemet's. The third wizard definitely had a personal relationship with Miss Prisswell and a close connection to Clemet. But this third wizard was unknown to him. What Severus wanted now was a quill that could draw what he wanted; to sketch an image from his mind onto parchment, but no such quill existed.

He took a long hot shower, using the relaxing heat to try and sort out his thoughts, then gave up. He changed into presentable robes, dried his hair and took some Headache-Relief and Pepper-Up Potions. He gave Lucius a cursory greeting as he passed him on his way down the stairs.

"Leaving are we? Our guests arrive any minute," Lucius said, stopping to watch Severus descend the stairs.

Severus stopped and turned to face him. "I intend to go retrieve my wife."

"If you feel you must. Surely she would not renege at this late hour? I've been told that even Muggles have some sense of common courtesy," Lucius said with a grin. "I have adjusted the wards on the gate, unless you wish to Apparate with her to the terrace."

"Thank you," Severus said simply and walked through the house to the terrace. Narcissa was personally directing the seating arrangement and checking the place settings

as he passed the dining room. He laughed; the idea of Potter and his friends knowing which fork to use in formal dining was ludicrous to him.

He arrived at Grimmauld Place and raised his hand to knock, only to find himself staring at a huge sunflower on a bun of blonde hair and bright, yellow dress robes.

Luna Longbottom turned, smiled at him and stepped aside. "Come in quick, Headmaster, the wrackspurts are swarming by the street lamp."

Severus frowned at her but entered quickly. She had been an astounding student when she hadn't tried to experiment in his classroom, easily getting Outstandings in most of her subjects, although he'd had no idea how. Her essays had always been amusing, well written, but hilarious. Not that he'd ever tell her that. "Thank you, Mrs. Longbottom," he said. "I came to escort everyone to the Manor."

She simply watched him for a while as though he were a mildly interesting creature. "I hope they plan on having pudding," she said, then skipped off through the doorway.

Severus followed her into the drawing room, unsure if he should and was pleased to find all seven of them there, all dressed appropriately, even Ronald Weasley. When Hermione turned to face him, he nearly felt his heart stop. She was in a long, dark red dress that shimmered with lighter red highlights when she moved, and her hair was up in a mass of tight curls. "If you are ready, we should go," he said, glad that his voice sounded smooth in his ears.

Hermione walked over and tucked a red carnation in his lapel. "Marking what's mine," she said when he scowled at the flower.

"Yours?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"So you keep telling me." She picked up a wrap off a chair. "I expect you to address my friends by their names. You do remember their names, don't you?"

"Naturally," he said curtly at her impertinence. He looked at each one, purposefully thinking of them by their given names. Neville helped Luna with a stole, as Ginevra, also in bright crimson, looped her arm with Harry's. Ronald was conversing with Dean by the fire. He couldn't help noticing that each wore a red flower, the girls in their hair, the guys on their lapels, the exception being Luna's sunflower, and the guys all wore red ties. "You couldn't have given me a green one?" he asked Hermione as he took her arm in the crook of his.

"Nope," she said with a smirk.

He tried to offer directions for Apparating. "Excuse me Professor, but we've all been there before," Dean said politely. "Of course, these are better circumstances."

Severus nodded. "I'll see you at the gate, then." He turned taking Hermione with him, landing just to the side of the gate to give the others room. As the cracks and pops announced the others, he tried to change his carnation green, only managing to do half, the red remaining on the edges of each petal.

Hermione giggled. "Couldn't leave it alone, could you?"

"At least I didn't turn it black," he replied. "You lot are certainly coordinated."

"Unity in the face of thine enemies," she whispered as the gate opened to admit them.

"Hardly enemies, Hermione," Severus said softly, watching Ginevra and Harry enter followed by Neville and Luna.

Hermione's grip tightened on his arm as she followed him through the gate and gazed at the huge manor. "And until only a month ago, not friends either."

"Three and a half months to be precise," he corrected her. "They have accepted you since our consummation." Her footing faltered on the path before the stairs to the terrace, and he paused to make sure she was all right. "You are wrong about them, you know. You are a guest and, as such, will be welcomed warmly. Narcissa has gone all out on your behalf tonight."

She looked up at him in surprise.

"I hope you know how to conduct yourself in a formal dining situation," he said with a smirk.

Harry stopped and turned, and Ron paled in the dim light.

"Of course I know how to conduct myself in a formal situation. Just because my parents were Muggles didn't mean that we didn't attend formal functions," Hermione stated, affronted by his suggestion that she might not.

"Harry, I know it well, and you can follow me," Neville stated, touching his elbow. "Luna has been coached by Gran, so between us you'll be fine."

Ginevra smiled and hugged Harry's arm to her. "You knew it would be formal, right?" Harry just stared at her and shrugged. "Just do whatever Draco, Luna, Neville, and Hermione do and we'll be fine. Besides, they know our backgrounds and invited us anyway."

Severus smirked. *This is going to be entertaining.*

~L~

In an attempt to down play house affiliations, Lucius had dressed in pale blue silk and black, and Narcissa in a matching gown of blue silk and aquamarine gems. He scowled briefly as Draco appeared in dark green dress robes with a touch of white from his shirt at the collar and cuffs. At least Astoria was resplendent in a coppery-colored dress and amber bead jewelry. When Severus led in the guests to the drawing room, he had to choke back a laugh. *So much for house ambiguity.*

Mrs. Potter and Hermione were both in lovely *red* gowns with red carnations in their upswept hairdos, Mrs. Longbottom in vivid yellow with an actual sunflower adorning her hair. Mr. Potter wore a red tie and sported a carnation on his lapel of his dark, bottle green dress robes, while Mr. Weasley and Mr. Thomas both wore black dress robes with red ties and red carnations. Mr. Longbottom was quite dignified in his dark, royal blue robes, but his carnation was nearly the size of his wife's sunflower, and he too wore a red tie. The most amusing one was, however, Severus, who now sported a carnation as well, something he did not have when leaving the house. The flower was light green with red tips, a definite alluding to his and Hermione's house. *Most amusing.*

Severus' eyes flicked from Lucius' gaze, to his carnation and to Hermione, then back to him, a clear signal that he'd fallen into one of the marriage traps all men must learn to deal with – a wife's whim. Lucius unnecessarily fixed the crease of his own lapel as he winked subtly at Severus, smiling at his twitch of his lip in annoyance. *Oh, yes, the carnation was her idea, but if I am to guess, it was originally red and large like the others.*

"The Gryffindors showing off their defiant unity," Draco whispered to Astoria.

"Oh, Draco," Astoria laughed softly as she patted his arm. "I should have placed one of your roses in my hair. I feel incomplete," she whispered back, before stepping forward to greet the arrivals.

Lucius stepped forward and extended his hand first to Mr. Weasley, then to Mr. Longbottom, and kissed Mrs. Longbottom's hand in greeting. Narcissa, ever the hostess, was handing the girls' wraps to a waiting house-elf as she greeted them. Soon everyone was holding a glass of fine, French, elf-made wine and talking amiably enough. Ronald, Harry, and Ginevra were conversing with Draco and Narcissa about Quidditch. Astoria, Mrs. Longbottom, Hermione, and Severus were conversing about some inane African creature, and he was faced with Dean, discussing the international Galleon share exchange. As Narcissa drifted from one group to another, Lucius smiled at his wife's ability to blend into any conversation, even one about a nonexistent creature.

A house-elf entered the doorway, bowed, announced that dinner was ready and popped out quickly.

Lucius was impressed that Neville and Luna Longbottom observed proper decorum regarding the seating arrangements and sat across from each other at Narcissa's left and right. It amused him that Harry and Ginevra Potter disregarded custom, or were ignorant of it, and sat between Neville and Draco on one side, while Ronald and Dean sat between Luna and Astoria on the other. He was pleased that Severus and Hermione chose to sit on either side of him at the head of the table. *At least I'll have intelligent conversation over dinner.*

The soup arrived as soon as everyone was seated, a delicious pumpkin flower soup with pea soup added on top in the shape of a flower with dollops of cream on the edge. Hermione laid her napkin on her lap as Ronald, Dean, and Harry watched Neville dramatically lay his napkin on his lap and pick up his soup spoon as if coaching them. Dean and Harry copied him, even mimicking how Neville scooped up his soup and ate it. Ginevra, he noted, was eyeing Draco carefully, following his son's example.

"Oh, my! This is incredible," Ginny gasped after her first taste.

Narcissa smiled. "I'm so glad you think so. It's an old family recipe."

Harry looked up and asked, "A Black family recipe or a Malfoy one?"

"A Black family recipe," Narcissa said. "If you'd like the recipe I'll share it with you."

"So, Hermione, are you looking forward to your last year at school?" Lucius asked.

Hermione looked up and quickly swallowed. "Yes, I am."

Lucius ignored the twitch of Severus' lip as he pressed her regarding her class schedule and club activities. The girl was a pleasant conversationalist when she wanted to be. The conversation however, turned to the renovations of the castle, and the new animal paddocks for the Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

"It's like a small zoo, but Hagrid maintains it well," Severus stated.

Astoria's eyes lit up as she turned to Severus. "Hogwarts has a zoo?"

Dean and Draco turned to listen as Severus explained the new animal shelter built at the edge of the forest. "The Edentaggart Magical Creatures Zoo has agreed on an animal exchange for the students, although Hagrid does maintain several of the creatures in the paddock for his own amusement."

"Not dangerous animals?" Astoria asked, covering her mouth with her fingers.

Severus smirked. "If you define dangerous in Hagrid's terms, the answer would be yes, naturally. There are some of the more common creatures one is likely to come across if you enjoy activities in our national parks and forests."

"I'm sure that the creatures would not be maintained on the school grounds if Severus' spells and Hagrid's abilities could not contain them," Hermione said as she dabbed at the corner of her mouth. She placed her napkin on her lap when the salad course was served, and quickly glanced at her friends.

"I'm sure that Severus and the professors have all made magical contributions to ensure the students safety," Lucius stated, smiling at his soon to be daughter-in-law.

Lucius grinned as Neville picked up the salad fork, holding it in his hand to show Luna. Luna and Dean both smiled and copied his unspoken directions. But Harry was still fingering his three forks, until Neville nudged him and told him which one to use. The exchange was entertaining to watch. The salad consisted of baby greens rolled up in thin cucumber slices and the croutons were little wonton-like pastries, looking very pretty with dried cranberries and thinly sliced cherry tomatoes on the side arranged like little flowers.

Hermione and Ginny both deftly cut their salad, their actions copied by the boys, except Ronald, who picked up the salad in his hand. "What's this?" he asked as he unwrapped it and picked out a purple leaf.

Astoria turned to answer him.

"So how did you like Reginald Reynolds, your new Potions professor?" Lucius asked, passing Hermione the dressing.

"Hermione and he didn't converse much," Severus stated when she shrugged, her mouth full.

Down the table, Dean was following Neville's and Luna's lead, but Harry was still picking at his salad. It was amusing to watch him separate the baby greens by color. Across the table, Ron was still playing with the cucumber.

Hermione leaned around Astoria to speak to Dean. "Dean, tell Ron to cut it up and add the dressing. Use the fork next to his napkin – that's supposed to be on his lap," she said softly.

Ronald leaned forward and asked, "Why should I put the fork on my lap?" apparently confused.

"The napkin, Ronald," Ginny admonished him quietly.

Draco snickered, then jumped slightly, apparently from Astoria having nudged him under the table with her toe to stop. "So, I understand that you're in the Auror training program, Harry. May I call you Harry?" she asked politely.

"Yeah, Ron and I are Auror trainees now," Harry replied.

"Both Harry and Ron are in an accelerated training schedule," Severus said to Astoria. "Since the Aurors are so short-handed, the trainees are getting far more field experience than is normal for the training program."

"Must be exciting, chasing after Dark wizards," Lucius said, and tuned to look at Harry. "But with your experience, it must come rather naturally to you, Harry." He smiled benignly, seeing that his innuendo made Hermione bristle slightly.

However, Harry wasn't at all perturbed. "It's exciting. We are learning loads of new techniques for following and capturing Dark wizards and witches."

Severus cleared his throat and told Lucius about the latest raid, while Hermione listened with rapt attention as she sipped her wine.

Lucius was quite please by Hermione's reaction to the fine red wine he'd selected to be served at dinner. "So, Gibbon is captured," he stated. "Did he lead you to Avery and Bulstrode?"

Severus shook his head. "Only in the fact that we know that they have managed to elude capture so far. Gibbon was not aware of their hiding place. The one he knows is in a cave, but he Apparates inside it so we still don't know its location."

"Pity," Lucius said, catching Hermione's confusion at his declaration. "Wallace Avery and Gene Bulstrode were quite furious over my betrayal at the end of the war. They greatly resented my house arrest and that I couldn't extend them monies."

Hermione raised her eyebrow at the statement. "They tried to extort money from you?"

Lucius smiled as he set his wine goblet down. "Naturally. However, there was little they could say that I hadn't already been accused of through the Ministry, and what they claim to know, they have no proof, other than their word."

"And Lucius has been quite cooperative with the Ministry since his arrest," Severus added with a smirk. "Even his vast collection of Dark Arts books was made available for the Aurors and Unspeakables to study."

"I bet," Hermione said against the lip of her glass before drinking.

Lucius liked her spunk, even if it was at his expense. "As I've been accused of – money has its privileges. It might be of surprise to you, Hermione, that I contribute a fifth or more of the scholarships to Hogwarts every year – paid outright, every year, as well as a substantial monthly endowment to St. Mungo's. Neither of which hold any stipulation as to who may benefit. I also support the Brotherhood of Goblins, the Dark Force Defense League, Society of the Reformation of Hags, the Squib Education and Relocation fund for those choosing to leave wizarding society for Muggle life, and the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers."

"I hadn't known," she replied as the house-elves exchanged the salad plates for the main course. The tenderloin beef was served on pesto mashed potatoes with grilled veggies on the side and a pomegranate port wine reduction sauce.

"Mr. Malfoy is really quite a generous philanthropist," Astoria commented, smiling at Lucius. "He told me that to those who much has been is given, much is expected."

"And from the ones who have been entrusted with much, much more will be asked," Lucius added with a smile. It made him smirk to watch Ronald pick up the vegetable string garnish off his beef to examine it closer.

"Luke 12:48," Hermione said, drawing his attention back to her.

"You know your Bible, then," Lucius said with a smirk.

"I've been to church," Hermione admitted demurely and turned to Astoria to ask about her plans for the future.

As the conversation at his end of the table turned from Astoria's desire for a lady's shop and Narcissa's encouraging her to be active with the Witch's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and The Amelia Bones Witch's League for Peace and Freedom, to matters of international news, Lucius glanced up at Narcissa. She was wearing a gracious smile as once again, Ronald, Harry, and Dean were discussing Quidditch.

At the end of dinner, Narcissa stood and announced that desserts would be served in the drawing room. Lucius stood and assisted Hermione with her chair, pleased to note that Dean did the same courtesy for Astoria.

The guests all mingled around the table of small pastries as Lucius surveyed the scene. Ronald and Harry struggled with how they were supposed to eat their desserts while holding their goblets of dessert wine in one hand and their dessert plates on the other. The girls all sat together talking, while Severus spoke with Draco, still keeping an eye on his Bonded mate.

Lucius stood beside the mantel, watching his guests. For the most part Hermione had managed quite well throughout dinner. A bit rough around the edges, but if she allowed Narcissa to coach her, she'd fit in quite well in proper wizarding society. Even Ginevra and Luna were acceptable, and Harry really tried to emulate Neville and Draco as much as he could. *His celebrity status will always grant him allowances, though.* Only Ronald seemed utterly lost. *Too bad they'd stopped teaching etiquette at Hogwarts.*

~H~

Hermione's feet ached as she watched her friends all make their goodbyes to their hosts. All in all, dinner had not been that bad. Aside from a few veiled insults, some only thinly, Mr. Malfoy had been an amiable dinner host. Severus walked with Hermione and her friends to the terrace and wrapped his arms around her as each of her friends Disapparated for their homes.

"Stay with me a while," he asked against her ear, his voice sending a shiver down her spine.

"Severus, I'm exhausted," she replied, leaning back against him for support, shifting her feet to ease the pain.

He drew his wand and flicked his wrist as he murmured, *"Accommodare,"* which made her shoes pleasantly comfortable and eased the ache in her feet. "Is that better?"

"Some, thank you," she admitted, awed by his thoughtfulness.

"At least walk with me through the garden to the gate," he insisted, moving around so he faced her. He tipped her face up and kissed her gently, barely a whisper on her lips. "I've wanted to kiss you all night," he said softly and kissed her more ardently. Hermione swooned, grabbing onto him to keep her balance. *Why in all Hades can this man make me light-headed just from a kiss? Neither Viktor nor Ron ever did. Why him of all people?* His arms tightened around her and Hermione leaned into him, her treacherous body responding while her mind was crying for her to resist.

When she opened her mouth to protest, he deepened the kiss, making her thoughts melt to a mindless haze. The only thing registering was the strength of his embrace, the feel of his lips, the gentle probing of his tongue and his fingers stroking her hair. When he finally released her, she stumbled, grasping for his arms, and noticed that her hair was now tumbling down her back. He tucked her carnation into his pocket, pulled her to him again, holding her tightly, until she relaxed and let go. The cry of a peacock made her turn her head, and his arms dropped to his sides.

Taking her hand, he wordlessly led her down the stairs into the garden. They walked in silence, her mind a drift, taking in the geometric shapes of the boxwoods and hawthorn, the flowering roses, night jasmine, and rosemary topiaries. She removed her shoes on the soft grass when they turned for the gate, feeling the damp blades between her toes.

Severus led her to a bench and drew her to sit on his lap. He slid one hand into her hair and kissed her chin, neck, then her lips. The aromatic night jasmine and rosemary from the plants nearby mingled with his cologne, filling her senses. She tipped his face up and pushed his hair back, staring at his dark eyes, surprised by the lust she saw in them. She kissed him, controlling the pressure, surprised again when the heady feeling returned. With a throaty moan, she gave into the feeling and kissed him more passionately, her head spinning as he responded in kind.

The cry of a peacock broke the silence again, and Severus took advantage of her distraction to reposition her slightly so as to trail kisses slowly down her neck to the curve of her shoulder and down to the small swell of her breast over the neckline of her dress. Hermione's head rolled back, allowing him total access, losing herself in the feelings he gave her. One hand cupped a breast, his fingers gently kneading and caressing.

She sat up, placed her hand on his face to make him look up and kissed him, wanting to make him as heady as he was making her.

A white peacock walked by, fluffed his feathers, checking the grass near the couple as he searched for worms. Disgruntled, he moved on, crying out into the night.

The pair on the bench hardly noticed.

~ T B C ~>

~~~~~o0o~~~~~

Author's notes:

I know, I know... but I had to stop somewhere. You know that he's not dead, right? Otherwise the story would just end here, and this isn't the ending I have planned.

I want to thank my betas, EverMystique and DutchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

## On Heather Moor

Chapter 31 of 63

Severus takes part in a set up to trap Gibbon's friends, but gets caught in the fray.



~~~~~o 31 o~~~~~

On Heather Moor

~S~

Severus woke up from a very vivid dream of making love to Hermione, so similar to their spell induced couplings that it had seemed real. He felt furious and frustrated when he'd realized he was alone. Not that he'd expected to wake up and find her in his bed. No, the witch was still being obstinate about that. And he was sticky, apparently from having ejaculated in his sleep, *again*. Yet he was so stiff; he was rock hard and his testicles so tight they throbbed. He reached down and stroked himself.

The dream, much like Hermione's kiss the night before, was so vivid in his mind still that he could see her if he closed his eyes. Her heavy-lidded, lust-filled eyes in the throes of passion, her mouth slightly parted, her lips moist and swollen from his kiss, her skin aglow in the moonlight, the way her breasts strained and rose with each quick, deep breath when she was aroused... His back arched as the tension in his body reached its peak, and with a feral groan, he came, his semen shooting up and landing on his chest, the strength of the ejaculation even hitting his own chin.

Growling with annoyance, he rolled out of bed and went into the bathroom to clean himself up.

As he sat in his tub, washing off his mess, he couldn't help but think about their kiss kisses from the night before. The way she'd melted in his arms, responded passionately and ardently, and then swayed on her feet when he'd stopped, demonstrated to him that Hermione was still absolutely and unequivocally attracted to him. *At least physically pure animal magnetism*, he scoffed. Her responsiveness had made him want to take her right there on the Malfoy lawn, but his inner voice had warned him not to.

However, his patience was wearing thin, and he didn't know how long he could endure this game of hers. His mood darkened as he toweled off. He wanted her. He wanted what was his: his wife in his life, and not this gallivanting around as if they were courting. He threw his towel in the corner of the room and walked over to the wardrobe to dress.

To get Hermione off his mind he focused instead on the house Gibbon and Foulkes had shown him, albeit reluctantly, during their interrogations. The house sat on a heather moor, of that he was certain. Severus wanted to figure out where the house he'd seen in both Gibbon's and Foulkes' memories was located. *The old house with the rough-hewn doorway... the memories only showed a parcel of the land near the house and the inside much too dangerous to simply Apparate to.*

The heather on the rolling hills and the rocks made him think it was Scotland. He didn't know Scotland well, having only explored the sites he knew where certain potion ingredients could be found. He preferred to use fresh or liked to prepare his ingredients himself to his own exacting standard. This made him familiar with much of the countryside, but nowhere he'd been, that he could recall, looked like the landscape in the memory.

The Pensieve sat on a stand next to his desk. The memories of the house and surrounds swirling in the mist within the bowl seemed to taunt him. Even if he were to start Apparating around Scotland to every known field of heather, it would be a waste of time. Not that he hadn't considered it once well, twice. Aurors Maurice Duncan and Robert MacNaughton hadn't recognized the surrounds either, and both claimed to know the landscapes of Scotland well.

Severus also wanted to know the identity of the stocky, blue-eyed, ash-blond wizard with Miss Priswell. He knew he had to be a wizard because of his association with Ludwick Graven and Gibbon eliminated the possibility of him being Muggle-born. Therefore, the Muggle-born Registration records from the war wouldn't be helpful. In addition, the school records wouldn't help, as there were no photos of the individual students.

Searching through the *Daily Prophets* would require a lot of time, time he wasn't sure that Talfryn had, especially in a publication that came out daily. However, since the wizard didn't look old, maybe in his forties or fifties, he'd only have to look at every *Prophet* for the last fifty to sixty years. *About twenty-one thousand plus issues*, he thought with a moan. *And that is assuming the guy ever did anything to warrant notice of the paper's reporters* It was a huge long shot for so much effort that could, in the end, be fruitless.

He arrived in the corridor of the fourth floor on his way to the library just as some of the staff were walking down for breakfast.

"Ah, Headmaster, you join us today?" Tigran asked, walking in his direction.

Normally, Severus enjoyed talking with Tigran, but this morning he was going to try and solve the mystery of the ash-blond's identity. "I'm not hungry this morning," he managed to say cordially enough.

"Ah, then you'll join us for coffee? I have excellent African blend," Tigran suggested.



Maybe he'd been too cordial.

Reginald apparently noticed Severus' sour mood and quietly warned Kenneth to go on down for breakfast. "I'll have that cup," he said, walking over to Tigran. He looked at Severus with a grin. "Come on, mate, you're always grouchy in the mornings, and a cuppa might suit you. What do you say?"

Severus knew that Reginald was immune to his moods and the last thing he wanted to do was make Reginald curious. "Fine." With a scowl he allowed Reginald to usher him to the Great Hall. "But when school starts, just remember that I'm *your* boss."

"Sure, mate. So what are your plans today?" Reginald asked. "I don't have my final shipment of ingredients yet, so my day's free."

"I was hoping to get some reading done in the library," Severus lied, "or my office."

"Well, if you need a second set of eyes on your *reading* project, let me know," Reginald stated.

Severus cursed himself; Reginald knew him too well, and knew that he liked reading in quiet corners and alcoves. He had since he was a kid and he only read in the library when researching something. He asked Reginald about his current paper for the Potioneers Society to distract him until they reached the Great Hall.

He was serving himself eggs when he overheard Reginald and Tigran talking about the highlands of Scotland with Minerva.

Severus' curiosity perked up. *Minerva... She claims to know the Scottish Highlands better than most even told me of a few hard to get to places for potion ingredients.* "Minerva, you're from the Highlands..."

She looked at him as if he was a dunderhead first-year. "Yes, you know I am."

"Are you familiar with old stone houses of the Highlands?" he asked, wondering if maybe she'd be able to shed a light on his mystery house.

"Severus, there are many old stone houses in Scotland," she said, her brow furrowed.

"And, on your summers off, you travel the Highlands with your family." He knew she did, she loved the Highlands. The house was in the highlands, of that he was certain.

"... Geoff and I enjoy the outdoors and with the great-grandkids..."

"I would like to show you something in my office." He rose and led the way, telling her why the house was so important. "Kingsley said we didn't see enough in the memory to organize a raid, and Apparating inside the house could cause unnecessary loss of life," he stated as he stood beside Dumbledore's Pensieve.

"All right," she said, looking troubled. "But why ask me? Surely the Aurors can ascertain where this house is."

"No one in the office who saw the memory recognized the surroundings. I need to find Ludwick Graven, and I know he is associated with the rogue Death Eaters." He indicated the fragment of memory of the house with the rough-hewn doorway that still swirled in the mist in the Pensieve. "It's only a fragment of a memory, but if you view it a few times it might help. Oh, and just like in the days of the Order, keep what you see only between us for now. I don't need you connected to this."

She nodded and bent forward, submerging her face in the basin, and he followed her. "The beams of the house, plaster-coated lime-washed walls, definitely a croft house..." she said, and the memory faded. They reentered to look again, and Minerva turned to take in her surroundings. "The butt-end of the dwelling, I'd say." The third time she walked to the door and peered at the landscape. "Familiar," she repeated, her lips pursed in concentration. "A typical heather moor, but these rocks... and the house from this side blends into them. If I'm not mistaken, there are spells to conceal the house from view."

He didn't follow her in the fourth time. When she stood up, she stared out of the window. "It's so familiar... but not Scotland. It doesn't feel like Scotland. I think... The rocks look familiar." She turned to look at him. "I'm sorry Severus, but if it comes to me, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," he said, resigning himself to waiting until the Aurors figured out the location of the house and spending his time perusing twenty-one thousand old *Prophets* for the remainder of his day.

~H~

Hermione woke slowly, staring at the pale blue painted on the ceiling of her room. She'd tried to copy the magic used on the ceiling in the Great Hall, but unlike the magical duplication of the weather outside, the ceiling only changed from day to night, but the sun, moon, planets and stars did rotate like the real ones did, so she was happy with that. However, today her mind was in turmoil, again, over Severus Snape.

Last night had been fantastic. She'd lost all sense of time. Harry had been pacing by the time she'd Apparated home, but when she'd tried to apologize he'd only huffed at her and ran up to bed. She didn't know what to make of his moods lately. Nor did she know what she was going to do about Severus. He wasn't clingy but he wasn't possessive either. He wanted her around, but she wished she knew if he could love her. Her mum always said sex doesn't equal love.

Crookshanks looked up, slowly uncurled himself, stretched and gingerly made his way up to her for some attention. She buried her fingers in his fur and scratched him behind his ears, listening to him purr. He was getting old, and moved much slower these days. "Are you hungry, boy?" she asked, and he looked up at her and closed his eyes when she started scratching one of his favorite spots. She was debating bringing him to Hogwarts. All those stairs, and he wasn't able to climb them like he used to.

Hermione heard movement outside her door and decided she had to get up. She pulled on jeans and a light jumper and headed downstairs. Harry sat at the table, reading the *Prophet* over a hot mug of cocoa. "Hi," she said, accepting a mug from Kreacher.

"Hi," he said, not even looking up.

Hermione thanked Kreacher when the elf placed a plate with two sunny-side-up eggs, three bacon strips, and two pieces of toast in front of her. "So what are your plans today?"

Harry shrugged again, turning the page.

"What's in the paper this morning, anything good?" she asked trying to draw him out of his apparent slump.

"They have another article about our raid and said that Rowle and Gibbon were captured. That means we can't have Blume impersonate Rowle again," he said. "Kingsley isn't going to be happy about that."

"I bet; you lose a valuable subterfuge of having the opportunity of impersonating him again," Hermione agreed. "Anything else?"

"Quidditch scores," Harry said and rattled off the latest preseason scores and team stats. "The Cannons have three new players. It looks like they may have a good team this year. MacEwen and Guthrie have signed on as new Chasers and Summersby is going to fly as Seeker. Remember him? He flew for Hufflepuff our sixth year."

"Yeah, small boy, really agile on his broom, wasn't he?" she asked, vaguely remembering the guy.

"He was all right. Ginny still beat him to the Snitch," Harry said with a smirk.

"His first year playing, right?" Hermione asked, smirking back. *And they all thought I never paid attention.* "It's good then, the Cannons getting new players. Ron will be

pleased if they have a good season." She finished up her eggs. "Well, I'll be in the library. I want to read up on..."

Harry sighed heavily. Later in the library, Harry walked in and looked around as if lost. She looked up and smiled at him, and he gave her a half smile in return. She tried to concentrate on *The Transfigurative Science of Converting Shape and Form*, but was distracted by Harry fingering the bindings of the books as he read the titles. "There is a really good book on Human Transfiguration on the fifth shelf to your right," she suggested. "Might come in handy."

"Er, thanks," he said, moving over.

After some clarifying on which book she'd meant, he found the book and came to sit next to her on the sofa. After a while she looked over at him and noticed he was still only on page four.

She nudged his shoulder. "What's gotten into you lately?" she asked, opting for the direct approach. He opened his mouth the same time she added, "And don't say nothing. You've been acting strange, and I really want to know why. It's not about the attack, is it?"

"No, Ron and I, well, we talked," Harry said. "I was madder at him than you, anyway."

"Then what's wrong?" she asked, holding her mug in two hands. "You've been moping around a lot lately."

He stared at the pages of the book. "You're leaving."

"And you're going to miss me," she finished for him. "Harry, I'm not leaving you, I'm going back to school. And in case you've forgotten, you'll be taking a full schedule of Auror training courses. You can Apparate to see me on weekends at Hogsmeade, and we'll be together over Christmas."

He looked up and tried to smile. "It's not the same. It used to be the three of us, all the time. I always hated summer because I would be separated from you and Ron, but now it's the whole year. You're my family, Hermione, like my sister."

She put an arm around his shoulders. "And you're like a brother to me. But you will always have me in your life. You will also have Ginny, and Ron is going to be with you in training."

"Ginny will be with you," he said with a sigh. "We're finally together again, and she'll be gone, too."

"And we'll write you every day if you want, even if you won't write back," she said, giving him a squeeze. "You know, it's Saturday. I don't have to work and you are off, right?"

He looked up and nodded.

"Wanna play a board game with me, and then go somewhere fun for lunch?"

She was glad to see him smile.

~S~

Severus pulled the thick book of the school charter and bylaws off the shelf, hoping to find a loophole to his problem. After several fruitless hours searching through the old *Daily Prophets* for the mysterious wizard, he'd sought the solitude of his office, portraits notwithstanding, so he could find a loophole to his 'Hermione problem' in the school bylaws. He wanted Hermione in his room, not in Gryffindor tower, even if he had to insist that she stay with him. However, like Minerva, the portraits were nosey in regard to his situation as well.

"There is no way around it, it's the girl's choice," Everard stated.

"He has every right to expect his *Bonded mate* to reside with him," Phineas Black snapped.

"But he isn't *officially* Bonded," Dexter Fortescue argued.

"We're Bonded. We just haven't signed the Ministry's bloody forms," Severus said, wishing the portraits would shut up so he could read the damn book.

"It's a *magical* Bonding; of course it's legitimate," Dilys Derwent stated.

"Magical Plight-Trothed spells are binding; even the Ministry cannot deny it," Christopher Wren, a wizard sporting a sixteenth-century ruff, stated factually. "All magical pure-blood families know this."

"So if I understand you correctly, Miss Granger had been considering filing for an annulment, of a magical Bonding, but hasn't followed through with it? But then neither of you have signed your confirmation of the Bonding either, is that right?" the image of Dumbledore asked from over Severus' shoulder. "What have you been doing, my boy?"

Severus sat up straighter in his chair, turned and glared at the image in the painting. "What have I done?"

"To upset her so. Didn't you bring her here to have her read up on this spell?" Dumbledore asked with a sigh. "Surely she is under the impression "

"The girl used the Moon-Song Curse to ensnare me, and I've decided that I will try and make things work with the girl! The fact is that the Ministry has told her they can give her annulment papers saying she is free, but you and I know that a true Pairing Charm cannot be broken in such a matter if it is consummated. I cannot deny that, although I was unhappy about the pairing, truth is, I was matched to her by a spell that unites soul mates one's magical complement."

"So you want to remain Bonded," Dumbledore said stating the obvious. That damnable twinkle appeared in the ex-Headmaster's eyes.

"It's not a matter of wanting to it's a matter of the fact that we are," Severus said as he leaned back in the armchair and glared at the charter lying open on his desk.

"Yet you now plan on enticing her to remain Bonded and to move into the Headmaster tower with you instead of sharing a dorm with her friends?"

"That's the gist of it," Severus stated for the second time. "But I'm not allowed to make overt advances toward *my wife*! At least not where any portrait can see... She is my *wife*, damn it!"

"It's a bloody fiasco if you ask me. A past Head of Slytherin, Headmaster of Hogwarts forcibly Bonded to a Muggle-born," Phineas Black scoffed from his frame. "She could do no better than you, that's for sure."

Dumbledore glared in the direction of his frame, and then turned back to Severus. "Severus, I don't know what more I can add. Since your Bonding is unofficial, due to the fact that neither of you have signed the official forms, you are held by the restraints of the charter. On the other hand, Hermione is eighteen and you are magically Bonded and have consummated your union prior to your reacceptance of the Headmaster's post," Dumbledore's image stated. "In other words it is forbidden, but the school governors can't dismiss you for continuing your relationship with your legally adult, Bonded wife."

"It's such a shame really, they make a cute couple," Dilys said, patting her curls.

Phineas scowled at her. "You're not helping the matter."

Severus turned to face Dumbledore's portrait. "Minerva is most insistent that I can't be seen consorting intimately with Hermione in the corridors or in empty classrooms like a hormonal teenager, as if I'd stoop that low," he stated, with a sneer. However, what Minerva had said wasn't to his liking, and he'd be damned if he was going to heed her. He knew every hidden nook and cranny in the castle and a few secret rooms as well. *I cannot order Hermione to come to me in my bedchamber, but I'll be damned if I won't try to coerce her.* "She will have to want to do so on her own accord, and the portraits will all know if she did."

"Precisely, although we portraits here are honor-bound to keep your affairs a secret. However, should you do anything against the school charter, such confidences can be broken if a student is put in grave peril or put in physical or mental harm," Fortescue stated as if quoting the bylaw at him..

Headmaster Christopher Wren scoffed at him. "Like he'd do anything to put a student in grave peril after everything he did to protect them his first term."

"In other words you are not telling me anything Minerva hasn't already told me," Severus said, closing the book. Regardless of every conceivable angle he could come up with, Severus was going to have to work around the school charter. If he was going to woo his witch back, Severus was going to have to court her without making a public spectacle of himself. This was going to take every skill he had at persuasion, manipulation, and stealth that he could muster. And in every corridor, every office, half the classrooms, and even the bloody library there were portraits, human portraits with eyes, and several of them he knew to be incessant gossips. Winning Hermione back would be a challenge. *Well, a Slytherin rarely failed at a challenge once he made up his mind to accept and conquer it, although winning the affections of this particular witch could prove to really test that theory.*

"So you intend to pursue her?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes," Severus stated firmly.

"I certainly wish you had taken a different approach to your union, Severus, but if you are truly meant for each other, I assume things will work out for the both of you," Dumbledore stated. "She is strong willed and, once her mind is made up, not easily swayed. But I do wish you luck."

"I won't need luck, I'll need perseverance." As he rose to go, his gaze fell to the three packages on his desk. He'd looked in Hermione's records and had discovered that her birthday was the nineteenth of September, so he'd Apparated to a rare bookstore to find her an appropriate gift. What he'd found was an old copy of a rare book, a lucky find actually, and it was even a second edition.

He knew that the only six first editions known to be in existence were in private collections of three of the wealthiest wizards, the vaults in the Department of Historical Records and Artifacts in the Ministry of Magic, The Alexandria Library Museum of Magical Masters in Cairo, and the Great Wizards and Masters wing of the Louvre. Even Lucius Malfoy only had a fifth edition. Of course, he knew that in time he'd be able to read the book, too, which was really an ulterior motive for buying such an expensive gift. But it would impress Hermione. That's what really counted.

The other two were a revision journal and a very fine swan quill. He contemplated giving the quill and revision journal as a start of term gift, instead of her birthday. She might appreciate the gesture toward her studies.

Giving up on the charter and bylaws, he sat down to sort out the papers from the school governors and sign off on the final curriculums of his new professors, saving Hagrid's for last.

At dinner, Minerva handed him a photograph of her and her husband, arm in arm next to a large snow-capped rock. He looked at her, not comprehending the photos significance.

"I remember now why the moor looked so familiar. Geoff and I took the boys here on one of my Christmas holidays. It's a lovely spot, where the moor drops steeply down towards the village of Ben Rhydding, near the town of Ilkley," she said, pointing at the picture.

He was still baffled by the relevance of her outburst.

She pointed at the picture again. "It's Ilkley Moor, between Ilkley and Keighley in West Yorkshire. The rock is what made me think of it." She pulled another picture from her pocket, this time larger in a wood frame, of herself, Geoff, and their three sons standing by some large rocks on a heather moor. "I think it's the same area as the house you are looking for."

"You think so?" he repeated amazedly. The larger picture didn't look like the landscape from the memory, and he couldn't tell from the smaller one due to the snow in the background.

Minerva nodded. "Yes. Ilkley Quarry is the site of the famous rock formation called the 'Cow and Calf,'" she said, indicating the larger picture. "My son, Gregory, said the rocks are made of millstone grit. The landscape is littered with these rock piles and formations. I don't know if a croft house had ever been built in the area, but the landscape is quite lovely and unforgettable. Gregory could tell you more about the place."

"Thank you, Minerva," he said, looking more closely at the background of the picture. It was a rocky heather moor like the memory.

Unfortunately, Minerva tried asking him about Hermione's living arrangement, and he snapped at her, "I'll inform you when she and I decide, and not sooner." He left the table and strode to his office.

A snowy owl appeared on his windowsill, hooted, flew toward him and extended a leg, brandishing a letter with Hermione's handwriting. Severus took the letter, and gave the owl a treat, wondering what, if anything, Hermione had to say to him that she couldn't say in person that night.

Severus,

*Please don't be mad, but I want to spend my weekend with my friends.*

*I'll be seeing you on Tuesday anyway.*

Hermione

Oh, no you don't. "Before you go, I have a response," he told the owl just as she was spreading her wings. She settled back down and waited. He quickly drafted a note.

Hermione,

*As per our arrangement, you may live at Potter's only if you keep to your agreement and meet with me nightly. I have not forced myself on you nor insisted that this be every night, giving you allowances. However, you did agree that you would spend your evenings with me in order for us to get to know each other.*

*Thus, I will be seeing you tomorrow night.*

*I will be by at seven.*

Severus

After giving the reply to the owl, he sat down and pinched the bridge of his nose *Why her of all witches? She still thinks like a bloody teenager!*

He slapped his hands on his desk, picked up his quill, and drafted a note to Kingsley.

~H~

Kingsley turned to face the room, holding his pointing stick with both hands. A huge image of large rocks on the slant of a hill appeared behind him. "Now where exactly the house is located is simply a hunch. Mr. Phillip Bradford, our wizard representative in the Muggle Ministry of Forestry, and a magical geologist, Gregory McGonagall, have both given us the locations of the most likely spots for the croft house as described by Severus. This is one of them."

Harry watched as more than a few heads turned to look in Severus' direction. Severus was creating the images from his memory by using an obscure spell Unspeakable Harvey Fink had taught Severus that morning. The image resembled a photograph slide projected onto the white wall, much like Uncle Vernon's boring vacation photos. But the effect was useful. The down side was that the image was removed from Severus' mind each time he cast it on the wall so this was their only shot to see it. Harry was trying to remember every detail of the images so he'd never forget them. Next to him, Ron was concentrating equally as hard, staring intently at the pictures.

The image changed, drawing everyone's attention back to the front of the room. "This is another." The detailed picture now showed the inside of the house with more clarity than the other images, as if the camera was actually better in focus this time. "The house itself is one large open area, with crude furnishings. It has small windows and at least two doors, though we only saw one in the memory," Kingsley stated. "There is a hiking trail through the landscape, so two teams will approach on foot as Muggle hikers." He indicated to his left, where both Harry and Ron stood, wearing Muggle attire, suitable for a day hike. Harry smiled at Ron, excitement at the prospect of leading the raid kept firmly in check. "Others will swoop down by air once the site has been located. No one is to Apparate until the signal is given."

Harry watched the faces of the Aurors, smiling at those who'd be in his team. He was leading one of the two front groups that was going to scout along one of the hiking trails on the map. He saw Severus, dressed in black jeans and shirt, sigh as Kingsley went over the attack plans again. Maurice Duncan and Robert MacNaughton were both in Muggle jeans, t-shirts with lightweight jackets, and hiking boots, next to him, listening with rapt attention.

"So you all know your assignments; I suggest the front teams prepare to go," Kingsley finally said.

Six people approached Harry to have their outfits checked, and get their backpacks Phillip Bradford had made up for them. When Severus had called a meeting late the night before, announcing that he knew the general location of the Death Eaters' hide out, Harry had stressed the necessity for the hikers to be properly dressed in order to blend in and not raise suspicions. Therefore, having been raised Muggle, he and Phillip Bradford had been assigned the task of teaching wizards how to look like ordinary Muggle day hikers.

Harry had taken the nine going as hikers to the Gap on London's Oxford Street first thing in the morning, and he'd tried to keep everyone together in the large store as he pointed out what was proper hiking attire. Ironically, Ron had been a huge help in assisting Loraine Matsuno and Mathilde Wells in their selections while Maurice and Robert helped the others in the men's department. And, because Aurors often had to go into rugged landscapes, they already had good sturdy dragon-hide hiking boots.

Thankfully, everyone looked all right to him: Rivas and Perkinson had on shorts and polo shirts, Galvin Darthmyer in jeans and a jersey shirt, Loraine in shorts and a T-shirt and Mathilde wore jeans and a cotton blouse. Severus was eyeing everyone's footwear as Ron handed out the backpacks.

"Okay. Now be careful out there. They might detect us, or might not. There will be spells protecting the place, but since we have seen the house and the surrounds, you should be able to see through a Fidelius Charm if there is one. But be alert and vigilant. These men are killers and will kill first and run."

Hayward Blume squeezed in through the group as he tried to approach Harry. "You got everything you wanted?"

Harry looked up. "Yeah, thanks." He turned his attention back to the Aurors surrounding him.

"Okay, we have beef jerky, granola bars, water bottles, light jackets, first aid kits, moleskin if you get a blister, Sunscreen Potion, Insect-Repelling Potion, penknife, a battery operated torch, binoculars, and a map," Phillip said, pulling each item out as he named them. "If you need to, there is a side pocket for your wand and a compass on the zipper." Everyone was checking through their bags as he spoke.

Harry picked up the tree branch and handed Ron the flashlight. "We have two Portkeys; Ron and Robert MacNaughton's team will use the battery operated torch to get there, my team the branch," he said, nodding to Maurice Duncan. Maurice had insisted that Harry take lead, saying it'd be good for him. Harry hadn't minded in the least.

Maurice Duncan, Loraine Matsuno and Mathilde Wells reached out to grasp the branch in Harry's hand as the others divided in to two teams. Darthmyer glared calculatingly at Severus, as Severus grasped the branch, pointedly ignoring Darthmyer. Harry wondered what Darthmyer was perturbed about, still hovering with his group since he was supposed to be on Ron's team. Darthmyer grasped the branch just as it started to glow. "Oi, you're on"

Harry was cut off when he felt the tug at his navel. They landed between some bush and some rocks, not far from the trail. "... on Ron's team!"

Darthmyer was still glaring at Severus. "I don't trust him," he said with a sneer in Severus' direction.

Harry brandished the branch at him, snarling softly in a controlled rage, "Yeah, well I do. And now you've shorted Ron's team a wand, and you can't Apparate now. So, you've best decide right now if you can work with him, because I don't want trouble from you."

Thankfully, Severus kept his expression neutral, although he crossed his arms, his gaze flicking from Harry to Darthmyer.

Darthmyer's expression turned stony. "He's one of them."

Harry was about to retort when Loraine stepped forward. "What's your problem? You know very well that Severus has been on our side since his trial. You should've seen him fighting at the Rose and Thorns raid, and he's been assisting us in our interrogations each time we capture one of them."

"Enough," Maurice said in a loud hiss. "We're drawing attention. Darthmyer, we can't send you back, and you can't go to your team. I hope they stay smart now that they're a wizard short thanks to this immature stunt so you'll follow Potter's lead and do whatever *he* tells you. But after this, you and I will have words. For now, focus people!"

"Okay, keep the chatter down," Harry instructed as he tossed the branch aside. He checked his compass against the map that Loraine pulled out of her pack. The town of Ben Rhydding lay to his left. "Okay, we go this way," he said, walking off to his right.

Everyone followed him, most chatting softly. Severus stayed behind Harry and Maurice with Darthmyer on his heels and Mathilde and Loraine taking up the rear. Loraine tapped Darthmyer's shoulder and tried to engage him in conversation.

Harry slowed down so he could walk next to Severus. "I'm sorry about that; he was supposed to be in Ron's group," he said softly, jerking his head in Darthmyer's direction. Severus was being very quiet, and he hoped it wasn't because of Darthmyer.

"It's of no consequence," Severus stated softly. "Why the binoculars?"

"They are magically enhanced, and will also make us look like tourists," Harry stated with a grin. "Ron's idea."

Severus rolled his eyes.

"So how are things between you and Hermione?" Harry asked, knowing that Severus wouldn't confide in him, but they were supposed to look like day hikers and appear like a small group of friends.

He wasn't disappointed. Severus scowled and turned his head. "Are you asking me about my love life or inquiring if I'm mistreating your friend?"

Harry suppressed a smile. "I know you are not mistreating her. I just wondered if you are getting along all right."

"I'm sure she's told you everything you need to know," Severus stated coolly. "Change the subject or better yet, be silent."

"She tells me where you take her, and I know she's still willing to give the Bonding a go, but she doesn't tell me everything," Harry stated. The look on Severus' face, the twitch of the eyebrow followed by a sneer made Harry laugh softly. "She's my best mate. If you are going to stay Bonded, you and I will have to deal with each other."

"Is that why you requested me on your team?" Severus asked.

"No, I wanted you because you're a capable wizard, and you can help me break down any of the protection spells that your ex-associates might've used to keep us out," Harry stated firmly. It was the truth. Harry had the sneaking suspicion that the house would be protected by the same spell that Draco had set on the stairs to the Astronomy Tower in their sixth year.

The team stopped to survey the landscape and check the map. At a fork in the trail, Harry chose to go right, deeper into the moor, since the town wouldn't be in view anymore if they did. Each time they entered a field of dense heather growth, they left the trail, spanning out to scout for any magical signatures or anything that resembled the location they were seeking. Harry paired Maurice with Darthmyer each time, ignoring the older wizard's glares, and signaled Severus to follow him.

As the terrain started to give way to a gentle decline, Severus reached out and grasped Harry's arm. "Hold up a minute." He pulled out his wand, aiming for the ground. Harry signaled everyone to squat or sit, watching Severus carefully. Bending low, Severus strode forward, scanning the plants. He came back, but kept his wand out.

"What?" Maurice asked.

"A very faint magical trace pointing north," Severus replied. "I think it's to deceive an intruder, placed here merely as a distraction from the house."

Maurice nodded in agreement, saying softly, "We should proceed with caution in case there are sensory charms," as he swept the area with detection charms.

Loraine was scanning the area with her binoculars. "I think I see a Jack Russell Terrier?" she said questioningly, staring at a point in the distance.

Mathilde quickly confirmed the find. "Two, with bobbed tails," she informed the group. "They could be Crups."

"Concealment Charms, now," Harry ordered softly, casting the spells on himself, "and don't forget to add Heat-Sensing and Locating Charms. I don't want us hitting each other." The landscape remained the same, but from his perspective each member of his team now appeared to him as a red, orange, and yellow shape. He leaned over to the Snape-like shape beside him. "Does this look familiar?"

"Somewhat," the figure responded in Severus' voice, then pointed down the trail. "I want to get down to that grouping of brush."

Harry nodded, then mentally chastised himself. The spells made small and simple gestures, like nodding, almost unreadable. "Maurice, you, Darthmyer and Mathilde aim for that ridge of rock on that slope; Loraine, Severus, and I are going down to that brush. Use the Protean disks if you see anything."

He followed Severus, Loraine at his back. The closer they got to the brush, the more tension Harry felt. Severus stopped occasionally, kneeling down, and they copied him. Each pulled out their binoculars and Disillusioned them.

"There is definitely something there," Loraine said hesitantly and just above a whisper, "but I can't see it if I look at it directly."

"Fidelius Charm," Severus stated. "We've seen the house and the inside so we know it's there, but we won't be able to look directly at it until we are inside the ward."

They moved forward carefully, the tension mounting as they edged their way through the low foliage. Severus held out an arm to block Harry's progress. "The Crups, we're getting too close." He aimed his wand in the direction of the distortion, sending a curse and then a spell pulse that rippled the air.

Severus leaned toward Harry. "That should confuse the Crups. They're now unable to smell anything and they should be confounded," he said, and Harry could hear the smirk in his voice. "I also detect a Stealth-Censoring Spell."

"Well, we're in the right place." Harry turned to scan the ridge with his binoculars, spotting Ron and Rivas. "Loraine, send a message to Ron that we've found the house and to Disillusion themselves."

"Already sending the message," Loraine stated, as Ron faded from view.

In a few heartbeats Harry could see three glowing human-shapes proceeding to the location of the house.

"He says that the dogs are Confounded... and they're dividing... Rivas and Perk I assume Perkinson are moving to the other side..." she read off her coin. "He'll send word when they're in place."

"I want the Crups stunned when we get close enough," Harry stated, and Loraine indicated that she'd relayed the order. "No," he said turning to face her, "I want us to do it. We'll move forward and try and draw them out of the house. Have Ron and his team move in from the back. If there is a door, great, if not, have them come around the house and attack from the sides."

"You're doing good kid," Maurice murmured, leaning over his shoulder. "Silence your boots, in case them dogs hear us."

Harry chastised himself for forgetting, casting a Silencing Charm as he moved forward. He could feel Severus smirking beside him. As they moved down the slope toward the bushes, Loraine whispered to him that three members of Ron's team were still waiting on the ridge.

Two jets of spell-light shot from the location of the house, one purple, the other red as Harry and Severus dived away from each other just before the spells hit the ground. The red one had been close, but Harry surmised that it had been nothing but a lucky shot as it had landed short from where they'd been.

"*Bombarda*," the girls shouted, aiming for the house, shattering glass and making rocks explode in the air. Darthmyer sent a ball of fire soaring in the air toward the house, but dissipated into water before it hit.

Three spells burst forward from the house, responded to by spells from his team. Another set of spells were fired on them, apparently aiming blindly at the sources of the attack, one catching one of his team on the arm. "I'm good. It's my left," Maurice shouted, firing a Body-Lock at the place where one of the shots came from.

Twin shouts of "*Patere manifesto*," and "*Manifestare*," could be heard from the house as what looked like globs turned into puffs of smoke. "It's to reveal our location," Maurice said, as puce smoke billowed in the air. "If it touches us, our Concealment Charms will fail."

Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus*," the same time Maurice shouted, "*Obtorpescere*," as more explosion of puce smoke filled the air around them.

"You can't disarm them, Potter, if you can't see them," Severus shouted, sending three fireballs through the air in quick succession. One of the fireballs landed a few feet off the ground, caught on something flammable, and spread quickly. Another seemed to curve, passed too far to their right, and shouts could be heard, possibly from the side of the house. A scrawny, scruffy blond wizard appeared, followed by a wiry-looking, dark-haired wizard with a goatee. "Mulciber and MacTavish," Severus and Maurice said in unison.

"*Deflagratio*," Mulciber shouted, setting the ground near them on fire.

Mathilde and Maurice immediately responded with, "*Aqua-riguum*," to put out the flames as MacTavish sent two green jets of light at them. Darthmyer erected a deflection shield as he shoved Philip out of the way and shouted at Mathilde to duck. Meanwhile, Ron, Phillip, and Robert were sliding down the slope firing spells at the house.

More dust kicked up and part of the roof collapsed.

Two more wizards left the house, while one stayed in the doorway sporting a Bubble-Head Charm.

"*Stupefy*," Harry said, echoed by the girls on his left. "That's Dolohov," he shouted. "Get him!" The puce smoke was settling on them now, and breaking down their protective charms.

"They can see us now!" Harry warned his team. A spell grazed his shoulder as he turned, sending a wave of cold down his arm and spine, but adrenaline helped him shake off the chill.

Mathilde made a forceful flick of her wrist as she growled, "*Conglacio intransit*," at Mulciber as Loraine hissed, "*Petrificus Totalus*," aiming for MacTavish. Both wizards fired consecutive curses in response while ducking.

A whip-like burst of purple light shot at Harry from Antonin Dolohov's wand but missed, cracking on the ground instead. Ron ducked and rolled, firing a Body-Bind. Dolohov fired at him, making Ron rollout of the way. Robert quickly cast a Shield Charm and Harry fired a Stunner to defend his friend. "Ron, get up!"

A flash of red whizzed by Harry's head. "*Stupefy*," Mathilde yelled, as MacTavish fired a spell back handed, then swung, wildly, snarling, "*Cinefactus*."

MacTavish fired an Entrail-Expelling Curse at Darthmyer that hit his side. Blood gushed from the cut, the major impact of the curse hopefully having missed, but he was down. Ron and Robert fired, both their spells, unfortunately, blocked by MacTavish.

Mulciber shouted, "*Lapidonis*," at Harry as the wizard in grey robes, yelped, "*Stupefy*," barely having time to dodge another spell.

Harry managed to roll out of the way, landing on his knees, and fired back. He blocked a sickly burst of light headed for him, but heard Loraine curse loudly. Dolohov aimed at him, but Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus*," as Ron shouted, "*Levicorpus*."

Not far from him, a shout of "*Diffino atroxis*" was answered by Phillip's "*Expelliarmus*," and Robert's "Stupefy."

To his far left Harry heard Ron shout, "*Conglacio intransit*."

Dolohov fired widely, snarling, "*Viscerum lania*," as MacTavish yelled "*Mutilus interrorsus*" with a sharp pointing jab of his wand.

Rocks exploded not far from Harry's feet, making him roll and fire again to defend himself.

Both girls took aim at the wizard in the doorway, who took aim at them, Mathilde's face going pale as her wand snapped in her hand. Loraine started running over to her firing spells wildly at the house. Phillip tried to cover for her, firing on the wizard, drawing his attention, but missed and hit the house.

The wizard at the doorway shouted, "*Cinefactus*," hitting Phillip's shoulder, making his shirt and part of his shoulder disintegrate into dust.

Meanwhile, Dolohov raised his arm, saying "*Avada Kedavra*," as he took aim. Harry tied to disarm him, but was knocked out of the way by Severus. Harry struggled to get up, ignoring the shooting pain in his ankle. He saw MacTavish fire at Mathilde, making her scream, but it cut off short. He turned and saw her fall. Loraine fired the same time Robert did, their spells colliding next to Mulciber.

Dolohov tried the kill Harry again, but Severus' arm slashed the air as he snarled, "*Sectumsempra*," the same time Harry shouted, "*Levicorpus*." Dolohov was flung upside down in the air by his ankle, blood spurting from his body as he tried the Killing Curse again. Harry jerked his arm, shouting, "*Expelliarmus*," to disarm him as Ron shouted, "*Conglacio intransit*."

Maurice barely had time to shield himself as Dolohov aimed at him, snarling, "*Viscerum lania*," again.

Meanwhile, MacTavish made another sharp-pointing jab of his wand at Harry, but he was thrown off balance from dodging a spell from Ron, and his spell flew well past Harry's location. Ron tried to Stun MacTavish, only succeeding on hitting the wizard's arm.

Perkinson, looking rather singed, stumbled from around the house and fired. The wizard standing in the doorway panicked, fired a spell off wildly, and ran from the house, stopping to turn on his heel.

MacNaughton fired again and again to try and stop the grey-robed wizard.

"That's William Holabird!" Perkinson shouted, just as the wizard in grey Apparated away.

Mulciber turned and aimed at Harry, enraged, snarling, "*Avada Kedavra*," as Dolohov turned into a human icicle. Harry managed to dodge out of the way as Mulciber's curse bounced off a rock.

Loraine and Ron both shouted "*Expelliarmus*," as Phillip shouted, "*Conglacio intransit*," sending MacTavish flying and crashing against the burning house. Ron hit him with a Stunner, and he fell onto his face, stiff as a frozen board.

Harry sat on a rock as the dust settled around them. His ankle throbbed and he couldn't stand on it any longer. His left arm felt bone cold, and his left hand was numb. Not far from him, Loraine was trying to help stop the curse from eating away at Phillip's shoulder. From where he sat, he could see she favored one leg. Maurice told her to take Phillip to St. Mungo's as he picked up Mathilde's limp body. Ron approached him, looking worried. "I'm fine, Ron. See who's hurt and help get them to hospital."

"Sure, mate," Ron replied and turned.

Several yards away Harry saw something black sprawled on the ground. Forgetting his pain, he hobbled and hopped to where the body lay, stumbling faster when he realized it was Severus. He managed to turn the man over and checked for a pulse. He knew that he couldn't Apparate with him in his condition. "Ron, I need help!" he shouted.

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Author's notes:

I know, I know... but I had to stop somewhere. You know that he's not dead, right? Otherwise the story would just end here, and this isn't the ending I have planned.

I want to thank my betas, EverMystique and to DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

TPP: Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

The Latin used came from <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl?> Any mistakes in my choice of which Latin words to use are totally my own.

Obrigesco: *to become stiff, **to freeze***

Deflagration: *burning, destruction by fire*

Riguum: *watering, well watered, irrigated. I figured this would put out a fire.*

Patere: *exposed; **to be revealed**, disclosed, clear*

Manifesto and Manifestare: *to show clearly, reveal*

Cinefactus: *turned to ashes*

Conglacio intransit: *to freeze, be inert, **to turn to ice***

Mutilus: *maimed or mutilated*

Introrsus: *inwards, inwardly, internally*

Viscerum: *pertaining to the flesh; also **internal organs**, entrails; inmost part or heart of anything*

Lanio: *to tear to pieces, mangle, lacerate*

## Revived and Wedded

Chapter 32 of 63

Hermione learns about the raid and rushes to Severus' side, refusing to leave him until a cure is found. And Luna and Neville get married.



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Revived and Wedded

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When Harry stumbled into the house from the Floo, limping and wearing an arm sling, Hermione let out a cry of alarm, "Where were you last night? I was worried sick!" as she rushed over to him. "You could've at least sent me a message or something."

"Hold on, I'm still sore," he said, holding up a hand as if to stop her from lunging at him.

She made a weaving motion with her wand as she removed the ashes from his clothes. "What happened?" she demanded, pulling his good arm around her shoulders for support. "Are you all right?"

"Hermione, my ankle is fine," he insisted, but didn't remove his arm. "I was at St. Mungo's, and I had loads of forms to fill out about the raid."

She tightened her arm about his waist as she turned her shoulders sideways slightly to glare at him. "Raid? What raid?"

He straightened his posture a bit as he looked at her squarely. "We found one of the hideouts yesterday. Dolohov, Mulciber, and MacTavish are now behind bars, and William Holabird is in custody for questioning. Do you remember him? He worked in Magical Transportation."

"The guy who claimed to have been Imperiused?" she asked, trying to guide him to a seat.

"Hermione, I'm fine," Harry said, shrugging her off.

"You need a pain potion!" she said, wondering if she'd be able to conjure crutches for him.

"My potions are in my pocket," he said with a grimace when he put weight on his sore foot.

"You're still limping," she insisted and pulled him down on the sofa. "I should elevate your foot." With three different quick flicks of her wand for the right spells, the ottoman moved closer, grew taller and then became fluffier.

"It was broken," he stated with a smirk as he set his foot on the offered rest. "The Healers mended it in no time, but I pulled my ligaments and tendons as well." He leaned back and sighed as if his leg wasn't the only part of him in pain. "Can't I just sleep here tonight?"

Hermione laughed. "I'll have to convert the sofa into a cot," she said as she summoned a pillow from his bedroom. She stood up and looked about the room. "And Kreacher will have to set up dinner on the coffee table..."

"Transfigure away!" he said with a wave of his hand, catching his pillow before it hit her.

She enlarged the coffee table to make an eating table and asked Kreacher for blankets. "So tell me about the raid. What happened?"

Harry took a deep breath and sat up. "Snape, er, Severus figured it out. He called a meeting and told us the general area where the house was located. Kingsley asked Ron and me to help lead the search teams with Maurice Duncan, who was with me, and Robert MacNaughton, who was with Ron. Maurice I really like him he let me lead it as if I was the lead Auror. Anyway, Severus was with us my team and we found the house. Loraine, you remember her, right? She and Mathilde Wells blasted the house, although we couldn't see it 'cause of the Fidelius Charm and Severus set the roof on fire. He also burned Rivas, but that was an accident... But, between the fire and smoke... Anyway that's when the fighting started."

Hermione swallowed, listening intently. "So was anyone hurt?" she asked, mentally crossing her fingers.

Harry looked at his hands. "Darthmyer and Mathilde are dead; Rivas has third-degree burns on most of his body. Phillip Bradford's shoulder was hit with a curse that turned his skin and some of his bicep to ashes, and Loraine and Maurice they both had minor injuries, but they're fine now."

He was idly playing with a thread on the fringe of the throw pillow he'd pulled onto his lap. She leaned down and tipped her head to look at his face, but he refused to look at her. "Harry, what is it? What happened? Tell me," she implored, sure that there was more, something he wasn't telling her.

He looked, up his eyes haunted. "Hermione, its Severus. He was hurt. He was unconscious when I found him. He's still unconscious... I don't even know what hit him," he said remorsefully.

Hermione covered her mouth as she sat back, her mind taking a while to process what he'd said. She opened her mouth to ask the questions rolling foggily through her thoughts, but only one word escaped. "Alive?"

Harry nodded. "He's alive, but not responsive." He reached for her hand as she stood up and walked to the window. *He's hurt. Not dead. Hurt.* Hermione turned, not sure which was faster, Floo or Apparating.

She barely heard Harry say, "Hermione, I'm sorry, I didn't see it happen. Everything was happening so fast... and the fighting was life or death with these guys."

"I'll be back," she said, hurrying to the door to Apparate to St. Mungo's. She arrived at the Apparation site and quickly scanned the room. The queue for the receptionist was long, but since she had no idea where Severus was, she had no choice but to wait. Several people turned to look at her, some whispering to their companions. She ignored the stares and murmurs.

When she finally reached the receptionist, the witch simply said, "Go to the Spell Damage Ward on the fourth floor, Auror security wing," and handed Hermione a disc on a safety pin. "You'll have to wear this at all times," she stated bluntly, and then leaned to the side to peer around her. "Next."

After asking the first Healer she saw when leaving the lift where to go, Hermione hurried down the corridor to a set of double doors. A wizard with a sensory wand sat next to a table with a one-armed brass scale on it. "That won't be necessary, Armand," Auror Hobday said as he approached. "If you're Hermione Snape, what color robes did you and Mrs. Potter buy recently?"

Hermione smiled. "We bought two each, one red and one yellow."

He nodded and opened the door for her. "He's down the hall, fifth door on your left."

She thanked him and walked quickly to the room. Three Healers stood around the bed, two of them holding clipboards while the third ran a diagnostic check with his wand. They stopped talking and turned, all three staring at her as Hermione pushed open the door and entered. Severus lay on the bed, the blankets folded neatly at mid chest, and his arms lay at his sides. If it weren't for the slight rise to his chest, and the pulse of the light at the end of the Healer's wand matching a heartbeat, she'd have thought him dead. "How is he?" she asked softly, fighting back her fears.

"Nonresponsive. His vital signs are good, and he's warm, but he hasn't awakened yet," stated the grey-haired wizard with the wand on the other side of the bed. He tucked his wand into his pocket.

"What happened? Do you know what spell hit him?" she managed to say around the lump in her throat.

Two of the healers turned their attention back on Severus, leaving the dark-haired wizard with a pointy chin to address her question. "We're not sure." At Hermione's wide-eyed incredulous stare, he blushed slightly and continued. "He's swallowing his potions, water, and liquefied food, and his motor reflexes seem normal. His breathing and heart rate are normal for a resting rate... but he's nonresponsive to anything around him."

The youngest wizard of the group added, "He's not responding to pain stimulus."

"Not unlike having been kissed by a Dementor, except his eyes are closed, but he's not drooling and he's nonresponsive... or being on Draught of Living Death, except his reflexes are uninhibited, and he's visibly breathing." Her mind raced through the affects of the curses she knew. "Almost like... May I see his chart?" she asked, looking at one of the wizards holding clipboards.

"We've gone over every possibility," the older man stated as the younger wizard asked, "You don't remember me, do you?" He smiled when she shook her head.

He did look familiar, but she couldn't place his face. "I'm David Cadwallader. My little brother and I were on the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, but Jason always was the better flyer."

She smirked despite herself at his comment. "Hufflepuff... I remember Jason; he was a large, burly guy. He played Chaser, didn't he?"

"Yes, well, I take after dad's side of the family. Jason always said you were wicked smart," Healer Cadwallader said, handing her his clipboard. "Maybe you'll see something we don't?"

The grey-haired wizard bristled. "She's not a trained Healer. In fact, she hasn't even *finished* her education at Hogwarts yet."

Hermione ignored him as she read through the Healer's notes.

"Sorry, this is Healer Galen Cavallaro," Healer Cadwallader said, first indicating the dark-haired wizard and then the older Healer. "And this is Healer Calvin Lansing."

She glanced up to politely acknowledge both Healers and turned her focus back on the chart. "Inert, unaware, listless... motor reflexes responsive but he's unresponsive to pain stimuli, skin warm... A white misty appearance in the eyes..." She looked up at Healers in surprise. "His eyes are glazed over by a mist? Show me!" she exclaimed as she scurried over to the bed. She gently pushed one of Severus' eyelids up and peered at his eye.

The lights dimmed somewhat behind her as Healer Cadwallader illuminated his wand tip and moved it back and forth to show her the whitish haze on his dark iris. "Because his eyes are such a dark color, it's easy to see, but this way you can see the swirling of the discoloration as if the aqueous humour behind the lens is, in fact, a mist."



Hermione stood up and paced, turning over the facts in her mind, trying to remember anything that fit the description of Severus' condition. The mist on his eyes reminded her of something from her Defense class... "Vitalis exanimus but it can't be," she mumbled, then stopped and faced Healer Cadwallader. "What would happen if a living person was hit with the spell to turn a corpse into an Inferi?"

Healer Cadwallader gasped in shock at the implication. "He would... be a living dead!"

"But he'd still have his soul though, right?" she asked, hopeful that deep down Severus was still intact.

Healer Cavallaro crossed his arms and looked down at Severus with an appraising expression. "We've not determined that"

Healer Lansing interrupted the younger man. "But that would be cruel to..."

She pivoted to face Healer Lansing and glared at him. "He was in a fight against Death Eaters! I think cruel and unusual would be a given in this situation! Dolohov liked to cause as much pain and damage to his victims as possible and enjoyed inflicting slow, painful deaths. Mulciber was well known for inflicting the Imperious on people, and MacTavish..." She gasped and covered her mouth. "Wasn't he accused of creating hordes of Inferi at his first trial?"

"But no one has ever found a way to reverse the Inferius Curse," Healer Cavallaro stated. "The bodies are usually burned."

"Not an option," Hermione snapped.

"So, miss know-it-all, how does one reverse the irreversible?" the older wizard sneered.

"Well, first we look up every reference on the Inferius Curse we can find, then list out the key aspects of the curse and break down its magical elements and affects. Then we list all counter spells for each affect and test the combinations until we find a counter curse," she stated the obvious back at him, defiantly.

Healer Cadwallader's eyes lit up with excitement. "And if we can find the opposite antipodal magical effects, and identify the magical movement, we might come up with a counter curse!"

"Yes," she agreed, and held up her index finger, moving it in the air as she rationalized out, "In most spells, the word is a means of focusing one's strength and desire or deliberate intent while the wand movement is the adjuvant for the determination and direction of the spell. If we can find the correct opposing antonym and determine the proper movement to direct the wand's natural energy flow, we might be able to create a reversal to the curse."

Healer Lansing crossed his arms, and huffed. "Ignorance of youth there's no reversing the Inferius Curse."

"All I need is to get into a library. Maybe Professor McGonagall will allow me to use the one at Hogwarts," Hermione said, handing Healer Cadwallader back his clipboard.

"The Healer's library is on the first lower level, and we have access to mice," Healer Cadwallader suggested, reaching for her arm rather than the clipboard.

Hermione smiled. "And I can go with you?"

He smiled and opened the door for her. "I'll take you there personally."

\*

Hermione rested her elbows on the table, her fingers laced together, and pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumbs. Yashar Javidan, Healer-in-Charge of the Auror Spell Damage ward, had granted Healer Cadwallader time to research his new hypothesis on reversing the Inferius Curse, and gave Hermione an access pass to the research facilities of St Mungo's.

Hermione had gone home Monday night frustrated at the lack of information regarding the curse and exhausted from a long day reading through old tomes and documents. Heedless of the consequences, she'd returned on Tuesday, determined to find the answer. Wednesday, she'd slipped out early and beat David to the small office off the main medical library that he'd procured for their research.

Kreacher had popped into the room with her usual breakfast, saying that "Master says Miss is to eat or I is to shove food down Miss' throat." He likewise appeared with a plate of sandwiches for each meal after that.

She should've returned to Hogwarts days ago. Professor McGonagall had left several messages at the house when Hermione had missed the train, and Hagrid had even visited Harry to see if she was all right; however Hermione had refused to leave until a reversal to the curse could be found. McGonagall's last message had indicated that she could have a leave of absence until Friday, but she had to be at the castle by Sunday. And Luna and Neville were getting married Saturday. Hermione hated the extra pressure, but refused to give up trying.

Late Thursday morning, Harry arrived with a sack lunch and to ask how things were going.

Hermione resisted the urge to hex him. "It's not going so well," she said dejectedly. Several stacks of books and numerous parchments with charts and tables lay scattered on the table in front of her as she read over the numerous notes she'd taken on the effects and affect of the curse.

Harry tilted his head with an encouraging smile. "I know you'll figure this out you always do."

"I'm not so sure this time," she said, pulling a large, heavy book toward her.

"Hermione, if anyone can find it, it's you." He placed the bag next to her. "Will you at least be home for dinner?"

"I should, but I'll be late," she replied, wishing he'd go so she could concentrate.

David arrived a few hours later, carrying a stack of books and a few scrolls. "You're here? I found some more references."

"Really? From where?" she asked, reaching for the scroll about to fall from his pile.

"I got permission to borrow some old tomes from the Malfoy library," he replied, dropping his pile on the table. "When I said what I needed, Mr. Malfoy was really quite helpful. He personally helped me find all this."

Hermione wasn't surprised. However, after reading all the new material, it didn't tell them anything that they didn't already know. She rested her head in her fingertips and peered down at the list of Latin words on the parchment between her elbows, saying them softly to herself in random combinations. "Responsum. Perspicientia. Animatus, animate, animatum having life or alive. Vivo, vivere, vixi, or victim to live, be alive or survive. Novare to revive... or reficio, reficere, refectum, revivisco, and reviviscere to come to life again, revive." She sighed, knowing that they'd tried each combination of words without any success.

David tried the latest incantation on her abandoned list again on one of the Inferi-cursed mice, but there was no change in the mouse's condition. He tried the next one on the list with the same results.

Hermione cupped her hands over her nose and mouth and exhaled slowly *It has to be here. I'm just not seeing it.* She closed her eyes a moment and then picked up her stack of notes again, scanning each page even though she'd already memorized every word.

She turned to David and dropped the hand still holding her parchments onto the table. "What if we're looking at this the wrong way?" She exchanged the sheets of

parchment for one on the table while looking for one she had yesterday. "The Inferius creates a false life; it animates, revives the body in a zombie-like state. What if we have to kill or destroy it to beat it?"

David looked at her in alarm. "Kill the patient? No, that wouldn't be allowed," he said emphatically with a sweep of his hand.

"We're not getting anywhere trying to revive the mice. What if the answer isn't to animate or reanimate them at all? So what if the answer was the exact opposite: to inanimate, deaden, discourage, or kill. It would be like rebooting the system of a computer, shut it down to release the spell and then resuscitate?"

"Are you bloody mad?" he asked, staring at her as if she'd lost her mind.

She ignored him, finally finding the sheet she wanted. "Here, *abolere*, *abolevi*, *abolevitum* to destroy, do away with... *Abrumpo* or *abrumper* to break off, sever or to remove. *Perimere* or *peremptum* to do away with, destroy, kill, annihilate... *Ferire* to strike dead, slay, kill... That seems likely. *Mortiferus ferire* is used to kill magical creatures humanely."

"But that's backwards. You're talking about killing him!" he croaked out as she Summoned another of the caged Inferi-cursed mice to her.

Carefully constructing the wand movements for both spells in her head, she practiced variations of two spells, trying to combine them into a fluid movement. Finally, thinking she had it, she aimed her wand at the mouse. "*Mortiferus ferire vitalis*," she said determinedly, and then quickly added, "*Rennervate*." The mouse remained lifeless. She summoned another mouse, thinking that she needed to flick her wand more, and repeated the spells. Again the mouse lay lifeless.

"I told you, it won't work that way," David stated. "You have to..."

She summoned another, ignoring him. "*Mortiferus ferire vitalis*," she said, quickly adding, "*Reaspiroatum*," trying again. The mouse lay dead in its cage. She sighed in defeat.

David's eyes narrowed as he stared at the mouse. Suddenly his eyes widened as he clutched his hands in fists and stared at her as his pursed lips stretched into a smile. "No. Try, *Reanimaus aspiro*," he suggested. Hermione Summoned another mouse. "*Mortiferus ferire vitalis*," she said watching the mouse die, then quickly added, "*Renanimaus aspiro*," as David added, "*Resuscadio ictus*," with a swish of his wand.

The tiny nose twitched. Then a foot jerked, and the side expanded as the mouse took a breath. Slowly, as if waking from a drunken sleep, the little mouse rolled up onto its feet, staggered, fell, and began to shake.

Hermione sucked in her breath as the mouse stirred, tears forming in her eyes.

David performed a diagnostic on the mouse, and turned to her in amazement. "We did it!" he exclaimed, leaning over and hugging her.

~S~

Severus started to open his eyes and then squinted at the bright glare. He moved his hand to cover his face, and the lights dimmed.

"Sorry about that," an overly eager voice said. "Your eyes are not used to the light."

"Severus?" Hermione asked imploringly, gently touching his shoulder.

"Yes," he tried to respond but his mouth was bone-dry, and he could barely talk.

"Oh, my God, you're back!" she exclaimed, clasping both hands in front of her mouth as she gazed disbelievingly down at him.

"He's awake?" the deep baritone voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt asked from somewhere across the room. Two heartbeats later and the dark-skinned, bald head came into view. "So you've decided not to die after all."

"Really? I thought *this* was the afterlife," Severus snarled. "Where am I?"

"In the hospital," Kingsley said with a grin.

Severus looked around, ignoring the pain from moving his head. "St. Mungo's?"

"Yes," the enthusiastic male voice replied.

A Healer held a cup to his lips to drink. He tasted Rejuvenating Elixir on his tongue instead of the expected water and almost choked before he forced himself to swallow. "I'm thirsty. Give me water before you drown me with potions."

"So you are cognitive as well as awake," Kingsley said teasingly, and then his expression became serious. "Before you ask, we got them. Dolohov, Mulciber, and MacTavish are in Azkaban. William Holabird is in custody. Naturally, they're not talking, but once you are up to it, I'll authorize a visit."

Severus turned his head to get the Healer to stop pouring the potion in his mouth so he could talk. "Anyone else"

"Hurt? Yes." Kingsley told him about the casualties calmly, but his eyes were haunted with grief: "Mathilde Wells is dead, I'm afraid, so is Samuel Rivas. Perkinson said that he was burned by a cursed fire... It wasn't Fiendfyre. He said he'd never seen anything like it consumed Rivas in seconds and didn't respond to water. Rivas never had time to cast the Flame-Freezing Charm. Perkinson rolled him in the mud to put it out and sent him here by emergency Portkey. Rivas died several hours after arriving on the ward."

"The Flame-Freezing Charm wouldn't have worked. It's a spell that Lucius used... it's the *Infernardentis*," Severus tried to explain. Hermione gasped and covered her mouth.

*Damn; I killed him. I used the Infernardentis to burn the house.* He'd have to explain it later.

"Darthmyer died, the Entrail-Slicing Curse of Dolohov's got him," Kingsley said solemnly. "He bled out before MacNaughton got him here, and Phillip, the Healer's are having trouble regrowing his shoulder. Some nasty curse turned his skin and some of his muscle to ash."

"The Cinefactus if there is any of the ash... I have a salve that if mixed with his ashes will regrow the tissue, but you have to be able to get as much of his ashes as you can."

Kingsley nodded, making a mental note. "I'll send Loraine; she knows where he was hit."

"Don't send her alone. The others might go there," Severus warned, trying to push himself up into a sitting position.

Hermione adjusted his pillows to prop him up.

"So noted," Kingsley stated. "There was another body found in the house we haven't identified yet. I'm assuming one of theirs. It's burned beyond recognition and not any of him left to use Polyjuice."

Hermione's face seemed to pale even more, and Severus covered her hand hoping she was all right.

Kingsley apparently noticed. "I'll come by later," he said and left them alone.

Severus looked at her. "What day is it?" he asked to change the subject. Judging by the light streaming in from the window, it was daytime.

"It's Friday, Severus," she said, sitting in the chair by his bed.

He glared at her in astonishment. "Why did Minerva allow you to come here? You should be attending your lessons."

The Healer smirked as he tried to get Severus to drink another potion. "You'd be the living dead if she were. You owe her your life."

Severus glared darkly at Hermione. "Explain."

"David and I worked it out," she started to say and the Healer, David, snorted.

"She's the one who worked it out; I simply gave her parchment and let her kill off one mouse after another."

Hermione blushed. "Either Mulciber or MacTavish I think it was MacTavish hit you with the Inferius Curse. David and I figured out how to reverse it and resuscitate you."

The young Healer snorted softly again. "She figured it out. Right brilliant she is," he said as he tried to get Severus to drink the potion.

Severus swept the cup away with his hand. "What do you mean *resuscitate*?"

She lowered her head, staring at her hands in her lap. "I had to kill you to do it," she mumbled quickly like a first-year being forced to rat on his friends.

Too bad for her he was used to run-on speech. "You had to kill me?" he asked incredulously, not comprehending what she meant.

Hermione took a deep breath and began to explain. He listened in amazement as she told him what she'd done and how she worked out the counter curse. "There are others, apparently, in the Spell Damage ward who are suffering the same thing. Yashar Javidan, the Healer-in-Charge of the Auror Spell Damage ward, and Healer Benjamin Levin, Healer-in-Charge of the general Spell Damage ward, want Healer Cadwallader and I to show the technique to the other Healers."

Severus closed his eyes for a minute. He was amazed at what she'd achieved, and not a little dumbfounded that she'd done so in such a short amount of time, but she'd said they'd only tested the counter curse spells on mice before testing it on him. That was a huge leap to make, going from mouse to human without any other trials.

"Are you mad?" she asked softly. "I know it was a "

He opened his eyes. "You're bloody lucky it worked. Human size and physiology are quite different from a mouse, Hermione," he stated in his professor's tone.

She collapsed back in her chair, shoulders slumping and her head down, fiddling with the cuticle on her thumb. Seeing her react so dejectedly made him feel guilty, but she'd still taken a huge risk with his life.

"I only wanted you to recover," she said softly.

"If it weren't for her, you'd be a nonresponsive lump in the bed, and you berate her for taking a chance to heal you?" David chastised him.

Severus turned and glared at the vexatious Healer.

"She was here, all day and even well into the night, working on finding your cure, and this is how you thank her?" the Healer ranted. "Maybe the papers were right, and she should've filed for the annulment. You don't deserve her."

Hermione jumped up and held up her hand. "David, please. Leave it alone; he's just cranky. I should've tested the counter curse on a larger animal before trying it on him. He's right; I was rushing forward irresponsibly and too arrogant... I jumped to conclusions and short-cut the process, believing I was right... I know it worked, but I could've killed him."

David thrust the potion into her hand. "Here, he needs this. I'll be down the hall. Let me know when you're ready to do the counter curse on Simmons."

Hermione nodded and smiled weakly at David as he left the room.

Severus stared at the ceiling. "I want you to return to school."

She sighed, and he turned to face her. "I mean it, Hermione. I want you at the castle. We arrested Antonio Dolohov. That means that his cousin, Dragen Dolohov, will want revenge. Unless he was the unidentified body burned in the house, which I strongly doubt." Her gaze snapped to meet his, and he was glad to read comprehension in her soft amber-brown eyes. "So until he's caught, you're not safe."

"But then neither are you," she said, laying a hand on his arm.

"And that's why Kingsley has me on the Auror ward and not in general population. The security on this ward is much higher." He reached up and she slipped her hand in his. "Thank you, Hermione. I can't believe... thank you."

She smiled and sat down still holding his hand. "Would you like me to read to you? I have the *Prophet*..."

"No, anything but that," he said with a sneer. "How about reading one of your medical books, instead?"

One corner of her mouth pulled back, and she looked at her hands, disappointed. "I had to leave them all downstairs." She looked up, her hands clasped together in her lap, and shrugged, making her breasts squeeze together enticingly. "I have all my notes, though."

He gave her a half-smile. "I want you to write this up for publication. You've made quite a discovery, and you should receive credit for your efforts. I'll see that it gets sent to the right people."

Her face lit up in a smile.

~H~

Time had seemed to fly by. Severus was still weak and recuperating on the Auror Spell Damage ward under tight security. Because of her determination to find the counter curse, Hermione had missed the rehearsal and dinner at the Longbottoms' for the wedding. On Saturday, she left Severus' room when the Healer brought him his lunch and Apparated to the lawn of Neville's house. She was ushered inside quickly and escorted up the master suite. She was shocked by the flurry of women, in various states of dress, already primping for the wedding.

Hermione was introduced to Luna's cousin, Roselyn Prescott, and her aunt, Shaylee Donovan. "Luna is having her hair and nails done," Roselyn stated, sounding too much like Lavender Brown as she guided Hermione into the room. "You should too." The girl looked at Hermione's hand grasped in her perfectly manicured one and gasped. "Your hands are a mess!" She pulled Hermione along and sat her next to a witch having her grey hair done up in rollers. "She needs to have the works," Roselyn

told the magical beautician.

Across the room, Hermione finally caught sight of Luna surrounded by several older ladies as Mrs. Donovan approached them with two veils in her hands for Luna to choose from.

"Ruth Gottlieb, I'm married to Augusta's brother," the woman said as another woman in a smock appeared.

"What have you done to your hair!" the witch in the smock exclaimed as she clasped Hermione's hand and gasped. "Your nails!" Two tables appeared from nowhere on either side of Hermione with small clamshell-shaped bowls of green goo. "Go on then, while I brush this out," the woman said, pushing Hermione's hand into the warm goo.

The witch began to wash and set her hair as the lady next to her gabbed on about how sad it was Neville's parents wouldn't be attending.

"I think it's sad, but given their mental state, I can see why," Hermione said, grimacing as the witch's brush snagged a snarl.

Mrs. Gottlieb rambled on, "After all, only Alice shows any sign of recognition..."

Hermione tried to pay attention as the witch behind her tugged and pulled on her hair as she set in the rollers. Finally the woman moved to sit beside her and proceeded to give her a manicure. "Oh, good, the ink's gone," she said, massaging her fingers. Hermione was shocked to see that her nails had grown a good half inch.

When the witch moved to the other hand, Ginny appeared, her hair in rollers and her nails painted in pale pink. "You made it! I was about to send dad to go find you. Harry said you're spending all your time at St. Mungo's. You were missed at the rehearsal."

"Why don't I let you young people talk," Mrs. Gottlieb said with a smile, rising from her chair.

Ginny plopped down in the vacated seat. "How's Severus?"

"He's doing much better," Hermione answered, lulled by the sensations of her manicure.

"Harry told me that you helped the Healers find a spell to wake him," Ginny asked as the Longbottoms' house-elf, Asia, handed each girl a plate stacked with finger sandwiches and pieces of fruit speared on toothpicks.

"Gin, it was awful!" Hermione said as she sat up a bit. "He was hit with the Inferius Curse."

"But no that's impossible!" Ginny exclaimed loudly, making a few ladies turn their heads. "He's alive though, right? I mean, he wasn't really turned into an Inferi?"

"No, he was alive when MacTavish cursed him. It made him almost comatose, but I created a way to reverse the curse that worked, and he's getting better." Hermione explained what she did.

"Oh, my gosh, that's bloody brilliant! You created the spells from scratch!" Ginny exclaimed, once again drawing attention.

As the woman in the smock finished first with Ginny's hair, then Hermione's, the girls discussed the creation of the counter curses and the theory Hermione finally used, and then Ginny caught her up on what had been happening at school. "Oh, and I'm Quidditch captain this year, so you're stuck coming out for all the games. I may even drag you out for practices, too."

"Games, yes, practices we'll see," Hermione said, admiring their hair styles in a mirror. The witch had pulled the sides up with sparkling combs, leaving her hair to fall down her back in luxurious curls.

Mrs. Longbottom came over to inspect the witches' work. "Very nice. Now into your robes, and we'll take pictures of you girls on the stairs."

Luna was now standing in the center of the room, inspecting her bouquet of white flowers interspaced with tiny blue and yellow roses. When she looked up, she practically ran over to Hermione. "You came!"

"I wouldn't miss it!" Hermione hugged Luna and took a step back to admire her wedding robes. "You're lovely."

Luna's strapless wedding robes were made of billowy, white silk layers over a soft blue under dress and decorated with hundreds of tiny crystals that caught the light as she moved. Her hair was curled, pulled up at the sides and laid silkily down her back. "Thank you. Harry told me about Severus. I'm sorry he won't be here."

"Marry in blue, lover be true... marry in white, everything's right," one of Luna's aunts said in a girly, sing-song voice as she made sure the robes hung nicely. "Now walk slowly, Luna dear. You don't want to mess up your robes."

"Yes, Aunt Aenya," Luna replied, turning slightly. "Hermione, this is my Aunt Aenya O'Doherty, my mother's elder sister, and that's Shaylee Donovan, her younger sister. They're from Ireland. Roselyn Preston is my cousin... over there is Neville's Great Aunt Enid, and Mrs. Longbottom's sister-in-law, Ruth Gottlieb." Luna peered out the window as Hermione greeted each woman.

"I'm glad it's overcast; its good luck if it rains on your wedding. Mr. Weasley came here this morning to help dry the grass. He was the first one to congratulate me!" she said, beaming. "I'm told that's lucky too."

"It's bad luck if a woman gets there first. Now did you hear the birds this morning, Luna?" Mrs. O'Doherty asked. "It's good luck to rise to the song of birds on your wedding day."

Luna nodded. "Yes, and I had my window open and the seeds on the feeder to encourage them just like you suggested."

"Good, good. Now the veil. Irish tradition says it must be a happily married witch to help you with that, to ensure a long, happy marriage for the bride and groom," Mrs. Donovan said joyfully as she helped her sister put on Luna's veil. Mrs. Longbottom placed the wildflower wreath on Luna's head to hold the veil in place. Mrs. Gottlieb carefully folded Luna's veil back, and the older ladies all stood back and smiled.

"Now you have my earrings, yes?" Mrs. O'Doherty asked, and Luna nodded. "They'll bring you luck whenever you wear them, you know."

"Yes, Aunt Aenya," Luna said as she inspected the chandelier above her.

Luna was given two Sickles from her aunts for her tiny purse, which dangled from her wrist. "For luck," they said with identical winks.

Great Aunt Enid, not to be outdone, quickly gave Luna two more. "For luck."

"Now, you have something blue, something cheerful, something old, and something new..." Mrs. Donovan said giddily. "You bathed in Rosemary and rose oil, and used the lilac soap?"

Luna nodded, examining the veil by holding the edges with both hands. "And I have a Knut in my shoe."

"Excellent!" her two Irish aunts exclaimed, Mrs. O'Doherty clasping her hands together with a girlish smile.

A witch gave Ginny and Hermione their flowers, and they were led to the grand staircase for pictures. The banister was decorated lavishly with flowers and candles and soft

music wafted from below. After several different posed arrangements, Great Aunt Enid shooed off the photographer. "What a nuisance of a man."

Mrs. Longbottom shook her head. "If you girls are all ready, we have to get to the entry so we can start the wedding."

Hermione was surprised to see Mr. Lovegood, Neville, Dean, Harry, and Ron with several older wizards, standing in the entry hall. Considering that Luna's aunts had literally ensured that every Irish good luck superstition had been met, it struck her as odd. Everyone knew it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride before her grand entrance.

A wizard in long robes wearing a striped, embroidered shawl, stood by a table with a scroll laying open upon it, and Hermione noticed that all the guys wore a yarmulke on their heads. Neville, Luna, Great Uncle Algie, Augusta Longbottom, and Mr. Lovegood took their places around to the table.

"In the presence of witnesses, the groom undertakes the marriage obligations by presenting me with a token of his promise," the Rabbi said, picking up an object off the corner of the parchment on the table.

Neville took what looked like a little Limoges box, held out to him by the Rabbi, lifted it, and then returned it to his outstretched hand. The Rabbi spoke again, and then Neville, his Great Uncle Algie, and Augusta Longbottom signed the beautifully decorated parchment the Rabbi had called the Ketubah.

"The Ketubah is a binding document of confidence and trust, which details the husband's obligations to his wife," the Rabbi said and smiled at Luna. "Therein, the Groom pledges to work for you, honor, provide for and support you, in accordance with the practices of Jewish husbands who work for their wives' honor, provide and support them in truth."

Neville then carefully lowered Luna's veil over her face.

"It's reminiscent of Rebecca's covering her face with her veil upon seeing Isaac before marriage," Ruth Gottlieb whispered to Hermione and Ginny.

The Rabbi walked out first, followed by Neville, then Mrs. Longbottom, and finally Neville's great aunt and uncle. Harry grinned and winked at Hermione and Ginny before he, Ron, and Dean, walked out.

Luna pointed demurely out the open door. "That's the Chuppah, which signifies the home he is providing me," she said dreamily. "I hope the peacocks don't make any noise. The Rabbi has a lovely voice."

Ginny whispered, "Just follow me; we stand next to the Chuppah on the right," then turned and walked slowly to the front to stand next to the gazebo at the end of the aisle.

Four white gossamer fabric swags were draped from inside the roof of the gazebo and wrapped around four of the supports, making a canopy inside. Large bouquets of flowers sat on pedestals and garlands of flowers decorated the rails. Two peacocks perched on the rails calmly on each side, their tails spread in twin fans, and Hermione wondered what spell was used to make them remain still. The flower girl and ring bearer walked down next and took their places, the young boy staring at Harry in awe. Then the music changed, and Luna walked forward with her tearful father as the Rabbi sang the blessing of welcome. Mr. Lovegood kissed her and reluctantly stepped to the side.

Luna circled Neville seven times as the Rabbi explained that it delineated the sacred space for their union and signified the sanctuary of the home being created. Luna came to a stop, standing to the right of Neville and smiled.

The Rabbi then recited the marriage blessings over a goblet of wine, which he said sanctified the marriage relationship.

Both Luna and Neville then drank from the glass.

"Harei at Mekudeshet Li B'taba'at Zo Kedat Moshe V'Yisrael," Neville said fluidly as he slid a simple gold ring on Luna's right forefinger, then thankfully repeated in English, "Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

The Rabbi then announced that he was going to sing the second blessing over wine, recited to give thanks to God for giving them the opportunity to perform this "mitzvah." His voice was lovely, a rich and robust tenor. When he stopped singing, he announced the reading of the Ketubah the marriage contract, and then sang that as well.

The Seven Blessings, the Rabbi called the Sheva Berachot, were given next, each conferred over a cup of wine. Several different people came forward, each giving the happy couple a blessing and passing the cup to Neville, who took a sip and handed it to Luna to do likewise. At the conclusion of the blessings, Luna and Neville drank from the wine glass again.

As Luna and Neville each picked up a candle from the small table, the Rabbi explained the significance to those gathered to witness. "In the Unity Candle Ceremony light is a symbol of God's presence, the candlesticks symbolizing the beginning of a home that will be filled with the light of Sabbath and festival candles. The flames represent the three partners in the relationship: Luna, Neville, and God..."

Neville and Luna lit the larger candle together as the Rabbi continued, "Symbolized by the lighting of the Unity Candle."

Neville took Luna's candle and placed it next to his on the table, and then held her hand, smiling happily at her.

"From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven. When two souls that are destined for each other find one another, their light flows together and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being," the Rabbi said. He looked up at the guests and paused. "Luna and Neville have written their own vows and shall read them now."

Hermione suppressed a smile at the comment, and took the flowers Ginny handed her. Luna handed Ginny her bouquet.

Neville pulled a card from his pocket and read, "I, Neville, swear by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand in hand, by your side. Mark, O Spirit, and hear us now, confirming this, our Sacred Vow." Neville took a ring from his pocket and slid it down the ring finger of Luna's left hand. "I, Neville, now take you, Luna, to be my wife. In the presence of God and before these witnesses I promise to be a loving, faithful, and loyal husband to you for as long as we both shall live."

He handed the card to Luna who read the vows softly to Neville, gazing forthright into his eyes. "I, Luna, swear by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand in hand, by your side. Mark, O Spirit, and hear us now, confirming this, our Sacred Vow." Harry nudged the ring bearer forward, and Luna took the ring from his pillow, then slid it down the ring finger of Neville's left hand. "I, Luna, now take you, Neville, to be my husband. In the presence of God and before these witnesses I promise to be a loving, faithful, and loyal wife to you for as long as we both shall live."

Luna tucked the card into the purse dangling from her wrist as the Rabbi picked up the silver goblet again. "And now please drink to the love you've shared in the past," he said, holding up the cup.

Neville accepted the cup, drank, and handed it to Luna, who took a sip and gave it back the Rabbi.

"Drink to your love in the present, on this, your wedding day." Once again, Neville accepted the cup, drank, and handed it to Luna, who tipped the cup to her lips again, passing it back to the Rabbi.

"And drink to your love in the future and forever more." Neville accepted the cup a third time, drank, gave it to Luna, who tipped the cup to her lips and handed it back to the Rabbi. Hermione privately hoped that Neville and Luna were not getting drunk.

A wizard in smart green robes, who'd been sitting next to Aenya O'Doherty, stepped forward. "May the road rise to meet you, may green be the grass you walk on, blue be

the skies above you, and may the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face, the warm rays of the sun fall upon your home, and the rains fall soft upon your fields. May God be with you and bless you, and may you see your children's children. May you be poor in misfortune, rich in blessings, wise in money, healthy and strong for each other. May pure be the joys surround you, and may the hand of a friend always be near. May you know nothing but happiness from this day forward."

The Rabbi smiled and said, "You may kiss your bride." With a huge smile, Neville raised Luna's veil, gently wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her on the lips. Luna hugged Neville tighter and leaned into him, allowing her husband to deepen the kiss, much to the delight of some and the shocked gasps and comments of the elderly witnesses.

The Rabbi handed Neville a glass in a cloth bag that he placed on the floor. After the Rabbi explained the symbolism of the glass, Neville stomped down hard, shattering the glass to the cheers of their family and friends. A dozen doves were released magically from behind the gazebo, and the two peacocks cried out. Neville kissed Luna again and walked down the aisle for the reception.

Hermione accepted Ron's arm and followed Ginny and Harry when it was their turn to leave, smiling to herself. Ron leaned close to her ear. "He looks happy."

She turned to smile at him. "They both do."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*Yes, I know I cheated you out of the reception, but you know what happens: the blessing over the wedding challah (a large braided loaf of egg-rich bread), dinner, followed by dancing, and Neville and Luna were carried around the dance floor on chairs. (Augusta Longbottom flat out refused to do it, but Xenophilius Lovegood thought that was fun.) There was cake, the bouquet and garter toss, and all that fun stuff, followed by more dancing. Exactly what you'd expect, right?*

*I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.*

*Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!*

## First Days

Chapter 33 of 63

Hermione's first days of school are not exactly how she expected, and Severus isn't recovering as he ought. And then there is Maggie, stirring up trouble again.



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First Days

~H~

Hermione arrived in time for dinner on Sunday. Professor McGonagall had agreed to allow her one more day with Severus before she had to take the Hogwarts Express to Hogsmeade. Auror Loraine Matsuno had ridden in the compartment with her, and Aurors Fairday and Duncan had patrolled the corridors as guards. Hagrid and Professor Dawlish had met her at the gate and escorted her to the castle. Hermione sat down next to Ginny and Dean at the Gryffindor table, pointedly ignoring the murmurs and whispers around her.

"How's Professor Snape?" Ginny asked, passing her the chipped beef.

"He's doing much better, thank you. He'll be back in a few days," Hermione answered as she filled her plate. She saw Luna wave at her from the Ravenclaw table and waved back.

"I'm sorry he missed Luna and Neville's wedding," Ginny said, scowling at Wendlynne Warwick and Veronica Jameson, who were blatantly staring at Hermione across the table from them. "I think you should know, everyone is speculating as to what happened to him. Rumors are he was hit with everything from the Killing Curse to the Jelly-Brains Curse."

Hermione leaned close to her. "And let them wonder. If he'd been hit with the Killing Curse, Professor McGonagall would've been instated as Headmaster, and they'd have announced a new Deputy Head by now. No, they're all being silly. Besides, it will be in the paper soon enough, I suppose, since it hasn't been exposed yet. Severus said I should write up my notes, and he'd see I get published," Hermione said quietly.

"You're kidding! Really!" Ginny exclaimed, setting her goblet down forcefully. "Hermione that's fantastic!"

Others were looking at them now, most quite openly.

Hermione leaned close to Ginny and said softly, "Well, it would really help other victims, you know, in case someone else is hit with it. Healer Cadwallader and I helped reverse the curse on three other patients suffering under the Inferius Curse in St. Mungo's on the Spell Damage Ward." She still felt elated from watching the patients wake

up from the comatose-like state the same way Severus had. "The Healers were at a loss as to what ailed the victims no one thought that you could use the Inferius on a living person without killing them in the process. Apparently MacTavish, or one of his friends, had used it a number of times."

"I can't believe that you solved it, and in only a week!" Ginny said as Professor McGonagall approached them.

"Five days actually." Hermione looked up as Professor McGonagall stopped beside her.

"Mrs. Snape, if you're finished eating, I'd like a word with you."

"Sure, Professor," she said quickly and shoved the last of her beef into her mouth. She followed Professor McGonagall out of the Great Hall.

"Hermione," she said softly, drawing her to the side of the hall. "Since the Headmaster hasn't made it clear where you were to be housed, I've taken the liberty to have you placed in the seventh-year dorm with your friends. You are still a Gryffindor prefect, although that gives us two seventh-year girls this year. I'm sure that you know Alestra Blackpoole; you'll share the duties with her. I saw no reason to take away her prefect status. Also, as per your request, Professor Avoian is delighted to have you in his class." She pulled Hermione's class schedule from her pocket. "Should you need anything, let me know."

"Thank you, Professor," she replied, smiling at her schedule.

"How is Severus?" Professor McGonagall asked, her expression showing she was deeply concerned. "I heard that he'd been nearly killed."

"He was hit with the Inferius Curse," Hermione stated. The doors opened, and the students were beginning to file out on their way to their common rooms.

The Deputy Headmistress glanced at the students emerging into the Entrance Hall and back to Hermione. "Would you have a cup of tea with me and tell me what happened at St Mungo's and how you saved Severus?" she asked, indicating the staff room.

Hermione saw Professors Sprout, Reynolds, and Flitwick approaching. "I'd be happy to."

An hour later, Hermione entered the Gryffindor common room. All the professors had wanted to hear about Severus, and they'd been amazed by the counter spells she'd devised. Even Professors Flitwick and Brandstone had insisted that she write up her discovery for publication, and Professor Avoian had requested that he be allowed to submit her paper to the Prussian publications as well. He'd even offered to do the translations himself.

The few students in the common room watched Hermione as she walked across the room for the girl's dorm. She heard whispers and mumblings behind her as well as a few curious mutterings, but she ignored them. She figured it either had to do with her relationship with Severus, or possibly her appearance as a student, considering she'd arrived a week late.

Before she reached the stairs, she overheard one girl among a small cluster of second- and third-years say, "I heard she rode a Gringotts' dragon to the castle for the final battle and burned half of the Death Eaters."

"Yeah! It was in all the papers," a third girl said softly, but loud enough for Hermione to hear.

"So she, Harry, and Ron really *did* break into Gringotts? What did they steal?" another girl asked, astonished.

"Nothin' my mum said," the first girl stated. "You can't steal anything because the carts only allow Goblins to drive them. Then there's the doors to the vaults; they close on you so you can't ever get out, and you can't use a glamour or Polyjuice 'cause the Thief's Downfall Curse makes disguises impossible, and there's Geminio and Flagrant Curses on the treasure so if it's not yours you can't touch it, and the track moves so you can't follow it out either loads of stuff to make stealing impossible."

Hermione shook her head and climbed the stairs, knowing that there'd be loads of questions to answer someday. She walked into her new dorm room with a bit of trepidation. It wasn't that she didn't know Ginny's dorm mates, but as of today they'd be hers as well. In the past years they had kept their distance from her, or only sought her out to ask a question as a house prefect or regarding schoolwork. As Ginny and Hermione prepared for bed, Deborah Smythe, Alestra Blackpoole, Wendlynne Warwick, and Veronica Jameson were all sitting with Nadine Graham on her bed across the room, talking in quiet whispers among themselves. However, every now and again, Hermione caught snippets of their conversation, and it made her grind her teeth in annoyance.

Finally, Hermione turned and faced them and, as patiently as she could muster, given how frustrated she felt, answered their questions: "Yes, we broke into Gringotts, took Helga Hufflepuff's cup from a vault, and rode a dragon out to escape. Yes, Harry, Ron, and I were hunting down the founder's artifacts, stolen by Voldemort, in order to kill him once and for all. Yes, I have always believed Harry. Yes, Ron and I helped him defeat Voldemort from getting the Philosopher's Stone, and I did solve the mystery of Slytherin's monster it was a Basilisk, by the way, not a dragon. Yes, Harry and I rode a hippogriff to set Sirius Black free. Yes, Ron and I helped Harry with his tasks so he could win the Triwizard Tournament, and yes, my friends and I fought Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries. Yes, I did see Voldemort twice, and, yes, he really was that revolting."

The girls all gasped at the name in shock, and Ginny quickly held up her hand. "Hermione..." Ginny started to say but was cut off as Hermione continued ranting, undaunted.

"Yes, I was part of the secret order led by Dumbledore, and yes, Severus Snape was in the Order too. Yes, he was Dumbledore's spy, and yes, he killed a dying man, ending his agonizing pain from a curse that was slowly eating him alive. And just so you know, Dumbledore had consumed a potion that day that had weakened him and strengthened the curse so that it had, by then, destroyed his entire arm all the way up to his shoulder and neck, so it was only a matter of time anyway. That's why Dumbledore *wanted* Severus to kill him to kill him quickly so that the Death Eaters who'd cornered him that night wouldn't torture him or turn him over to Voldemort. So if that about covers it, or you have any other questions please, by all means, be afraid to ask me."

Ginny swept her hand in the direction of her now their dorm mates as she pleaded, "Hermione, they're just"

"I'm not deaf! I'm right here!" Hermione exclaimed as she tossed a jumper into her trunk and slammed the lid of her trunk. She sat on it and buried her head in her hands. "I'm just a normal girl!"

Ginny walked over and sat down next to her, placing a hand on her back. "You have to admit, you've had a rather adventurous and exciting life, Hermione. You're not exactly... normal. You're exceptional."

"What's exceptional about trying to destroy a Dark Lord? Mostly it was simply dumb luck and quick thinking," Hermione said sarcastically against her palms, then peeked at Ginny through her fingers and frowned. "You know that, right?"

Alestra walked forward and looked at Hermione, her cheeks pink and her eyes downcast, apparently ashamed. "It's just that with all the gossip and all the stuff written about you and Harry you're a little... er... intimidating."

Hermione sat up, dropping her left hand on her knee. "But I'm the same person you knew before," she implored, holding her right hand, palm up, toward the girl.

"And you were always doing things! You helped saved the school twice! You stood up to Umbridge, and fought You-Know-Who and Death Eaters right here in the castle! I mean..." Veronica said, looking at her friends, then back to Hermione and Ginny. "You're a *war hero*. You've done so much, and you you fought him."

"They even wrote dozens of articles and several books about you well about the three of you," Deborah said shyly. "The things they say you've done and can do and you're still only in school!"

"But I'm still just a girl like you, only I went through some remarkable adventures," Hermione said. "But please, don't be afraid of me or talk behind my back. Talk to me. Ask

me. I'll tell you."

"All of it?" Nadine asked, stepping forward.

"Well, I do reserve the right to not answer personal questions but yes, all of it," Hermione said, smiling, and Nadine giggled.

"Are you really Bonded to Severus Snape?" Wendlynne asked, curling a strand of hair around her finger. "I mean, you are his wife, right? The *Prophet* said you'd left him."

Hermione closed her eyes and turned her head, knowing that the *Daily Prophet* had printed yet another article about her and Severus' rocky relationship and the fact she'd been dancing with Ron and Dean at the wedding. "Yes, sort of we're not separated it's complicated. Ron and I were paired in the wedding party since I was a bridesmaid and he was an usher, and Dean was Neville's best man considering they were best mates." She exhaled forcefully. "I was not Ron's date nor was I Dean's. Ron and Dean just wanted to see that I got home all right, that's all. The *Prophet* is not always right. Headmaster Snape, my Bonded mate," Hermione said, not really ready to use his given name around the girls yet, "is still recuperating at St. Mungo's and was therefore unable to attend Luna and Neville's wedding."

"So it's true!"

"Really?"

"Him? How?"

"Ew!" Were all said at once.

"Guys! She's going to be living with us. We'll have loads of time to hear her tell you everything. But maybe tonight you could just get to know her a bit, and let her get to know you, before you start judging or idolizing her," Ginny said, sounding exasperated but smirking all the same.

"Sure."

"All right."

"Sorry."

"Okay," were mumbled as the girls all turned to ready themselves for bed.

"Thanks, Gin," Hermione said as she stood up. She collected her things, and they walked from the room to head to the loo.

They bumped into Sunita Gupta, another of their dorm mates, in the hall. Sunita recoiled into the wall and tried to flatten herself into the wallpaper, her eyes going round as saucers. "Oh my. It's you! Sorry, I didn't..."

"It's all right, I'm sorry to have bumped into you," Hermione said with a smile that faded as the girl stared at her as if she were a celebrity.

Ginny pulled her arm and dragged Hermione with her. "Give them time. They just have to come to grips with it all. You do have to admit, whether you want to or not, that you're a bit larger than life to them because of all the stuff in the *Daily Prophet*, *Sorcerer's Sun*, *Witch Weekly*, *Teen Witch*, *Magical Star*, *Inquisitive Witch*, and *The Quibbler*. Even *Witch's Home Journal* and *Better Magical Homes and Gardens* had articles on you, Ron and Harry," she said, smiling. "Besides, I've got a feeling you're going to be seen in a whole new way this year."

"Great!" Hermione exclaimed. "Now, I know what Harry went through."

"Exactly," Ginny said, her grin straining even wider.

~S~

Severus lay on his bed and wondered what in the blazing horntails his Healer was up to now. The first few days since waking up, Severus had felt as if he was abiding in the wrong body. It wasn't like inhabiting it, because the sensation was more like he was using it as a shell, simply for the fact that while he was able to make it move, the movements left him feeling numb and... not exactly prickly like the first three days tingly, which was not a word Severus liked to use. However, Healer Cadwallader had been elated by the use of the word as if Severus had imparted some valuable secret to the universe.

The Healers routinely stimulated his motor reflexes, and he could swallow his potions and feed himself, but he felt weak. Thurston, a large wizard that came in every day for his muscle treatments, helped Severus move his arms and legs, but the first few times exertion always left him exhausted. But the worst was the bed baths. Healer Cadwallader firmly believed he needed cleaning daily after his exercises.

"Hello, Mr. Snape."

*Speak of the devil.* "Hello."

"How are you this morning?"

Severus hated this part of the morning routine. "The same. Just get on with it and drown me with your potions and start your poking," he growled.

"Let's have you sit up, shall we?"

Severus rolled his eyes in the direction of the Healer in indignation; however, he managed to push himself up into a sitting position with only the slightest assistance of the Healer. Severus drank the first potion, exchanging the small dosing cup for the next one and swallowed that one, refusing to react to the taste.

Healer Cadwallader simply smiled and handed him the next potion. When Severus handed it back, the Healer gave him a glass containing a vegetable and fruit blend that tasted of carrots, grass, pineapple and apple juice.

"So let's see how you're doing." The Healer slowly swept his wand over Severus, making little nods when the diagnostic spell changed colors. "Internal organs and digestive tract are doing well, your heart is good and strong, lungs clear... How do you feel when you move any different?" Beside him, his quill jotted down his findings on the chart.

"I still don't feel like it's my own body," Severus admitted. If he didn't, the Healer simply used a Fides-veritatis, or Truthfulness Charm, to read his thoughts and impressions. While not as accurate as Legilimency nor as long acting as Veritaserum, it was legal for Healers since the spell only worked in close proximity and until the Healer broke their concentration, effectively ending the spell.

"It's your nerves, they're apparently regenerating. Muscle-skeletal control will come naturally with exercise, and you were in reasonable condition prior to the curse, but there is something in your system... something that's inhibiting your healing." The Healer lowered his wand. "I can't place it but it's like... were you recently... poisoned. Were you?"

Severus' brows furrowed. "Last May. I was bitten by Tom Riddle's snake." Cadwallader frowned as he checked over his previous notes, deep creases appearing between his brows. "The Dark Lord's familiar, Nagini, You-Know-Who's..."



"Snake, yes I you were bit by the snake in May?" he asked, looking up. "Who healed you?"

"Narcissa Malfoy tended to my needs, but the potions were ones I'd made myself just in case," Severus admitted. "I'm sure Healer Hippocrates Smethwyck would remember the potions I created them for Arthur Weasley in December of 1995."

Healer Cadwallader smiled as he set down his chart. "I'll ask him, but why don't you enlighten me. What type of snake was his familiar? What were the properties of its venom? Did the antivenin have active antigens and neurotoxins? I mean, it's possible that a snake poisoning could be the reason you're not reacting as favorably as the other patients we've revitalized from the curse. I'd like to rule it out."

Severus sighed and indicated for the Healer to give him a glass of water first. "One question at a time." He took a long drink of water and held the cup in his lap. "Nagini was a very rare hybrid, magically crossed with an anaconda and an Australian Taipan or Asian Krait, but her venom was very much like an immature basilisk. Her venom toxicity was both a neurotoxin and hemotoxin, affecting the nervous system, brain, heart and cardiovascular system at the same time, and causing respiratory paralysis, coagulation of the blood, and clotting of the pulmonary arteries..."

~H~

The first week of school seemed to fly by in a blur. Hermione managed to get through her first week without too much difficulty. After attending the first day of each of her classes, she approached each professor to collect her assignments as well as the material she missed during her absence, and many of her professors granted her an extension on the essays they'd already assigned. Hermione then went to the owlery to send a request and signed payment voucher to Flourish and Blotts for the books she'd need for her History of Magic class.

Hermione buried herself into her schoolwork to catch up, spending all her free time either in the library or on her bed. So far, her dorm mates simply avoided her, although she could see them slyly glancing or trying to coyly stare at her whenever they were around.

More than once she caught Ginny saying, "You know how she is about her studies and her marks, just give her time she's like this when she isn't five months ahead with her reading and finished with all her assignments," which made Hermione sigh.

She wasn't being antisocial she was behind, a feeling that made her edgy and nervous. She was never behind well, not counting her second year when she'd been petrified, or her fifth year when she'd been recovering from that curse...

She shook her head and tapped her wand on her homework planner that kept reminding her of the impending due dates of her current essays. Hermione was determined to get them in on time even though she'd been granted a few extra days. She still had three essays from the previous week to finish, and there were only so many hours in the day. That, and Ginny insisted that she attend meals, even taking away her quill if she tried to write while eating.

Hermione's finger stopped on the page for Friday. *Has it really been that long?* She had hoped that Severus would have returned to school by now. She turned to glance out the window. *But he had been fine...* Madam Pomfrey held students over night and sometimes for weeks, but Severus had seemed all right. *Maybe something is wrong?* Hermione pulled out a piece of note parchment and drafted a letter to David, inquiring after Severus' condition.

Reading the letter over, she decided to write Harry for good measure and ask him to check in on Severus as well. *Oh that will make Severus' day but I really want to know.* Signing and sealing it, she packed her things to go up to the owlery.

Saturday morning at breakfast, Ginny had once again dragged her away from working on her bed to go to the Great Hall to eat, and then refused to simply let her simply grab some toast and go to the library. When the owls arrived with the post, a screech owl landed in front of Hermione with a note from Professor McGonagall, asking her to join her in her office when she'd finished eating. Hermione fervently hoped it wasn't bad news about Severus.

"What's that about?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged, forcing herself not to assume the worst. "Doesn't say. So I won't know until I go, apparently." Hermione finished her pumpkin juice and ate her last sausage, jutting her chin toward the staff table. "She's leaving."

"So, I'll see you out on the pitch afterwards?" Ginny asked and the bit into her toast as Hermione stood up.

"Gin, I can't," Hermione said, hanging her head. "I have a whole week's worth of revision and my essays to catch up, plus finishing my current assignments... I can't possibly."

"Which you'll have caught up by Monday," Ginny said and waved her off. "Go on, I know where to find you. I'll drag you and your books to the pitch later. You need some sunshine and fresh air, not more smelly books and candlelight."

"Gin..."

"Go on. But you can revise on the benches of the pitch this morning. It'll be good for you."

Hermione sighed as she grabbed her bag and hurried up to Professor McGonagall's office, knowing full well she was not going to win this argument.

Professor McGonagall simply wanted to go over Hermione's prefect schedule. She also granted Hermione's personal request to learn how to become an Animagus. Hermione explained how, unbeknownst to Harry, she had tried several times to learn how to transform with Tonks when they'd been at Grimmauld Place, and she'd even tried it a few times with Ron when Harry had been on guard duty during last year, almost managing to accomplish the transformation. But she'd been uncomfortable trying it without having someone to assist her if she'd didn't do the change correctly. So, Professor McGonagall happily consented, and Hermione squeezed in the dates for private lessons in her revision planner, which would begin in two months once Hermione settled into her workload.

Just as she'd threatened, Ginny and two of the guys from the Gryffindor team arrived to escort her to the Quidditch pitch. Harold and Burt, it turned out, were the team's Beaters, and had been brought to physically carry her if Hermione had refused to come. Hermione spent the time perched up in the stands, books balanced beside her and a board on her lap as she worked on one of her essays in the sunshine. However several of the other Gryffindors who'd come to watch the team practice spent as much time gawking at her as the team players.

Afterwards, Hermione had ensconced herself in the library among a pile of books, catching up on the schoolwork she'd missed, when an owl swooped in with a note from Hagrid inviting her to have tea with him on Sunday. Hermione had quickly written a reply that she'd love to see him, but offered to pick up sandwiches and cakes from the kitchen to save her teeth from his cooking.

Looking back, afternoon tea with Hagrid had been the highlight of her weekend. At least Hagrid had treated her like he'd always done.

Many of the students in the castle were still staring at her, whispers and murmurs buzzing around her as if she were deaf to the noise. When she walked the corridors, she received awed looks and furtive glances, and on a few occasions, she'd been asked to pose for a photograph or sign one of the pictures of herself in a magazine.

~MoM~

Maggie Whitmier was absolutely fed up with the Snapes. First the register indicated the man was 'practically dead' from a curse, then by the next morning he'd been registered as an 'Inferi,' which was as good as dead, but then five days later the quill wrote that Severus Snape had been revived right after declaring him dead! That was three times she'd had to fill out the required forms on that man! And one didn't just go from Inferi to alive without having to have proof of life forms and his consciousness confirmed by a qualified Healer. But to be reinstated as alive that required four forms in triplicate! It was bad enough that the wizard was on the restricted Auror's ward. In

addition, Minister Shacklebolt was personally involved in the man's case, so everything had to be copied for him as well.

At least that young Healer, David Cadwallader, had been cooperative, even if Healer Calvin Lansing had been a bit curt and rude to her. Something about untried spells and not testing properly... Well that wasn't Maggie's business, but Rita had been thrilled with what little Maggie had remembered.

Maggie had been called down to the Wizengamot office to answer questions regarding all the forms not even for a proper hearing, oh no. Oswald Grunthyme, Rolf VanBuren, and Griselda Marchbanks of the Wizengamot were present, as were Elsa Deers and Marvin Boatright representing the Hogwarts School Governors, and Elaine Prevatt, Clerk to the Governing Body. You'd have thought that with such distinguished people this would have been a formal meeting, not just an informal inquiry in a conference room. And as an added insult, they'd had the audacity to insist that she make a Fides Troth of Confidentiality Charm! Of all the nerve.

Maggie picked up the growing file on the Snapes. Never had she had a simple Bonding file grow so thick. Three months, three weeks, and five days and still the couple refused to acknowledge the Bonding. Maggie opened the file and picked up the Failure of Obligation form she'd filled out a month ago when Rita had informed her that the couple were not even living together. In fact right under the form were the Declaration of Infidelity forms that the Minister had refused to allow Allyson Richardson in the MLE to sign, citing that Mr. Potter, who was Bonded to Ginevra Weasley-Potter, was like a brother to Mrs. Granger-Snape and therefore not culpable as a adulterer.

*My arse! He's a man, and she's a girl, and they are living together!* Maggie set the two forms aside. The Minister had also blocked the other two times she'd filed infidelity on Mrs. Granger-Snape. He'd insisted that Mrs. Granger-Snape was not having an affair with her ex-boyfriend Ronald Weasley or with George Weasley, even though Rita had clearly sighted her with them on more than one occasion looking positively chummy, so both those Declaration of Infidelity forms had been returned stamped 'unfounded' as well.

The Failure of Confirmation and the Failure of Registration lay underneath. Both properly filled out and submitted to the MLE and Wizengamot, twice both times returned as having been too 'hastily filled' and marked 'pending Minister's approval.' *Minister's approval! At this rate they will never be registered properly.*

Now, even though Maggie had sent Mrs. Granger-Snape the confirmation forms, *again*, the couple still hadn't signed them. She shoved the file among the pending files on her desk. There were only seven others currently in the rack, and six of those were all recent unions.

Maggie pulled out the Potter's file. The copy of her Declaration of Infidelity was stamped 'Unsupported' in bright red ink as was the Failure of Obligation form. The Minister himself had delivered these to her, stating that any more harassment of the Potter's from her office would mean her dismissal. Maggie huffed in annoyance. *I suppose it's reasonable. I mean, the girl should finish school at the very least.*

However, the other May Bonding was finally finalized. Neville and Luna Longbottom were properly married, and even though he was apparently going on an expedition and she was finishing her last year of school, the file was thankfully complete. *Yes, the Longbottoms were a very respectable family, ensuring that everything was done according to procedure.*

Maggie would have loved to see the wedding, but neither the bride's family nor the groom's had thought to invite her. But then even the Good Tidings columnist of the *Daily Prophet* had been excluded as well.

Nevertheless, a lovely picture of the wedding party and one of the couple had managed to be published. Then there were the shocking photos of Mrs. Granger-Snape consorting with her ex-lover Mr. Ronald Weasley and ex-class mate Mr. Dean Thomas. Maggie shook her head. *The witch simply has no shame and no sense of proper decorum. But then she is a Muggle-born and young.* Still, Maggie wished that the Snapes would make a decision so she could put the file away. She was tired of dealing with it.

~S~

Healers Hippocrates Smethwyck and Augustus Pye made a visit to Severus' room first thing in the morning to discuss his progress with his Healers. Severus feigned sleeping, hoping that the wizards would discuss his case more openly if they thought him asleep. After the diagnostic charms had been completed and documented, the wizards moved to stand outside of his room. However, the door was halfway open, so Severus could hear them quite clearly.

"...I've conferred with Mrs. Malfoy in regards to his treatment and progress following the snake bite," Healer Cadwallader was saying as he gave report to the senior Healers. "Apparently the potions took about eighteen days for the wound to completely heal, although he remained nonresponsive for another four. According to Mrs. Malfoy, he simply woke up on the eleventh of May, and his recovery was swift afterwards."

*Of course, the night Hermione performed that blasted spell,* he grumbled to himself. *Narcissa had even commented on it being a full moon that night.*

Even though Healer Calvin Lansing was his primary Healer, Severus still felt that the younger Healers, Galen Cavallaro and David Cadwallader were more intelligent, although Healer Cadwallader did like to ramble a bit about Quidditch scores and Aethonan races and was overly impressed with Hermione and Potter.

"Mr. Weasley was sufficiently recovered after eighteen days," Healer Smethwyck stated. "We may have to consider that Mr. Snape's neuro-network might not fully recover."

Severus was aware that both Healer Yashar Javidan, Healer-in-Charge of Auror Spell Damage ward, and Healer Lansing were of the same mind and wanted to simply keep Severus in bed, following the normal potions régime. Healers Cavallaro and, of course, Cadwallader both wanted to continue with the adaptation of Muggle therapy along with the healing and regenerative potions. Healer Pye was simply too over enthusiastic about anything Muggle and reminded Severus of Arthur Weasley.

"The patient had the antivenin in his system prior to the bite, and a second dose was administered when he was found," Healer Lansing stated. "With the combined regenerative strengthening potions, he should recover eventually."

"But there is a possibility that the Inferi Curse caused a relapse of his synapse functions, which is why there is reduced responsiveness in his peripheral nervous system," Healer Cadwallader replied. "By stimulating the sensory neurons with therapy, we are actively encouraging the stimuli of transmute neural signals to the brain."

"But progress hasn't been any more promising than conventional treatments," Healer Smethwyck stated.

"Not so," Healer Cavallaro said. "According to both the patient and the Malfoys, the snake was a very unusual hybrid, whose venom was similar to that of an immature basilisk. Mr. Snape, a Master of Potions himself, identified the snake's unique physiology and the biological toxin proteins. I read over Arthur Weasley's records, and even though he had sufficient recovery to go home in eighteen days after treatment with Professor Snape's potions, there was still a significant recovery time before Mr. Weasley was able to resume normal daily activities without magical assistance charms."

"So how soon do we release him?" Healer Javidan asked.

Severus strained to hear the response, exhaling the breath he hadn't realized he'd held until Healer Cadwallader said, "A week, maybe two. He's Headmaster of Hogwarts; I'd like to see a bit more recovery before sending him back to the school."

"Agreed," Healer Javidan stated. "We'll reevaluate him in five days. Good day, gentlemen."

Severus crossed his arms and sighed. *A week maybe two more of this?*

"Oh good, you're awake!" Healer Cavallaro said as he entered the room, followed by Healer Cadwallader.

"So, I take it you overheard your prognosis?" Healer Cadwallader asked, smiling. "Don't you worry; we should have you out of here by the end of next week." He set his

chart on the bedside table and placed his quoting quill in place. "Let's test your range of motion and motor strength today, and then see how you fare with your wand, shall we?"

"By all means," Severus replied as he pulled himself up into a seated position.

~H~

*Hermione was in an herb garden, pruning and pulling up weeds. She was on her knees, tugging on a particularly stubborn weed. Without a sound someone had come up behind her, his hands sliding on her back and grasping her waist. She sat up quickly, finding herself pressed against his body. His hand toyed with her braid, freeing her hair easily as his other hand slid to her groin and held her firmly. Her heartbeat had quickened from the surprise of his presence, and her breathing became deeper as he'd leaned forward, kissing her bare shoulder and neck.*

*She closed her eyes, allowed her senses to swim as he caressed her, even allowing him to slide his hands under the slits of her dress. He pulled her dress up, his fingers grazing her skin as she allowed him to remove the garment. The sun was warm, but not as warm as the physical contact of his hands and body, and she smiled at the way his chest hairs tickled. He turned her with ease, one of his knees between hers as she gazed up at Severus' dark smoldering eyes. Their lips met, crashing together and then tenderly devouring each other.*

*He lowered her to the ground easily, their bodies a perfect fit as he entered her, filling her and making her moan from the feel of him moving in and out of her in long strong thrusts...*

Hermione woke up from the frustration of nearing climax, the tantalizing arousal that wouldn't let her peak, her whole body throbbing with need. She turned her head, comprehension dawning slowly that she was alone in her bed. Her first thought was that Severus had reached out to her, connected them like she'd done with the Moon-Song Spell, but the dream was so different. Yes, he'd made love to her, but it wasn't as vivid as the dreams she'd had under the influence of the spell, or curse as she was beginning to think of it, but just as arousing.

She fell back onto the bed with an exasperated sigh and closed her eyes, willing herself back to sleep.

Sleep finally came, but a restless sleep. She was roused again from a similar dream as the first, although in another location this time Dr. Myers back garden on one of the lounge chairs. The big difference was that this time, she was wearing her bikini for Severus, and he'd taken an extremely long time removing the thing as he'd caressed and kissed every inch of her.

Try as she might, her arousal grew to frustration because her body just couldn't climax. The closest she could achieve, even with assistance, was a soft ripple and rolling sensation that came in waves. She opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling, and balanced her forearm on her forehead.

Hermione checked the clock by her bedside. Ten minutes after four. She would be up and dressing in two hours anyway to get ready for class. Giving up on being able to sleep, she went to the loo to have a long, hot shower, planning on spending the morning with a thick book.

Hermione closed her eyes and thought of Severus. He plagued her thoughts frequently in her quiet times and haunted her dreams. It had been over a week and a half since she'd seen him, and Hermione was desperate for news. Her letter from David had been vague and not at all encouraging. Harry said he'd stopped by a few times, but Severus had been asleep, and the Healers wouldn't tell him much other than he was improving. As Hermione turned off the taps, she decided to go ask Professor McGonagall for a pass to go see Severus and find out how he was doing. She simply needed to see him for herself.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*The lingering effects of Nagini's bite really sucks. He gets well soon and return to Hogwarts, I promise.*

*I want to thank my betas, EverMystique and to DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

## Enlightening Visitations

*Chapter 34 of 63*

Hermione visits Severus in St. Mungo's, and Severus makes two visits of his own.



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Enlightening Visitations

~H~

When Hermione entered the Auror security wing on the fourth floor, she was pleased to see David coming out of a patient's room into the main corridor. He looked up and smiled at her. "Hermione! I'm surprised to see you here," he said, closing the chart in his hands as she approached him.

"I'm here to see Severus," she said, coming to a stop in front of him. "How is he really? It's been days, and I thought he was doing well, but he's not back at school yet. Did

the spell fail somehow?"

David cupped her elbow and gently ushered her over to a sitting area. "There's no problem with the spell you created it's just that there is a complication."

Hermione gasped and leaned away in shock. "He's not but your letter?!"

"Hermione, there is a complication due to Severus' previous neurological condition from a snake bite," he said, tucking the chart under his arm.

She'd not considered that.

"The venom was apparently a very rare type that acted as both a neurotoxin, affecting his peripheral and central nervous systems, and hemotoxin, affecting his heart and pulmonary functions as well. Fortunately, his cardiovascular and pulmonary scans are fine, and his central nervous system is not currently affected, but his peripheral nerves were. So it's his sensory and motor functions that have been affected. He can move, but his agility and dexterity are sluggish, and he's weak. Also, his magical abilities are diminished."

The information he presented whirled around in her mind as she struggled to make sense of what he was saying. "How badly?" This information was contradictory to his letter, and she should have been told the truth.

"Rudimentary level only but he's showing signs that as his neurological condition improves, his magical abilities should, too," he said and then quickly added. "I'm really hopeful."

Hermione nodded in understanding. Well, she understood what he was saying, but not how an injury that had happened almost four months ago could be having such a profound effect now. She tried to recall the information she'd read recently about neuro-regeneration and pulmonary regeneration potions that Professor Reynolds had assigned for his essay. Because of Severus' near lethal encounter with Nagini, it had become a topic of great interest to her.

She thanked the Healer and walked to Severus' room. He was sitting up in bed, reading. "Hi," she said, closing the door behind her.

"What are you doing here? I thought I said you were to stay at the castle," he said, his tone even and low but he was apparently unhappy to see her, and she was a bit taken back by his demeanor.

"I had Auror escort," she said as she sat down. His eyes narrowed so she quickly amended her statement. "Harry, Ron, Loraine, and Kingsley met me at the school, and we took a Portkey to the alley beside the hospital. Harry and Kingsley are in the visitor's lounge, waiting to take me back."

"That tells me who, Hermione. Not why," he said, letting the book drop onto his lap.

"I-I wanted to see you," she stammered slightly. *Articulated like a nervous first-year.* She took a calming breath. This was not the way this was supposed to be going. She was worried, and he was being so cold. "How are you doing?"

His lips pursed momentarily as he stared at her. "Better."

"David said you're having difficulty moving," she said, hoping to draw him out into talking about it.

He closed his eyes and exhaled, then looked at the wall.

"If you won't tell me, I can go ask your Healers and..."

His head snapped in her direction. "No. You'll return to school where you belong."

"So much for building a relationship based on trust," she said, rising to go. "If you won't talk to me, there's no point..."

"I feel... numbness occasionally," he admitted, and she sat back down.

She tilted her head to try and get him to look at her. "David indicated that your motor functions are impaired. Something about there being an interruption in conduction of the impulse in your nervous..."

"Did he? Did he tell you he thinks it's a complication with my nervous system because of the snake bite?"

"Yes," Hermione said, folding her hands in her lap. He looked pale, the light green of the hospital robe not helping his complexion. "You should get outside more often; the body produces vitamin D from sunshine," she suggested and flinched at his scowl. "Are you being given Remyelination Potion? It can generate new neurons, glia, axions, and myelin sheaths, as well as help the synapses..."

"I'm taking neuro-regeneration potions," he stated.

He had no reason to be so dismissive of her. She was here because she cared about his well being. He could be a bit nicer to her, after all. "Aristolochia rugosa and Aristolochia trilobata, or Dutchman's Pipe, are very beneficial for treatment against snakebites and scorpion stings because the aristolochic acid inhibits inflammation induced by the immune complexes in the body, and nonimmunological agents..."

"Stop quoting the book at me," he snapped and closed his book.

"You read *Medicinal and Ethnoveterinary Remedies of the Healers of Trinidad* by George K. Bridgewater?" she asked, since he'd recognized the quote.

"Naturally. I have my own copy, as well as *Bioprospecting the Phylogenetic Piscine of Magical Venoms*, by Jared J. Herd. Whom do you think made the potions to cure Arthur Weasley?" he asked, closing his eyes and shaking his head. When he looked at her, she saw the old look he used to give her in class. "Healers Javidan, Lansing, and Cadwallader have been reviewing my journals from 1995 and '96 on the subject as well as my annotations in my journal in regards to my previous treatment."

"Oh," she said. *That makes sense. Mr. Weasley's condition took a dramatic turn for the better just about the time of Severus' visit...*

"Yes. Oh." He laced his fingers and rested his hands on the book.

"How did he get them?" It had just slipped out. That wasn't really what she wanted to ask him, but the way he smirked told her he'd expected the question.

"Draco Malfoy, of course."

She was shocked; that was not the person she was expecting him to say. "He's been here to see you?"

"As was Narcissa," he said smoothly. "I've told you, they are my friends. Narcissa came here to answer Healers Lansing's and Cadwallader's questions regarding my snake bite and recovery. Now my turn."

Hermione smiled and crossed her ankles. "All right," she said.

"How are things in school? How do you like Professor Reynolds?"

She almost smirked at his change of subject, taking the focus off himself and onto her. He really hated talking about himself. "Things are much quieter this year, considering there isn't any huge mystery to solve, and I can concentrate on my studies," she said, and for a second it looked like he was about to smile. "I like Professor Reynolds well enough. He's competent. His directions are clear, and so far his essays haven't been too bad. I really enjoyed researching the last one. And I'm really enjoying Professor Avoian's lectures. He really loves history, and his lectures are truly engaging."

He nodded slightly in approval, encouraging her to continue. She relaxed and began telling him about her lessons and how far behind she was. "I have five essays to finish by tomorrow," she admitted.

He glanced at his bedside table and then back to her face. "Which essay were you working on last night?" he asked, and Hermione wondered if maybe he was thirsty.

She stood up and poured a glass half-full with water as she answered, "Neuro-regeneration and pulmonary regeneration potions for Professor Reynolds." She handed him the glass but he shook his head. "I'm sorry I thought... Why don't you want it?"

"Hermione," he said in warning.

It dawned on her he was embarrassed to be seen as weak. "Is it because of your weakened motor functions?" She moved closer and brushed his hair back from his face. "Try; I don't mind, and I don't see you as weak, only healing. There's a huge difference."

"I'm not thirsty," he said, but his gaze was locked on the hand holding the cup.

"Severus, you keep indicating that you want this to be a marriage," she said, and his gaze snapped to her face. "Wives do this for husbands; if they're ill or injured, a wife takes care of her husband. It's not a weakness to let me help you. Besides, if the tables were turned, you'd do the same for me, wouldn't you?"

He frowned, his eyes hardening as he regarded her, possibly angry... He was behaving so typically male, as if needing to prove his masculinity, having to always appear strong and virile, but right now she was seeing behind the mask, and she knew he didn't like it at all. "Being injured doesn't mean you're weak. It only means you have to heal."

Maybe she was pushing too far. "I'll go." She turned to place the cup on his bedside table.

"Yes, please."

She turned to look at him. "The water..." he said, leaving the actual request unsaid.

She held the cup up for him, and his hand covered hers, guiding the cup to his lips.

"Thank you," he said after only a sip.

"More?" she asked, hoping he wasn't stopping because of her. He accepted, finishing the water. She refilled the cup but he shook his head. She attempted to put the cup in his hand, and his eyes narrowed as he watched her. "You don't have to worry about my opinion regarding your masculinity. There is no doubt in my mind so this gruffness and unwillingness to show me that you are temporality weakened from your condition has made no impression on me."

He crossed his arms at his wrists, but didn't answer her, so she set the glass down on the table.

Feeling at a loss, she looked at the book on his lap, surprised when she realized he was reading *A Farewell To Arms* by Ernest Hemmingway. "I've read that one. Actually, I've read all of Hemmingway's books. *A Farewell To Arms* is practically an autobiography of his time in the war," she said.

He smirked. "I'm aware of that."

"That I've read it or that it's a personal account of his experiences?" she asked with a smirk.

"The latter," he stated. "When did you read it?"

She smiled at his question. "I started reading them... the summer before I got my Hogwarts letter. You see, my father loves his works, and I wanted to... What?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Which did you prefer?"

They spent almost an hour discussing Hemmingway and various other Muggle authors. Hermione was delighted, realizing that they shared, at least in part, a similar taste in fiction. So that when Harry knocked on the door and poked his head in, Hermione felt like she'd found another connection to Severus.

"Hermione, we have to go," he said, quickly adding, "Hello again, Professor."

"Potter," Severus replied without the bitterness Hermione was used to hearing whenever he said her friend's name.

"Sure, Harry, one moment." She placed her hand on Severus'. "I have to go. I don't know when I'll be able to come and see you again."

He squeezed her hand. "Don't. I don't want you to."

She sighed in disappointment, dropping her gaze to their hands.

"Hermione, no matter what precautions you take, if word reaches Dragen or any of his associates that you came to see me, they will stake out the street and alley by the hospital. I'm surprised they haven't already. It's not that I don't trust Potter and Kingsley to defend you if there is an attack; it's a huge risk that I don't want you making. I want you at the castle," he announced his last five words firmly, and she nodded. "You have your studies to concentrate on. Write me if you wish, and I'll respond."

She let his words sink in before looking up at him. "All right, if you insist. But if you're not better in two weeks, I'm coming back." She stood up and leaned forward, intending on kissing his cheek, but he turned his head and captured her mouth in a kiss.

"I... er... I'll wait outside," Harry stammered as Severus buried his fingers in Hermione's hair so he could deepen the kiss.

Hermione had to brace herself, one hand on the bed and the other on the headboard, so she didn't fall on him and hurt him. Severus turned slightly, and she sat down, trying to be careful where her bum landed. His other hand found her hip, urging her to shift closer, and she complied, finding herself in his embrace. For someone who was weak and having diminished motor control, his embrace was oddly strong.

His hand at the nape of her neck moved slowly down as he angled his head to trail kisses to her neck, and she felt him stroke her breast through her jumper. She still tried to keep some distance between them so she wouldn't crush him, but that only left room for him to fondle her.

She moaned, and pulled back. "I feel like I'm molesting you," she said breathlessly, mentally shaking her head to dispel the headiness he was eliciting.

His hand stroked her leg up toward her groin and rested there. "I would think it is I who is taking advantage of you," he said smoothly.

His words sent a shiver through her. "I..." She was interrupted by a knock on the door and Harry poked his head back in. "Have to go." She eased from the bed and backed up. "Please get better."

"I will," he said, smirking as she turned to leave.

~S~

Severus crossed his arms over his chest as he watched her leave. The encounter went very well in his opinion. He'd been surprised to see her, and he'd have to have a stern word with Kingsley and Potter about it, but over all it was very illuminating. She cared very deeply for him and still wanted him to open up to her, which meant she did want the relationship. Their physical attraction to each other was as strong as ever, considering her responsiveness. Winning her was going to be much easier than he'd thought.

He turned and reached for the glass, picking it up and lifted it to drink. His hand still had a barely perceivable quiver, but nothing like she was led to believe. He tapped the rim of the glass against the pitcher. "Fill half way," he said and smiled as the pitcher rose and refilled his cup.

He leaned back against his pillows and concentrated, making the water glass rise from his hand and float in the air before him with two consecutive wandless nonverbal spells. He made the glass float to the windowsill and set down. He smiled smugly. Holding out his hand, he summoned the glass to him. The glass lifted once and he frowned. He repeated the exercise two more times before filling the glass with more water and trying again. The third time the glass tipped lightly, making a small amount of water spill out.

Frustrated he drank the water and levitated the glass back to his bedside table as Healer Cadwallader entered the room. "Awesome, how did it go?"

"Well enough," Severus stated.

"Ready to do it with a wand?" the Healer asked, taking Severus' wand from the drawer.

"Wandless takes more concentration," Severus said as Cadwallader refilled the glass. He repeated the exercise four more times, making the glass move in a wide zigzag instead.

Cadwallader held the wand out to him. "But you and your wand need to be reconnected, and that will take practice."

Severus held his wand in his hand, and for some reason, it wasn't responding as well as it should. His wandless abilities were growing stronger, but he was not up to par with his own wand.

~H~

When they'd returned to the school gates, Hermione wanted to linger in Hogsmeade with Harry for a while before returning to the castle, however Kingsley and Harry wouldn't even consider it. "With everything going on, it's much better if we hang out on the school grounds," Harry insisted, indicating the gate that was opening up to admit them.

"Fine, if you insist," she grumbled and slipped inside.

John Dawlish greeted them as they passed him. Hermione said, "Hello," spotting Professor Reynolds standing only a few feet away, talking to Hagrid.

"Minister, a word," John said, drawing Kingsley's attention.

"Hey, let's go up. I want to see the castle and maybe find Ginny," Harry suggested, making Hermione laugh.

"In that order," she teased him.

"Well, only in order of occurrence, not necessarily my order of preference," he replied with a wiggle of his eyebrows and a huge grin.

Professor Reynolds and Hagrid both waved at them as she and Harry walked by. "Do you want to stop and see Hagrid?" she asked, waving back.

"Ron and I stopped by to talk to him before Kingsley and Loraine arrived," he said, and then added, "I'll stop by later on my way out."

The two men started to follow them up the path to the castle, and she sighed. "Over doing the security, don't you think?" she grumbled.

"John was obviously sent to open the gates, Hermione; I'm not sure what business Professor Reynolds has with Hagrid," he replied. "I assume they are going up to the castle the same as we are, nothing more." He asked her about school as they made their way up to the castle.

She told him about her new celebrity status, and he chuckled. "They'll get over it quickly enough," he stated, pushing open the huge oak doors to let her enter first. "Or you'll simply learn to ignore it."

"It's still annoying," she admitted. Several students stopped in their tracks, pointing at them as they crossed the Entrance Hall and ascended the stairs. "I suppose I never really understood what your first year must've been like, not really. The recognition, everyone watching you all the time..."

"Welcome to fame, Hermione. It sucks."

She laughed, ignoring the cluster of students they passed on the first landing.

She was glad that Harry had chosen to stay for a brief visit, but his appearance in the common room caused a huge stir the moment he entered. Many of the first- and second-years who'd never met him before wanted autographs and to ask him questions, to which Harry obliged. He'd spent a full ten minutes signing his Chocolate Frog cards for them before waving off the rest and walking over to sit with Hermione.

"Oh, my gosh! Harry!" Ginny squealed from the common room entrance. He stood up, turned, took a few steps toward her as she ran over to him and nearly crashed into him as they embraced.

"I've missed you," he said as they clung to each other.

Her arms tightened around him. "Me too." They kissed briefly, then they broke apart and joined Hermione on the sofa by the fire. The girls told him everything about what had been going on since school started, and he did the same about the Auror program and his part in the Death Eater search. "You never write to me," Ginny pouted, playfully hitting his arm.

Harry leaned back, rubbing his arm in shock. "I write once a week! To both of you! You made my owl attack me until I did, remember?" he said in his defense.

"And I had to in order to hear from you," Ginny insisted.

As Hermione had anticipated happening, Harry turned to Hermione. "Do you mind if I..." he stammered, pointing to Ginny.

"Want to be alone with Gin I figured you might. Go on," she said, smiling at them. She went up to her room as Harry and Ginny left the common room for somewhere more private.

Harry and Ginny had disappeared for several hours, so she'd spent the time working on her essays until dinner. Harry reappeared with Ginny and sat in his old spot between Hermione and Ginny at the Gryffindor table, which caused quite a stir throughout the Great Hall, even at the Slytherin table.

Following dinner, Professor McGonagall invited them to have pudding with her in her office. She was so delighted to see Harry, she actually hugged him. Harry gave her a much abbreviated version of his Auror training and activities. When the bell tolled the hour of the younger students' curfew, Professor McGonagall exclaimed, "Oh, my where did the time go!"

"Harry, I'll walk you to the Entrance Hall," Ginny suggested, hoping that Professor McGonagall wouldn't object.

After saying good-bye to Harry, Professor McGonagall asked Hermione about Severus.

\*

The rest of the week flew by with very little incident. Hermione wrote to Severus on Monday, sending her letter right after breakfast. His response arrived on Tuesday without any speculation as to when he'd be discharged. She wrote him back that night, and asked Ginny at breakfast if she could use her owl to send it to him.

On Hermione's prefect rounds, she encountered nine third-years splashing in the prefect bath and deducted five points each, then caught four couples engaged in trysts in various spots around the castle, one, a Hufflepuff and a Slytherin actually engaged in the act.

True to her word, or threats depending on how she looked at it, Ginny had dragged Hermione to both Quidditch practices, and even managed to get her out on a broom for a little while. On Saturday, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna spent time together out by the lake, enjoying the sun and watching the squid as they talked.

However, Hermione spent all her available time in the library or sequestered on her bed trying to catch up on her school work, forever feeling like she was dragging behind. That dreaded feeling she hated, which always made her feel anxious.

Whenever Luna was in the library the same time Hermione was, she always came and sat at Hermione's table. It surprised Hermione how nice it was to have the girl's company, working quietly and companionably on their school work. More than once, they offered reading suggestions to each other, and Hermione was amazed at just how smart Luna really was, in her own dreamily-spoken, unassuming way. Even Luna's undaunted serenity seemed to rub off on Hermione during those times, creating a deeper friendship and understanding of the girl.

As much as Hermione wanted to look up the collation between neurologic conditions and magical ability, her class assignments left her little time to do so. She did manage to catch up on her essays by late Sunday night, and by Tuesday, she was finally current on her reading assignments and Arithmancy equations.

By Thursday, knowing she was well ahead of her reading, and far along on her new essay assignments, she felt relaxed enough to spend some time talking to her dorm mates. Alestra and Veronica were the first to relax around her, but they were both still fascinated by the hunt for the founder's artifacts, the Gringotts break in, and Hermione's memories of the war. Wendlynne, Hermione assumed after watching the girl, was painfully shy until she got to know someone, so she knew that it would take some time to befriend the girl, but Sunita still stared at Hermione as if she were larger than life, regardless of how often Hermione tried to draw her out.

In regards to Nadine and Deborah, they reminded Hermione very much of Lavender Brown, only really interested in boys, clothes, makeup, and boys not necessarily in that order and frequently wanted gossip about her and Severus. So Hermione figured that of her dorm mates, Alestra, Wendlynne, and Veronica were likely to become friends with her, which suited her just fine.

Friday, at breakfast Hermione received letters, one from Neville telling her about the *Untwert plumoria* he'd found and his enjoyment in camping in the mountains, and a friendly hello from Hannah, asking her how things in her life were going and telling Hermione about her job working in the Crock n' Carafe pub. Hermione wrote letters back to her friends, as well as one to Ron and Harry. She was about to write to Severus, but hesitated. She hadn't had word back from David regarding his recovery, and she was becoming concerned again. Deciding that she needed to find out in person, she went to Professor McGonagall's classroom before lunch to ask permission to go see Severus again.

"Mrs. Snape, as much as I'd like to allow the privilege, I'm afraid that the decision must be up to the Auror office. The Death Eaters have made two attacks, as you are aware if you've followed current events in the *Daily Prophet*, and I'm not sure that an Auror would be available to escort you."

"I'm sure Harry and Ron would after their shifts." It wasn't the answer she'd hoped for. Hermione sighed, her shoulders involuntarily slumping, then she looked up, remembering something. "Isn't there a direct connection between the hospital and the school?"

"Yes there is," the stern matron stated. "However, only Madam Pomfrey is authorized to open it, and only if there is an extreme emergency. When that connection is activated, an announcement is made at the Urgent Care Healer station to alert the staff."

"I see," she looked up and forced a smile on her face to hide her disappointment. "Thank you."

Professor McGonagall laced her fingers together on her desk and smiled indulgently. "If it will make you feel any better, I received a message the other day from Elaine Prevatt, Clerk to the Administrative Offices of the Hogwarts School Governors, that the Healers assured her that Severus will be returning to Hogwarts soon."

"How soon?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound petulant.

"I'm sorry, dear, I really don't know; it's up to his Healers to decide when exactly he is fit to return, but the news I have is that he is recovering his strength nicely," she said, and Hermione knew that she'd just have to write to Kingsley and ask him if she could have an escort to St. Mungo's.

Kingsley's response came with the post the following morning.

*Dear Mrs. Snape,*

*I'm sorry to inform you that I cannot grant you your request at this time. Our resources are stretched too thin at present, and I haven't anyone to spare. I'm sure that Headmaster Snape will be released as soon as the Healers deem him fit to return to his duties.*

*If you have any other requests, please do not hesitate to contact my office.*

*Sincerely,*

*Kingsley Shacklebolt*

*Minister of Magic for the United Kingdom*

Hermione crumpled up the letter and set it afire in her goblet, then left the table to write to Harry. She was going to find a way to see Severus again or, at least, get some proper answers.

~S~

Severus was released from the hospital, against Healer advice, two and a half weeks after Hermione's visit. He'd recovered physically, at least to the level he'd been before the curse, only his magical strength seemed off. His personal assessment associated his lack of ability to his wand and its unresponsiveness to his hand. Severus leapt into the air from the dark alley beside the hospital, relishing in the freedom of flight, pleased that this ability was undiminished. He returned to his home at Spinner's End to seek answers in his personal library, and then flew to Malfoy Manor to search through the books there. The only conclusion he could come up with was that somehow he'd been disarmed and his wand acknowledged another owner, but that didn't fit with what he knew about wand lore.

His first order of business, after forcing his way out of St. Mungo's, was to seek out Ollivander in his shop the next morning and inquire about a new wand. Diagon Alley was fairly quiet, with only a few shoppers scurrying about, quickly attending to their business. It was the same as during the war, and until the last resistance of the Death Eaters was caught, it would likely remain so.

Ollivander's shop was the same as when he was a child of eleven, seeking to buy his first wand with his mother. He'd been granted monies from a school scholarship, so his first cauldron and his wand were the only items that he'd bought that day that were new. For that reason, the small shop, dim except for the single ceiling lamp and the light from the large window, always held a fond memory for Severus. Ollivander seemed to materialize from the floor-to-ceiling shelf as he stepped into view.

"Headmaster, how good to see you up and around," Mr. Ollivander said as he stepped up to the counter. "How may I be of service?" The man was still thin from the imprisonment during the war, and his face deeply lined, but his silver eyes, that seemed to glow from within, were as penetrating as ever.

"I have come to ask you about my wand," Severus replied, laying it on the counter.

"Ah, yes, birch with dragon heartstring, twelve and a half inches, strong yet supple... It's served you well all these years, has it not?" Ollivander examined the wand carefully. "Interesting... I heard that you'd been hit with the Inferi Curse," he said without taking his gaze off the wand.

"Yes," Severus replied, waiting for the wandmaker's impression.

"And that you were near death," the wizard asked, finally looking up at him.

"So I was told," Severus admitted calmly.

"And this one why do you wish to destroy it?"

The question for some reason shocked Severus. "No, I will keep it, but I need one that responds to me." The silent, questioning expression of the wandmaker made Severus realize he'd have to admit why. "It feels... intrusively unfamiliar to me now as if it were another's."

Ollivander nodded as if finally understanding. "It feels clumsy, and your spells are less powerful..."

"Yes," Severus admitted, thinking that he was possibly making a mistake. His lack of control may simply be from his previous injuries and nothing more.

"The wand chooses the wizard, but alliance can be changed, it's rare, but happens when someone conquers someone else's wand. Any powerful wizard can channel magic through any instrument he desires, but the strongest magic is when the initial attraction creates an affinity bond between a wizard and a wand. And this connection strengthens even more as wand and master share experiences. Break this bond, and the wand will bend its will to the new master."

This was not the answer Severus had expected. He'd heard about this, but the facts of changing wand loyalties were seeped in myths. "I thought one had to kill to master another's wand," he asked, wondering if the old stories were false.

"Not always so," the wandmaker replied.

"I'd still like to replace it, then," Severus said sadly.

Ollivander gently placed the wand on the counter and moved through the shelves, pulling out one wand after another. None actually felt right in Severus' hand.

"I wonder..." the wandmaker murmured, walking to the back of his shop. When he returned, he handed Severus a black wand. The wand emitted a soft glow, and when he attempted to change a box lid into a glove, the feeling was intrinsically friendly and supple admittedly even stronger feeling than his original wand.

"Black birch, twelve and three quarters, strong yet supple... the phoenix feather core is from Dumbledore's own familiar, given to me just before he died," Ollivander said with a mysterious smile.

Severus studied the wand, refusing to think about the implications of the wandmaker's statement. He paid the seven Galleons and seven Sickles and left the shop.

His second order of business was to find out which Death Eater had disarmed him.

"I want to be alone with him," Severus stated emphatically as he peered into the window of the interrogation room.

"All right," Kingsley replied, backing up. "But I'll be watching you just in case."

MacTavish's eyes widened in recognition and his mouth opened slightly when Severus entered the interrogation room. "You but you're..."

"Dead? An Inferi? No, sorry to disappoint you," Severus said smoothly setting his old wand on the table, scrutinizing the other wizard. "So where to begin. Where is Dragen?"

"I'm not telling you that," MacTavish snarled. "And you stay out of my head."

"Not a chance; he attacked my wife, and I will find him to pay him my thanks," Severus said coolly, watching every miniscule move the wizard made.

MacTavish's eyes narrowed, but Severus caught the quick glance at his wand. "Thanks? Yeah right. You're helping them hunt us down," he sneered angrily at the betrayal.

"And what did you expect? We were on the losing side," Severus sneered at him. "There are consequences for the decisions we make in life, and this is yours."

"There isn't a we, traitor," MacTavish snarled as he snatched up the wand.

Severus reacted before the wizard had time to raise it to strike, hitting MacTavish with a wandless Body-Bind and pinning him roughly against the wall as Kingsley and the guard burst through the door behind him. "Thank you very much. I'll just take that back, if you don't mind," Severus said, snatching the wand from MacTavish's grip. The wand responded in his hand, the familiarity returning.

"Now about Dragen, where is he hiding out?" Severus snarled as he aimed his wand in MacTavish's face. *Legilimens.* Severus took his time sorting out the various memories, searching for locations and houses. He saw a few places that MacTavish didn't want to show him, some of the memories of the places were clouded, some completely distorted, but two places were clearly homes the wizard had resided in the past. Severus tried to force his concentration on the house that was distorted. "Dragen Dolohov," he repeated, trying to bring a memory of Dragen and Lestrage into focus, but the image changed, and Severus thought he recognized the place. "The Lestrage home?"

MacTavish tried fruitlessly to push Severus from his mind, but he persisted, increasing the exertion of his mental attack. The house was clearly too distorted for Severus to make anything out. "Where is it?" he snarled, and tried to focus on the Apparation location. He was successful, even getting clear images of Torrington and Rosier in the small village, which lay down the road... a bakery, and a green grocer, Gene Bulstrode harassing a cobbler in his shop a magical cobbler whose house-elf was sweeping up... The image changed, and Severus forced the new memory to return. A huge pepper tree and... a bridge, Torrington and Lestrage crossing the bridge... Dragen looking at a map of London on an old wood table. "Where is the house?" he snarled, but MacTavish was starting to lose crack.

Severus released him, and turned to face Kingsley as MacTavish fell on his face. "I have two locations to consider, the Lestrage house, which I don't think is a likely prospect as it's too obvious, and a house near a village with a bakery, a greengrocer, and a wizard cobbler. The cobbler has a house-elf. There is a large old pepper tree



next to a bridge over a gully... But this would be more clear if I used a Pensieve again."

"Good thing I have one, isn't it?" Kingsley said as the guard shackled MacTavish's arms and ankles and released the Body-Bind.

Severus didn't look back as he followed Kingsley from the room. "So, when shall we organize the raid?"

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*I want to thank my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*In bouncing around the internet I found:*

*According to Celtic wood lore, Severus' wood would be birch, so I chose Black Birch: Born under this wood sign, you have unwavering inner strength and gladly lend support to those who rely on you. Purity of thought and a knack for realistic evaluation and quiet determination are also associated with this tree sign.*

*The bird associated with the Month of the Birch is the pheasant, so I made Severus' new wand core phoenix. Birch's color is white, its day is Sunday, and its gemstone is red chard. The Celtic symbol of Birch is the White Stag with a rack with seven tines, especially interesting to me since Severus' Patronus is a hawk. Birch is associated with the element of water, is a tree of the sun, and the planet Venus, and its Herbal Gender is feminine. The Birch tree is sacred to the God Thor and the Goddesses Diana and Cerridwen.*

## The Headmaster Returns

Chapter 35 of 63

Severus returns to Hogwarts. Hermione offers to help him with his mystery and makes a startling connection.



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The Headmaster Returns

~H~

Hermione was in utter shock when she entered the Great Hall for lunch Thursday and saw Severus sitting in the Headmaster's chair, conversing with Professor McGonagall. As she moved into the room, he looked up. Their eyes met and locked on each other for several heartbeats.

"Hermione?" Ginny asked, pulling gently on her arm to move.

"He's back!" Hermione said, turning to Ginny with a look of shocked wonder.

"I can see that. You're blocking the door," Ginny urged her, finally drawing her aside. "Let's at least sit down. Everyone is staring."

As she walked to their usual spot at the Gryffindor table, she couldn't help notice that, even though Severus was still carrying on his conversation with Professor McGonagall, his focus seemed to be on her. "He didn't even tell me he'd returned."

"Maybe he didn't have time; he could've arrived just before lunch," Ginny said, tugging on her arm again to make her sit.

Hermione wanted to run up and talk to him, but after a quick glance at Ginny, she opted to wait until later. She didn't want to cause a scene in front of the entire school, and it could wait.

She sat down, grabbed a Cornish pasty and glanced back up at Severus, running her schedule for the day over in her mind. Unfortunately, she knew that she didn't have much time after lunch because she had Ancient Runes next. She'd finally gotten all her work caught up, and she really wanted to recheck her translations before class began. Moreover, she did have a revision break this afternoon before dinner.

She watched him, taking in every detail of his appearance. He looked good. All the rejuvenation potions seemed to have helped his complexion, and his hair was smooth as if he'd washed it.

"You have to eat, Hermione," Ginny said, bumping her shoulder into hers.

Hermione quickly turned to look at Ginny. "What?"

"You can't take your eyes off of him, can you?" Ginny asked with a smirk. "You'll have people talking again."

"That's hardly new. They have been since it all started." She glanced back up at Severus as she added some chips to her plate. "He looks good though, don't you think?" she asked, turning back to Ginny.

"If you say so," the redhead said with a chuckle. "Harry is more my type."

While Ginny chatted with two other Gryffindors about Quidditch, Hermione tried to check her runes translations as she ate. She made small checks on her parchments where she wanted to double check the symbols in her dictionaries, smiling occasionally at her friend's enthusiasm of the game and occasionally making quick glances at the staff table. When Severus and Professor McGonagall rose to leave, Hermione stuffed the last of bite of her pasty in her mouth. "Goffta go," she mumbled with her mouth full as she wedged her parchments between her books in her bag.

Ginny simply laughed and waved good-bye.

She didn't see any sign of Severus in the Entrance Hall, and thinking he'd possibly gone to Professor McGonagall's office, she raced up the stairs. It was on her way, sort of, to her lesson. However, he wasn't in the office when she got there, and she didn't want to take the chance of being late to class by going to his office. *Where I should have gone the first place*, she berated herself, taking her seat in time to quickly check the answers that she'd marked at lunch before Professor Bocher asked for the assignments.

Hermione felt distracted all through class, and the lesson seemed to drag on. She copied what Professor Bocher wrote on the board and tried to pay attention to the lecture, but her notes were a complete mess. When the new pages for translating were handed out, she took one, passed the rest on, discreetly checking her watch, and wondered if Severus would be in his office. However, when her Professor told them the due date, she wasn't sure if she'd said Friday or not. Didn't matter, she'd finish them tonight after seeing Severus.

The bell finally tolled. Hermione quickly stuffed everything into her bag and uncharacteristically bolted for the door. She didn't stop running until she stood before the gargoyle to Severus' office.

However the statue just stared down at her imperiously. "Password?"

"I don't know it," she admitted, hitching her bag back onto her shoulder. "Isn't there some way to tell him that Hermione Granger would like to see him?"

The statue stood immobile while Hermione waited, wondering what to do and hoping that somehow Severus would know she was there. After what seemed like ages, the gargoyle moved. "You may go up and knock."

"Thank you," she said and hurried up the stairs. The door opened the moment she raised her fist. When she entered, Severus was sitting at his desk with several piles of parchments and scrolls neatly stacked before him. "You're back." She closed her eyes and turned her head, silently berating herself for stating the obvious. "I mean, it's good to have you back."

"Is it?" he asked as he stood up and came around his desk.

She dropped her bag on the floor and faced him. "Yes, I... I tried asking Kingsley to allow me to visit again but he refused. How are you?"

"Much better," he replied smoothly, leaning against the desk with his ankles and arms crossed. "How are your studies going?"

"Much better, thank you. I've gotten caught up," she replied. Up close, he did look better, healthier. His raven black hair was clean, and his robes looked new. He turned and picked up something off his desk, then held the parcel out to her. "I missed your birthday. It is customary to give a witch your age a watch, but you already have two. I thought you'd appreciate this a bit more."

*He noticed my watches?* It was true, her parents had given her a watch for her sixteenth birthday and a lovely gold watch their last Christmas together. "Thank you, Severus," she said as she stared at the gift. She knew it was a book even before she opened it. What she hadn't expected was to be holding a very old book in excellent condition. There was a complicated Triquetra symbol on the handcrafted binding and a very old Welch symbol of a dragon on the cover.

Severus stood unmoving as he watched her examine her gift.

She dropped the wrapping on the chair next to her and carefully opened the book to the first page. The words, *The Magicks of Myrddin Ambrosius and Vivianne Morgaine* were printed in copper above a thirteenth century style picture of a robed wizard talking to a monk scribe. She turned the page, amazed at the detail of the illustrations and the gothic text. "Is this... an original?" she finally asked, looking up at Severus in awe.

Severus shook his head once. "A second edition," he said smoothly with a faint smile on his face. "I have another," he added while touching two more parcels on his desk, one the shape of another book and a narrow box, both wrapped in blue paper. "I was going to gift this to you our first evening together."

Hermione smiled, not believing his generosity. "May I open them now? I don't have anything between now and dinner," she stated, her finger idly tracing the pattern on the cover of her book.

He shook his head as he uncrossed his ankles and stood. "I have things that require my attention that have been put off due to my hospitalization," he reminded her. He closed the gap between them and cupped her face, lifting her chin slightly. Very slowly, he leaned forward until their lips were only an inch apart. He watched her, as if gauging her reaction, before very gently touching his lips to hers. Hugging her book with one hand, she slid her other up and around his back. His kiss was teasingly light, in slow, soft, tender strokes. She moved closer, and his arm tightened around her waist. She tried to deepen the kiss by tentatively tracing her tongue on his lower lip, and the tip of his tongue slid on hers. Taking a bit of control, her tongue followed his back into his mouth, and she attempted to mimic him when he kissed her this way.

He dragged her with him as he leaned against the desk again, holding her more firmly. Hermione set her book on the desk by his hip and hugged him back, now completely lost in his embrace.

His hand cupped her cheek as he pulled back, his dark eyes heavily lidded with lust and his lips curving up into a smile. "As much as I'd really love to keep kissing you, we both have work to do," he said, his voice strained. "Please, come back tonight."

"All right," she said. He handed her back her book, watching as she reverently rewrapped her new book in the paper and then tucked it carefully into her bag.

Hermione turned to go, still in awe of his gift. As she closed the door, she took another quick glance at him and heard Severus say, "Not one word from any of you," apparently admonishing the portraits as he took his seat at his desk.

She cringed as she descended the stairs, suddenly realizing that the portraits had just witnessed the entire scene, and she felt herself blush hotly. *Well, that can't happen again*, she admonished herself. The thought of snogging Severus in front of Dumbledore, even his painted self, was humiliating. She had gotten so carried away she'd completely forgotten about the portraits.

She shook her head and headed quickly for her dorm, anxious to read her new book.

~S~

Severus left the owlery and headed down to dinner. Minerva had reviewed most of the official letters and documents requiring his signature and had already apprised him of their contents. He'd only had to peruse them before signing. As expected, the Board of Governors wanted to review the stipulations in the bylaws regarding his betrothal and confirm the dates for the Hogsmeade weekends. Severus copied the dates down in a letter to Kingsley and the Aurors office so that security could be arranged if necessary.

He entered the Great Hall and walked to his place at the staff table, pointedly ignoring the fearful, speculative, and curious expressions of the students. He turned to Minerva to ask her about various matters of the school as the students filed in and took their seats. He was momentarily concerned by Hermione's absence, but she showed up several minutes after the food had appeared. Nevertheless, after she sat down, she looked at him with the same wistful dreamy expression she'd had after opening her gift. If he was any judge to her character, he knew she'd spent her revision time reading her new book.

Her reaction to the book was more than he'd hoped. The amazed smile and the way she'd examined the book he knew it had been the perfect gift.

"You seem happy," Minerva said, catching him off guard.

He decided to tell her the truth. "Hermione came to see me after her last class."

Minerva's eyes widened and her brows rose. She turned to look in Hermione's direction, both her and Severus catching Hermione's attention.

Hermione waved, and Minerva waved back. "So things are going well?"

"Yes," he said and brought up the new amendments to the bylaws.

After dinner, Severus excused himself and went to his chambers to change into a shirt and black trousers under his robes. He called for Mispy and requested pumpkin juice and brownies to be brought to his sitting room. Then he alerted the gargoyle to admit Hermione when she arrived. He waited at his desk, reading over the bill statements pending his approval before being sent to Elaine Prevatt.

The grandfather clock chimed the hour, and he scowled, wondering what was delaying her.

When the half hour chimed, he clenched his teeth, trying to concentrate on the monthly feed bill for the animals maintained on the school grounds for the Care of Magical Creatures and Transfiguration lessons. A loud pop, followed by the sound of tumbling bottles, made him rise quickly to his feet.

"I am sorry, sir, if Pepper is disturbing you, sir!" the elf squeaked as she tried to snatch up the bottle rolling away from her while still holding four in her arms. "But sir says Pepper is to bring you bottles when Miss Prisswell replaces them, sir." Pepper set two bottles down and ran after the one rolling toward the door.

The door opened, and Hermione picked up the bottle that hit her foot. "Pepper is sorry, miss," the elf said in embarrassment and turned to bow lowly to Severus. "Pepper will punish herself properly for dropping potions, sir."

"That won't be necessary, Pepper. I doubt you've harmed them," Severus said as he picked up the two bottles off the floor and uncorked one, holding it away with a frown at the putrid smell. "Damn witch!"

"What is...?" Hermione asked, placing the potion bottle on the desk next to the ones Pepper had placed there.

"Thank you, miss," the elf said and turned to face Severus, tugging nervously on her thumb.

Severus checked the other bottles. "Hermione, I need to take care of this matter. Will you wait here?" he asked, stacking the bottles in his arm.

Hermione picked up two before he could. "I'll go with you. It looks like you could use a hand."

"Sir, it is almost time for Miss Prisswell to give them, sir," Pepper said nervously.

"Pepper, go back and do whatever you can to stall her," Severus said, turning for the door. "I'll call for you in a few minutes."

Hermione followed Severus, having to run to keep up with him, but he wouldn't slow down for her.

"What's going on? Who was that house-elf? What are these potions?" she asked as they hurried to the hospital. "Who is Miss Prisswell?"

"Quiet," he snapped. At the door he paused. "No questions. Not now." He strode straight into Madam Pomfrey's office. "Poppy, Miss Prisswell's at it again. I can't even begin to determine what this one is," he said as he tried to read the label on one of the bottles. "It says Sleeping Potion, but as far as I can tell it has boot polish in it and smells like antiseptic and sulfuric-tar."

"Let me see it," the Healer requested.

Severus handed her the bottle and crossed the office to the storage room. "I need to replace these again; they're all foul, just as before. I am really going to love wringing this wench's neck!"

"I'll document the contents like before. Save the samples you have."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Poppy pour the contents of the supposed Sleeping Potion into a cauldron as he set the other bottles down to replace the potions for viable ones. He emptied the first bottle in a glass jar, rinsed the bottle out with water and then with isopropyl alcohol before using his wand to magically clean it. It was a shortcut he'd not allow any student to do, but he was in a hurry. After refilling it with the properly made version, he leaned around the doorway and said, "Poppy, we're really stressed for time. Pepper indicated that Miss Prisswell was due to administer them."

"I can only go so fast, Headmaster," she replied.

He heard the Healer ask Hermione to help her separate the ingredients, giving clear instructions as he dumped the contents of the Pain, Rheumatoid, and Bronchodilator Potions into jars, labeled each one and cleaned the bottles the same way as the first.

"Severus, this is a combination of a Sleeping Potion and Doxycide," Poppy finally announced.

Hermione looked at him with deep concern. "Someone wants to kill Severus, what's going on? Who is Miss Prisswell?"

Severus was wracking his brain for any ingredient that could be mixed with a Sleeping Potion that would turn it black. "Hermione, let me think. I have to make it appear the same black and quick ..." He had picked up two sleeping potions: the standard one Poppy used was the basic Sleeping Potion taught in sixth year Potions and was clear, the Deep-Soporific Potion was a bit stronger, but the color was a light orange. "Without changing the efficacy..."

"What are the chances that you could use Dreamless Sleep?" Hermione asked.

"It counteracts with the Rheumatoid Potion by actually restricting air flow, and if it's taken the same time with a Bronchodilator Potion, it can stop the heart," Poppy stated and then looked up alarmed. "Oh, Severus, I hope she doesn't know that!"

"I have serious doubts that she would." He opened up Poppy's ingredient cupboard. "I wish I had time to brew a new one." He picked up a thin vial, then a small bag. "Squid ink reacts to the wormwood. Anise fungaria cannot be taken if there is a heart condition. If I add additional sopophorous beans the potion will turn a dark purple..." He set both containers back and picked up the jar of beans.

"If mixed with chocolate, the Deep-Soporific Potion would be a dark blue almost black," Hermione stated, and Severus' head jerked in her direction, wondering where or how she'd discovered that.

"I've seen it done," she stated. "But I'm not sure of the efficacy of the potion. The sugar..."

"No, you're right, the refined sugar diminishes the efficacy; but unsweetened baking chocolate would not," he said, considering the idea and finding it sound. "With additional sopophorous beans it should be dark enough."

"Chocolate?" Poppy asked as Severus called out for Mispy.

The house-elf bowed as soon as she popped in. "I need a bowl of unsweetened dark chocolate, melted to a liquid, immediately," he said, and before she even stood up, the elf was gone. Severus poured a bottle of the light orange sleeping potion into a cauldron. The heat of the chocolate if added too quickly would alter the potion making it unusable, and too much could ruin it as well. He was crushing some of Poppy's sopophorous beans with her knife when Mispy returned with a bowl of the liquidized chocolate. "Hermione, add one spoonful at a time of the chocolate," he instructed, pouring the juice from the beans into the cauldron and stirring slowly.

Hermione added one spoonful after another while he stirred until the color changed to a blue so dark that it was nearly black. Severus stilled her hand and checked the consistency. It was almost too thick. "I need to test this."

"I'll take it," Poppy said, reaching for the spoon.

Severus shook his head, wishing he had more time. "No, the potion..."

Hermione had scooped up a dose, and he reached for it.

"No, I will. If anything goes wrong, I trust that you'll both find a way to counteract it," she said, holding the cup tightly in her hands.

"Hermione! No," It was too late. She'd turned, blocking him as he tried to stop her from drinking it.

A sharp pop sounded behind them in the hospital, but Severus' attention was on Hermione. For two heartbeats, nothing happened, then suddenly her eyelids drooped, and the cup fell from her limp hand and crashed on the floor. Severus and Poppy both reached for her as Hermione's body went completely slack and she collapsed against Severus. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the nearest bed with Poppy following right behind him.

The Healer cast a series of quick diagnostic charms, repeating three of the wand movements. "She's asleep, nothing more. I think it's fine," she finally said.

Severus brushed the hair from Hermione's face.

"Sir, Pepper is so sorry to insist, sir, and Pepper will punish herself most severely, but I have to have the potions now, sir," the elf squeaked fearfully from behind him.

He was checking Hermione's pulse and didn't turn to look when he said, "Poppy, please give the elf the bottles." Hermione was all right, but he wanted to throttle her for being so reckless. From the corner of his eye he could see Poppy place the bottles in a small box with rope handles and hand the box to the house-elf. "Pepper, no punishing yourself; she might question you as to why," he started to say, but Pepper popped out as soon as she had a good grip on the handles. "Damn."

"Nothing to do but let her sleep," Poppy said quietly when she returned to his side.

"I know," he said with a sigh, then snarled, "Idiotic girl," as if cursing at her.

"Not so idiotic. She has complete faith in you." He turned his head to look at her, and she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Severus, it was the obvious choice; if anything had gone wrong, you and I together would have set her to rights in no time."

"It was reckless," he said, coming out more like a grumble.

"But necessary," she replied. "She obviously trusts us completely or she wouldn't have taken the risk."

He sighed softly as he stared at Hermione's face. She looked so young when asleep so vulnerable. He was tired of her taking unnecessary chances, but Poppy was right: necessity meant taking a risk in this case. He just didn't like not being the one to make the decision. *Gryffindors*.

"Do you want to change her clothes or should I?"

He turned his head. "I'll do it. Will you inform Minerva for me?"

"Of course." She smiled as she walked away. "I'll be in my office, documenting my findings."

After changing Hermione into pajamas and covering her with a blanket, he joined Poppy in her office.

The healer was bent over a cauldron, separating out one of the potions. "Why haven't you had this woman arrested?"

Severus sat down in her chair. "Since you're involved... There are three other wizards whom I haven't fully fitted into the equation yet. If Miss Prisswell is so inept as to not notice when the potions are replaced, she isn't a very intelligent witch or has no affinity for Potions. That in itself negates the possibility of her being a Healer. So far, all I know is that she has been acquiring these potions from Ludwick 'Jude' Graven and, up until recently, a street thug named Ashton Foulkes. Pepper is keeping a very close eye on my Great-grandfather. She prepares his food, helps him drink, bathes and changes him. Miss Prisswell only gives him his potions and then spends her time reading or sleeping. If I remove her now, I'd hate to think who these wizards would set up to replace her. Better an incompetent I can fool than one I can't."

Poppy stared in the direction of the cauldron with an absent gaze, apparently deep in thought. "I remember Mr. Graven; he was really quite the bully while in school. He was several years your senior I believe, possibly in his sixth or seventh year when you started."

Severus nodded, remembering him. "He was friends with Rowle and Gibbon. That would put him in sixth year when I started school."

She looked up at him and worry creases appeared on her usually calm face. "Was he a Death Eater?"

"I didn't see him at any raid or meeting I attended, so I can't say," he replied with a slight shrug. "But his associations lead me to believe he could've been or he was simply a supporter. Not everyone took the Mark."

"Well, I will help you in any way I can," she said, standing up and facing him. "But you're taking a very big chance with your great-grandfather's wellbeing."

"I have a very capable house-elf taking care of him," he said, handing her the next bottle. "But I do appreciate your assistance."

~H~

When Hermione woke, Severus was sitting beside her cot, reading *aDaily Prophet*.

"I have no idea what prompted you to take an untested potion, Hermione. That was incredibly reckless," he said, glowering at her as he lowered the paper.

"I had every faith in your abilities, and I knew that between you and Madam Pomfrey that I'd be fine." She sat up and stretched. "Oh, that was a peaceful sleep."

"You could've had an adverse reaction," he said, nearly a snarl.

"Which you'd have created a counter potion for," she pointed out to him. He was very cross with her, but the potion was apparently fine. "Besides, I knew about the chocolate. Fred and George..."

"Those two!?"

"...tried the combination while creating their Skiving treats," she said as she scooted back against her headboard. "Yes, those two. It didn't work as a joke item, but it did make the potion a very dark blue, almost black unless you hold it to the light." She picked up the cup of water on her bedside table. "Do you think this Miss Priswell will know the difference between the new potion and the Sleeping Draught laced with Doxycide?"

"I don't know, but I will find out today when I visit," he folded the paper and dropped it on the pile on the floor.

"What are you looking for?" Hermione asked as he picked up another *Daily Prophet*.

His eyebrow quirked at her question.

"That's not today's the headline reads that the Cannons beat Puddlemere United by three hundred points!" she said, pointing at the *Prophet* he'd picked up. "I happen to know that Puddlemere won the British-Irish cup this last season and the Cannons came in ninth."

"I wasn't aware you followed Quidditch so avidly," he said offhandedly, turning the page.

"My best friends are Harry, Ron, and Ginny they keep me well-informed," she replied as she crossed her legs. "What are you looking for? I might be able to help." She crossed her fingers in her lap as she watched at him attentively.

He laughed as he lowered the paper. "I forgot; you were the brain behind Mr. Potter's meddling," Severus said with a smirk.

"They're quite capable of thinking for themselves, but I could help you if you're looking for something in particular," she said, hoping he'd say yes.

He looked at her as if actually considering it. "I don't want you getting behind with your studies."

"Not a problem, it's not like I didn't keep up my own assignments when I was helping Harry with the Triwizard Tournament or when I helped Hagrid build a case to defend Buckbeak or when I researched spells for the DA my fifth year."

He had the audacity to smirk at her examples. "I'll consider it," he said as he exchanged his *Daily Prophet* for another one.

Madam Pomfrey carried in her breakfast tray with two cups of breakfast tea. The Healer performed a series of diagnostic charms and then smiled. "Well that potion certainly had no adverse effects on you. You may get dressed and go after you eat something."

Hermione handed Severus a cup of tea, grabbed a crumpet, and then slipped behind a curtain to get dressed. Severus had collected the papers and was waiting for her when she came out. "I had Mисpy get your things from your room," he said, indicating her bag.

She quickly checked it. "I'll have to get my books for Arithmancy and Transfiguration."

"Very well," he said as he stood.

They talked about Fred's experimentation of combining chocolate with the sleeping draughts until they reached the stairs. "I'll see you at lunch," he said softly. He leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on her lips before departing.

Hermione watched him speculatively for a moment and then hurried to her room to exchange her books.

After her Transfiguration lesson, she saw Severus strolling down the corridor and hurried to catch up to him. "I have break until dinner if you would like a hand with your research," she suggested.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "What about your assignments?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It's Friday, so I have the entire weekend. If I get my Arithmancy and Ancient Runes work done tonight, I only have two essays to write per day. I'll be fine. My Potions essay is nearly complete, and I only need to recheck a resource for my Charms essay, but it's nearly complete, so those are the two I'll finish tonight." She walked with him, hoping he'd agree to let her help him with his search.

He must have figured that with two looking he'd get more accomplished, because he allowed her to go with him up to his office. "It goes without saying, Hermione, what I am about to show you is to stay between you and I no one else." He walked over to a cupboard and pulled out a Pensieve.

Hermione was immediately excited, having only heard about Pensieves from Harry and reading about them in books.

Severus took two small vials out of his pocket and showed them to her. "These vials contain memories that link Miss Priswell to the wizards in question." He poured them into the basin and indicated for her to enter.

Remembering what she'd read, Hermione bent forward, touching her nose to the mist and immediately felt like she was falling. Images swirled around her, and it felt like she was intruding on someone's dreams. The sensation was strange; the changing succession of images was not so fast she couldn't see the people clearly, only they were brief. When they ended, she stood up confused.

"Enter again," he suggested.

She did and this time he entered with her.

"I'm trying to identify this one," he said pointing to a man that had short blond hair, a hooked nose, dark blue eyes, and had a somewhat stocky build. "None of the Aurors recognized him."

The image changed again, the same wizard and a woman Severus identified as Miss Priswell were talking to a dark-haired wizard he said was Clemet, and one that looked like a thug that Severus identified as being Ashton Foulkes. During one slower memory, Hermione got really close to the blond wizard so she could take a good look at his face. When the memories ended, she stood again and turned to look at Severus. He ushered her up to his sitting room and dropped the *Prophets* on a large pile sitting on the coffee table.

"Who is he? I mean I know you don't know his name, but why are you trying to identify him. Is this related to the poisoned potions?"

"Yes," he said, indicating the pile of old *Prophet's*. "I want a name and anything else you can find on him."

She closed her eyes, visualizing the man with the long, pallid face, heavy eyebrows, and thin frame that resembled Severus's mother somewhat. "The other wizard he bore a resemblance to your mum."

"Very astute," Severus stated. "He goes by three names that I know of: Clemet King, Clemet Richfield, and Clint Richman. It's very possible that I'm related to him, but I don't know the connection. There is a picture of my grandmother holding a baby in her arms with a toddler standing next to her. He could be that toddler."

"Who are they trying to kill?" she asked, trying to lock the images of the men in her mind's eye.

"My Great-grandfather," he admitted. "Up until only a few months ago, I thought him to be my only living relative. Now I know I have at least an uncle. The other man is involved with Miss Priswell a lover or relative, I'm not sure. But I need to find out and soon."

Hermione picked up a paper and began to peruse it for anything on a Miss Priswell or the wizards he mentioned.

A house-elf appeared at dinnertime with a tray of sandwiches, fruit, and tea.

The discarded pile at Hermione's feet was growing, but the stack of *Prophet's* on the coffee table didn't appear to be shrinking any. "You know that this would go faster with help."

"I don't want any of your friends involved," he said as he turned a page.

"Ginny and Luna are discreet," she countered. "I know they would be able to help find any connection... What?"

He'd lowered his hands holding the paper to his lap and was glaring at her.

She turned to face him squarely. "Look, if you and I are going to be involved, don't you think that they will eventually learn some things about you anyway? I'm not saying divulge everything, but they are smart, and four people will cover this mess faster than two."

"That is the only reason I accepted your assistance, because we are, as you say, involved," he said and picked up the paper.

"All I'm saying is that they are my friends, and I trust them." She heard him snort as she picked up the paper she'd been reading. It was pointless trying to get him to see her way if he was being obstinate, so she resumed her search.

After hours of searching, Hermione decided that the obituaries and possibly the birth and marriage announcements were the most likely places to find any mention of Miss Priswell or the wizard, Clemet, who apparently had several identities. She checked each picture for either wizard and then read each birth, death, or marriage announcement, since many of the marriage and obituaries had pictures. It seemed that the persons who wrote the announcements liked to include the names of relatives. "Wizarding society really likes their family trees," she mumbled, as she exchanged her paper for another.

"I'm aware of that," Severus grumbled.

She left at the lower-years' curfew and returned to his office the next night after dinner. The Gargoyle let her pass without question. Severus was already reading through the papers in his sitting room. Hermione plopped down on the floor by the fireplace and began reading.

"Did you finish your essays?" he asked from behind his paper.

"Two are done, my Potions and Charms essays. I only need to rewrite my rough drafts of my Transfiguration and History of Magic essays tonight, which won't take me very long, and my other two I can finish easily enough tomorrow." He didn't comment, so she assumed he trusted her to keep up on her studies. She crossed her ankles as she read.

So far, there wasn't anything all that exciting. Anthelia Wellbegott, who apparently had a scandal column on the next to last page, usually had some interesting articles, like Bertie Bott's errant mistake of dropping his sock into his cauldron. Hermione giggled, knowing that was how he'd invented his Every Flavor Beans according to his Chocolate Frog card.

In another issue, Maribella Marjoribanks was chided for breaking twenty of her bones in a fall during a Quidditch game and getting herself banned from all future Tornados games. According to the article, she'd been so smitten with Quidditch player Johnathan Stykes that she had leapt out of the stands as he'd flown near her in hopes that he'd catch her. Apparently he hadn't, being too focused on the Bludgers at the time. But Hermione hadn't found anything relevant to their search.

Hermione came back on Sunday after finishing her last two essays, but she'd been too busy on Monday or Tuesday to help. Wednesday she joined him after dinner until curfew, and Thursday she came up to Severus' sitting room after completing her Potions essay and Ancient Runes translations.

Hermione turned the page to the obituaries and sat up. "This is the obituary for John Howard Prince. 'Survived by his wife of only three months, Frances Marie Prince, nee Griswold... and his parents Mr. and Mrs. Talfryn Eldward Prince.' Is this one of your relatives?"

Severus dropped the paper he was reading onto his lap. "Yes, Talfryn Prince is my great-grandfather."

"So is this John Prince your grandfather?" she asked, trying to fit the pieces together.

"No, my grandfather was Edgar Prince," he said, exchanging the paper he'd been reading for another.

"So this is your great-uncle, then," she asked, rolling over and sitting up so she could look at him. "It says he didn't have any children. 'Edgar Albert Prince will be hosting the wake at the...' so... wait. Frances Griswold." Hermione remembered that name. She'd read something about her. "Frances Griswold I saw an announcement... I think. Yes, it was on the scandal column. Something about a rushed marriage and a suspected affair..." She rummaged through the papers checking Anthelia Wellbegott's columns. "Yes, here it is. 'A widow of only one month... married Thomas Osgood in a simple affair in a quaint cottage on the River Stour in the Blackmore Vale. Only three couples attended...' There is a picture of the couple."

"So she remarried. That doesn't help me," he said, exchanging papers.

Hermione knew there was more to it something nagging at her in the back of her head. Anthelia Wellbegott had written something else about the witch. "But if John Prince died three months after his marriage to Frances Griswold I think I saw a birth announcement..."

"So she had a child with her second husband. The obituary stated that my great-uncle didn't have any surviving heirs," he said dismissively.

"No, there was something... this Anthelia Wellbegott is a lot like Rita Skeeter she loves gossip." Hermione tried to remember which paper she'd seen it in. "Yes, there was something about the baby being too big for a premature birth so she suspected an affair..."

Severus dropped another paper on his discard pile and picked up the next one on the table beside him, clearly unimpressed.

If she could only find the right paper! "...and that she rushed to get married... No, this is the one about the woman who claimed to have married a Satyr."

"Delightful," he sneered. "Please don't bother me with petty gossip."

She finally found the one she was looking for. "Here it is. Frances Griswold remarried and gave birth to Charles John Osgood barely seven months into her second marriage." Hermione picked up the papers with both articles. "She had been married to your great-uncle for three months, married again only one month later and had the baby less than seven months into her next marriage. The baby was most likely your great-uncle's son."

Severus looked at the picture of the wizard and woman holding a baby. "It's possible, he'd have been conceived one month before my great-uncle died."

"How did he die? Do you have any idea? The obituary didn't say," she asked, wondering how well he knew the Princes.

He shrugged slightly and dropped the paper on the coffee table still staring at the announcement. "I don't know, but it would've been recorded in the Obituary and Life Termination register."

"In Maggie Whitmire's office," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Yes," he said with a nod. "All deaths are recorded with date, time, and cause. Therefore, if foul play is involved or suspected, the Aurors are immediately notified."

"So the likelihood of her telling you is unlikely she still insists that we have to sign her forms." She leaned back against the sofa and crossed her arms, gazing unseeingly at the bookshelves. "Okay, what if Charles Osgood was told by his mum that he was actually the son of a wealthy family, a pure-blood family. If he'd tried to contact your great-grandmother or great-grandfather, introduced himself as their grandchild, and they refuted him..."

"It's likely, he'd have no proof, unless the Birth Registration ledger indicated the impropriety," he said patiently. "It's more likely that the Birth Registration ledger recorded him as Osgood's son, since that is what the announcement in the *Prophet* stated. Births, deaths, and marriages are always confirmed with the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office. Without proof of his paternity, he'd have been turned away."

"But if he is related, then it may explain why he's after your Great-grandfather." She turned to face him with her arm resting on the sofa. "He could've been angry about being cut from what he deemed as his inheritance your Great-uncle John's estate."

"Which I do know would have reverted back to his living relatives Talfryn Prince. This speculation doesn't connect him to Miss Priswell," he said, shaking his head.

"No, but it's a start," she insisted. "The announcement states that he was born in Sturminster Newton in Dorset; he might still be living in the area."

"That's easy enough to check unless his home is under the Fidelius Charm."

She sighed, he wasn't taking her theory very seriously, but at least he wasn't discounting it. "What about marriage? It could be possible he's married. If we look through the marriage announcements..."

He shook his head. "You're assuming that Miss Priswell is married to Charles John Osgood that's quite a stretch."

Her shoulders dropped a little. "It's just a theory," she stated, dejectedly.

"That sounds like a bad mystery novel," He set aside the *Prophet* and stood, stretching. He walked over and sat on the sofa near her. "I almost forgot about these," he said, pulling her two gifts from his pocket.

Hermione set aside the papers, rose from the floor to sit next to him and reached for the first present. Severus had a slight smile on his face as he watched her carefully open the slender box. She gasped in delight at the beautiful swan quill nestled on the soft velvet. "Oh, Severus, it's lovely!" she said, picking it up to examine the delicate work on the quill tip.

"And this," he said, handing her the second present.

She placed the quill back in its box and opened the other one, laughing softly in amusement at the study guide. She turned and hugged him. "Severus, you know me so well. Thank you, they're perfect."

"I'm glad you like them. I hope you use them well," he said and tipped her head up so he could kiss her. He turned slightly, wrapping her in his arms, holding her tightly. She closed her eyes, enjoying the languid sensuality of his lips on hers, and felt herself lifted. She opened her eyes in shock as he turned her slightly to sit on his lap and stroked her side. "It's easier this way," he said as he nipped at her jaw.

"You could've asked," she chided him, and he kissed her neck making her moan. "I don't mind sitting on your lap."

"Then I'd have had to stop kissing you," he purred softly near her ear. His one hand trailed down her side, slid across her stomach and back up, his fingers grazing the side of her breast as he continued to tantalize her. After a few minutes, he shifted, lowering her to the sofa and stretching out beside her, with one of her legs trapped between his. She pushed his hair back so she could see his eyes, and inhaled deeply at the desire she read there.

He leaned down and kissed her mouth; his free hand moved to her breast in tantalizing slowness, one finger sweeping across the soft mound, then trailed downward and back, but only grazing her breasts. She moaned into his mouth and his hand slid down slowly, one finger slipping under the waist of her skirt, going from one side to the other. She shifted, unsure if she was ready for more, and his hand moved up to her waist. Breathing deeply, she nipped at his lower lip, and he deepened his kiss. As if taking a cue that she'd relented, he caressed her breast again, and then slid his hand down her waist to her hip and pelvis. The soft, swirling touch sent a shock of awareness to her fog-addled brain and a yearning inside her when his hand moved away. He was teasing her, and she squirmed unconsciously to move her body to regain the contact. She bent her knee and tried to lift her head to kiss him, but this position left him in complete control.

He laughed softly against her throat when she arched her hips to meet his hand as it moved down her body again. He slid his hand to cup her thigh and hugged her leg to his hip. She could feel his erection pressing against her, its heat missing her core by only a fraction of an inch. She tried to shift herself closer, to fit herself to him, but he held her in place. "Stop that. If you don't if you push me, we're going to be in my bed in a heartbeat."

"You can't Apparate in Hogwarts," she said, gasping for breath as her heart pounded in her ears.

"I'm Headmaster, Hermione, the rules don't necessarily apply," he purred. "I know the spells to lower them and raise them. It's a flick of the wrist, and I'll have you in my bed."

She gasped.

"So either be a good girl, or tell me yes, because it's all I can do to hold onto my self-control with you." His hand slid from her hip to her side, right next to her breast. "Unless you're ready to be intimate with me again," he said as a finger swept over her breast, stimulating her nipple through her jumper. "So say the word: yes or stop."

She stared at him, momentarily lost in the depths of his gaze, her breathing deep and ragged.

"Perhaps you'd simply just like to continue," he said silkily before capturing her mouth again.

She tried to utter, 'uh huh,' but it only came out as a moan.

An hour later, a slightly disheveled girl slipped from the Headmaster's tower, her lips swollen, her blouse untucked, her eyes sparkling, and her heart pounding as she ran to her dorm, hoping that Filch wouldn't catch her out so late after curfew.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

I want to thank my betas, EverMystique and to DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

*Myrddin Ambrosius is another way of writing Merlin Ambrosius, only using the old Welch spelling Myrddin for Merlin instead of the more common spelling. Vivianne is adapted from Niviane: she was the huntress in the Suite du Merlin, which describes King Arthur's early adventures, and was the daughter of the king of Northumberland. She is also called: Nymue, Nimue, Niniane, Nyneue, or Viviane in some versions of the legend.*

*The name of Morgaine was simply added for artistic license, as if Vivianne Morgaine might be a relation to Merlin or another great witch of the age.*

## The Prince Family Tree

Chapter 36 of 63

Hermione finds out more about the Osgoods, Severus decides to do some checking on Hermione's theory himself, and Talfryn gets a visitor.



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### The Prince Family Tree

~H~

Saturday Hermione sat at a table in the Revision Hall on the fourth floor with her Arithmancy equations spread out in front of her. She not only had essays in every subject, she had a Potions assignment that had required her to run to the dungeons first thing before breakfast, two times in the last week, and again immediately after lunch on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and four times today. Plus she had nineteen pages of Arithmancy equations and a very difficult Ancient Runes translation that required her to work with another classmate to complete – and Professor Botcher had matched her up with Blake Blume. The problem was it was difficult finding time in their schedules to meet up.

She checked her watch and sighed, tapping her quill on her Arithmancy assignment. She had only three hours until she had to run down to the Advanced Potions lab to work on her potion, and Blake had yet to show up. She stared at the page of equations, but was finding it hard to concentrate on it, instead letting her mind wander on Severus' mystery.

As an avid reader, Hermione loved mysteries and detective stories as much as, or even more than, romances, and from what she'd pieced together about Francis Griswold, John Prince, and Thomas Osgood, her theory made perfect sense. Severus had even called himself the Half-Blood Prince while in school, preferring to be recognized for the connection to his pure-blood ancestry. So, it followed reason that Charles Osgood, upon finding out he was John Prince's son—not Osgood's—might have wanted to be recognized as a Prince or at the very least acknowledged by the old pure-blood family. But this part of her theory depended on whether Thomas Osgood was a pure-blood or not, and Hermione didn't know anything about Thomas Osgood's lineage. Severus was certain that Miss Prisswell was somehow intimately connected with either Charles Osgood or the wizard Severus called Clemet, but which wizard and by what means she was related to them was a mystery, too.

Hermione had discreetly asked Ginny and Wendlynne if they knew any Osgoods. Wendlynne had shaken her head, but Ginny had mentioned a friend of her parents, Eugene Osgood and his daughter Jocelyn. Eugene's wife, Mrs. Osgood, and Jocelyn apparently had been sent to Azkaban during the war. However, Mrs. Osgood had unfortunately lost her mind and suffered ill health during her internment and had never fully recovered. So, Mr. Osgood had taken a leave of absence from the Invisibility Task Force to care for her. Jocelyn Osgood, who was Bill's age, worked in the Magical Contracts and Agreements Office. They lived in Whitby, which was north of York, not Dorset, however.

"Sorry I'm late, but Wayne kept us on account of Byron being in hospital," Blake said in a rush, still breathing hard as he sat down next to her and drew out his wand. "I have an hour – you?" He had the look of someone who'd run all the way to the castle from Quidditch practice.

"An hour's good," she replied, pulling the sheets they were supposed to work on out of her bag. "I tried translating these without the charm last night."

"Me too," he replied, taking out his own, his breathing slowing to normal. "I got nothing but gibberish."

"I've tried it in Elder Futhark, Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, and in Younger Futhark and came up with..."

"How? It's in the Danish Rök runes," he said, picking up one of her translations and staring at it in shock.

"Professor Botcher warned us that the Bedydrian Curse, which conceals the real text, would deceive the translator and that, without the charm, the translations will vary to the reader," Hermione said as she dug in her bag for a fresh sheet of parchment. "This also has the Aleógan Hex that shows false, deceptive runes to the translator. Combined they create confusion and a blindness, which is why the memory is affected. And that's why we have to work together, because the one performing the charm can get a backlash from the curse if there isn't someone to shield them when they release it. Also the one performing the shield will remember more of what's revealed than the one casting the charm."

"Sooo, who goes first, me or you?" he asked, drawing out his wand.

"If you want, I'll shield you. If that's all right," she suggested, drawing out her own wand.

"Okay," he replied, performing the revealing-countercharm they'd been taught.

~S~

Severus looked up when the small bell on his desk indicated that he had a visitor. "Allow," he barked, wondering who it might be. The grinding of the stone behind the door stopped abruptly just before the timid knock on the door. "Enter," he barked.



Hermione peered around the door at him. "Am I disturbing you?"

"No, not really," he replied, sitting back in his chair as she pushed the door wider. "I had hoped you'd have come earlier." It had almost been a week since her last visit. He'd seen her out on the pitch from his window the previous Saturday, reading while her friends practiced, but she'd avoided him all weekend. Well, that wasn't entirely accurate; she was busy and he knew it. She'd smiled at him in passing between lessons and waved at him discreetly at meals, but that didn't count in his book.

All the professors were pushing the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. level students, cramming as much information into their fifth- and seventh-year curriculum as possible and trying to challenge the students academically in order for them to achieve their highest possible scores on their exams in all subjects. He'd done the same as a professor. He'd loved the academic challenge during this time as a youth and had hated it as a professor. Too many opportunities for errors, and the stress level made some students crack. Cracking during a Potions lesson could not only be disastrous, but fatal. But that didn't mean Hermione couldn't have revised in his quarters with him instead of burying herself in the library under piles of books and scrolls.

She pulled a scroll from her bag and then dropped her bag on the floor as she plopped into the chair facing him. "I've just been busy. I finished my paper on my spell. I've already given a copy to Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Brandstone today in class, and I know you wanted one, too, so this one is for you." She handed him the scroll. "I have one for Professor Avoian, but I'll give it to him in class tomorrow."

"Thank you," he said, taking the scroll "How is your revision going?" he asked, hoping she'd say she had caught up and could spend the evening with him tonight.

"Fine, behind, but not too bad." Her gaze traveled up to the portraits above him. "Professor Reynolds has us doing potions that take days to finish, and I've been reading up on Animagi transformations so I'm prepared for my private lessons with Professor McGonagall. I, of course, have essays in every subject – but you know, it's my final N.E.W.T. year."

Severus nodded in understanding. At least she didn't appear stressed. He knew that she'd been eating properly, but she looked tired. "You are staying up too late at night," he stated, smirking at her immediate response of, "Am not."

"Hermione, it's natural, and you're an overachiever. Knowing you, you're up until midnight, revising by candlelight."

Her face flushed slightly and her eyes flickered away and back – proof that his guess was correct. "Eleven usually."

"And you're up at six and in the library as soon as the doors open. You tend to read during meals," he stated, leaning forward with his forearms on his desk and his fingers laced together. "I also wondered why you haven't joined any of the clubs."

She sat up straighter. "I hadn't thought about joining them."

That statement caught him off guard, not that he showed it. "Don't you want to try any of the academic competitions?" He couldn't believe that she didn't desire recognition for her achievements. She thrived on approval and praise.

"I was thinking about..." she started to say, then inhaled sharply and exhaled with a nod of her head. "They will be hosted through the individual clubs."

He nodded and smirked. "Precisely. Which means you'll have to join them and have your individual projects approved. It also ensures that these projects are supervised either by the professors themselves or by their apprentices." He sat back and dropped his hands to his lap. "Have you also given up on helping me search through the newspapers?" he carefully controlled his annoyance with her from showing in his voice.

She hung her head for a second and then looked up at him. "I have been meaning to, but mostly I've been busy."

He turned his head in disappointment and leaned back, his jaws clenched. Severus knew Hermione's schedule by heart, knew which route she preferred to take between classes and which table she liked to sit at in the library. Since the seventh-year N.E.W.T. students were permitted in the Restricted Section, he even knew which of the four tables in there she preferred to use to do her research in the tomes that were not permitted outside the barrier.

"I'm sorry, I know I promised, and I want to help, really. I've been so distracted as of late," she stammered, and he looked back at her. She squirmed. "I..."

"I can't expect you to set aside your studies for my personal project, but I'd appreciate it if you'd consider revising here, in my sitting room, in the evenings."

She opened her mouth to reply, and he held up his hand. "I know that several of your subjects require the books from the Restricted Section." He leaned forward, his elbows on the desk and his fingers laced under his chin. "Did you not think that I could provide you books on the subjects you are working on – even tomes that are not provided in the school library. And consider this, Lucius Malfoy is a good friend, and I have use of his library at any time I desire it."

Predictably, her eyes widened at his suggestion. "And he'd lend them to you? For me?"

Severus smiled. "Hasn't he once already? If you'll tell me what you're working on, I will borrow what he has on the subjects for you."

Hermione smiled and began telling him about her lessons and the subject of her essays. Her eyes sparkled, and she became animated as they discussed her potion, her ability with complex charms, and the cursed Runes she'd been assigned.

"There are other spells that are more effective when dealing with misleading curses and jinxes," he stated suggestively.

She smiled and shook her head. "I want to know them, and I've looked them up; but many of them are dangerous, and Professor Botcher wants us to use the revealing charm he specified and a shield charm."

The grandfather clock began to toll. "I have to go, I have History of Magic," she stated, reaching for her bag.

"I'll pick up some books on Brendwert's theory of animate shape transfigurations and the Quadrennial-sagacity Potion," he offered, rising to walk her out.

"I'd like that," she replied and pulled out a revision guide. "I have time on... Thursday, and I can come up Sunday?"

He brushed her hair from her face as he forced himself to hide his disappointment. "Then I'll expect you on Thursday." He leaned forward and kissed her briefly, well aware that she did have to leave.

She kissed him back then moved away. "I'll see you at dinner."

He nodded, hardly considering that as 'seeing' her since he'd be at the staff table and she'd be with her friends. "All right." When the door closed behind her, he returned to his desk. Since she'd not be by tonight to see him, he had plenty of time to visit Lucius in the evening. At least he'd get a good drink while perusing his library.

\*

Lucius looked up from his book as Severus exited the Floo. "I expected you hours ago."

"Messrs Kolosson, Bronston, Mulheim, and Foster decided to replicate one of Potter's infamous adventures and blew up a girls' toilet," he said with a deep scowl.

"Apparently that's where the entrance to Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets lies, down the plumbing," Lucius stated, setting his book aside. "It looks like you could use a drink. Ogden's or Black's?"

"Black's Renegade. Thank you. It is – was, in a roundabout way. The entrance to the chamber was sealed off when plumbing was installed in the beginning of the twelfth century and the castle adjusted," Severus explained, sitting in the chair facing his friend. "Now it falls on the Headmaster to keep children from trying to break into it."

"And how many times have you gone in?" Lucius asked before taking a sip from his own glass.

A house-elf appeared, carrying Severus' drink on a silver tray. "Never. I don't speak Parseltongue – a requirement that the books failed to mention. The repairs to the foundations when the castle was renovated repaired the cave-in Lockhart caused, and the access to the chamber from the second floor girls' loo is now closed off since the plumbing had been repaired as well, so the only way in is through the original entrance." He sipped on the four hundred year old scotch, enjoying the smooth, rich taste.

"So how does one gain access?" Lucius asked nonchalantly as if inquiring where the Quidditch Pitch was, "if they were proficient in Parseltongue?"

"Apparently at the end of a tunnel that originates at the base of what had once been Salazar Slytherin's Tower – the original entrance," Severus stated just as casually, but with a hint of warning in his voice.

"Every Slytherin knows that the tower was remodeled after Salazar Slytherin left the school, and is now the grand staircase," Lucius said, disappointment evident in his expression.

Severus smirked at him. The faucet with the snake was still in the girls' loo, but in the dungeons a pewter snake had appeared embedded in a stone as well. "Not that knowing this does anyone any good, since one must speak Parseltongue to open the entrance to the tunnel as well."

"I see. Too bad. I, for one, would've loved to see it," Lucius stated, looking into his glass but keenly watching Severus from his peripheral vision. "So, how do things go with your Bonded mate?"

Severus rested his forearms on the armrest of his chair, holding his glass casually. At least he dropped the subject, although the new one wasn't one he wanted to talk about either. "I see her when I can between her lessons and assignment workload."

"Ah," Lucius exhaled. "So, infrequently."

"Yes, infrequently," he admitted, hoping to end this topic of conversation. There was no point in denying it; Lucius knew full well what the seventh-year N.E.W.T. level schedule was like for someone intent on carrying eleven courses.

"So that's why you've come to borrow my books?" Lucius asked with a slight smirk. "Too woo the witch with knowledge."

"I've decided to do some research on my own regarding a particular potion disguised by a unique version of the Bedydrian Curse," he said smoothly. But that was only one reason for his visit.

"I've read about Hermione's account on the reversal of the Inferius Curse. Quite a remarkable feat," Lucius stated. "It was in all the publications: the *Daily Prophet*, *Sorcerer's Sun* and *Witch Weekly*."

"Not to mention *The Quibbler*," Severus added, smirking at Lucius' raised eyebrow. "Luna Longbottom is the editor's daughter. Hermione has already written her formal article, and *The Healer's Current Academia* and *The Charms Chronicle* will both publish it," Severus stated, not bothering to mask his pride in Hermione's accomplishment.

~\*~

Hermione showed up an hour after dinner on Thursday with her bag bulging with books. "Sorry I'm late; I needed to check on my potion."

"Not a problem," he said smoothly, indicating she proceed to his sitting room. Although he did appreciate the explanation, she didn't have to give him an excuse.

He'd enlarged the coffee table into a desk and had the house-elves bring tea. She sorted out her papers on the table, opened a large book, and immediately began working on her essay. Severus watched her, leaning over his own book with one forearm on the edge of the table and his other hand near the corner of his book. He made mental note of the rare ingredients, and mentally checked off the ones he had in his own supplies and those he didn't. After a while, he rose, walking to the bookshelves, wanting to check a reference in one of his journals.

"What are you reading?" she asked innocently.

"My own research: a potion that is known to only a few Potion masters," he said, checking through his journals for the one by the Byzantine wizards of the ancient city of Constantinople.

"Is this it, the one with the picture of the medulla cortex of the brain?" she asked.

He turned around, shouting, "Hermione, don't touch that book!" as he moved quickly to intercept her, but she had already turned the book to face her. The book was from his own shelves and was extremely temperamental; it would curse anyone except its chosen owner should they try to handle it. Severus' gaze flicked from where he'd been staring at the book, wand at the ready to respond if the book tried to curse her, and back to her face as she read through the old English script.

The old book lay calmly on the table, the corners twitching as her finger trailed down the page as she read as if she was tickling it.

"I remember Professor Reynolds mentioning this potion, but it's not on our list... Wait. It's not the Medullaoblongata Potion, is it?" she asked, looking up.

"What do you know of the Medullaoblongata Potion?" he asked, surprised that she'd been taught that one.

She stood, her eyes downcast for a moment, staring, and then she looked up at him. "The Medullaoblongata Potion is known to cure medulloblastomas that develop in the glial cells and the early developing nerve cells of the brain that normally do not remain in the body after birth, but, for some reason, occasionally remain in half-blood children of Muggle-born witches. These tumors occur more often in boys than in girls. The Medullaoblongata Potion only has a sixty to seventy percent success rate in males, but less than sixty percent in females. It also limits magical growth of the victim to that of the age when the potion is taken. Most don't reach magical maturity since the tumors are usually discovered anywhere from age three or four, during the first onset of magical manifestation, to those of the age of twenty at best, but the majority are between the ages of five to nine."

"Very good, a text book answer," he said, then pointed to the book. "This one, however, is the Médousa Potion, a little known deviation of the Medullaoblongata Potion, and one that supposedly restores nerofunction without binding the patient's magical growth."

Her eyes darted as she read the potion's ingredients. "It's a very complicated potion."

"It is," he admitted, still amazed at the books compliance. He turned the book around and sat down, opening his journal.

"Are you going to try and brew the Médousa Potion?" she asked, watching him instead of resuming her own work.

"Yes," he replied while scanning his journal. "The potion takes two brewers working in sync. I thought about asking Professor Reynolds to assist me."

"Oh," she sighed, picking up her quill and resuming her writing to cover her look of disappointment.

An hour later, Severus had finished reading the journal.

"I'd like to help you with the potion," she stated, folding up her parchment and putting it away.

"We'll see," he replied noncommittally, not at all sure if her potions skills had improved enough. Intellectually she was brilliant, but he knew she lacked the instinctual affinity for potion brewing.

She huffed and started another essay. He repressed the urge to smirk as she rested her head in her fingertips as she wrote.

When the lower-years bell tolled curfew, she hurriedly packed up her things. "You're leaving?" he asked, annoyed.

"Yes, I have to meet with Ginny and go over our assignment for Transfiguration," she replied.

He reluctantly escorted her to the door.

~H~

Hermione sat at a small cubical in the periodicals section, making notes in one of her journals she'd designated for Severus' mystery. *The sandy-blond wizard didn't look too much older than Severus... Wizards seemed to age slower than Muggles once they reach their twenties – well, based on what I've seen at any rate.* Professors Sinistra and Vector hadn't appeared to age a day from the picture she remembered seeing of them in the old *Daily Prophets* that had announced their employment at the school. *And that was over thirty-five years ago for Professor Vector and twenty-seven for Professor Sinistra.* She picked up the crude Prince family tree she'd made up the night before. What she knew for certain was that Talfryn Prince had two sons: Edgar Albert and John Howard Prince. Under Edgar, she'd written the names Clemet with a question mark and Eileen Snape. Directly under her, was Severus's name. On the right side of the paper, Hermione indicated that John Prince had been married to Frances Maria Griswold and had a son, Charles Osgood. This meant that Clemet and Charles were cousins.

She picked up her quill and dabbed the tip in her inkwell. She'd read the archive articles about Severus' Death Eater trial in 1981 and knew that he was twenty years older than she was. *So that's thirty-eight...* she thought as she jotted down Severus' name and age, and then mentally calculated when he'd have been born. *That would mean he was born in 1960. Severus did indicate that his mum was in her late twenties when she married his dad... Eileen Prince would've been born in the early 1930's, so if she had an older brother who was a toddler when she'd been born...* She wrote 1930 down under Clemet's name with another question mark.

*Charles Osgood was born in 1921 according to Anthelia Wellbegott's article.* She made a quick calculation. *So he'd have graduated Hogwarts either 1938 or 1939. That would be a safe bet to start looking for marriage announcements for Osgood. Some wizarding couples do get married right out of school – especially pure-bloods.*

She walked over to where the old newspapers were kept for the students use and pulled out the thick binder of *Daily Prophets* from 1930. Since her search only included marriage announcements, she used the Word-Search Charm for any variation of the word Prisswell and Osgood to quicken her task. Finding nothing, she exchanged it for the binder that held the papers from 1946.

~S~

A week had gone by since their last evening together, and he wished that he could insist that Hermione revise in his quarters with him, but the bylaws stated that he couldn't. He was seriously tempted to grab her between classes and haul her into an alcove just so he could kiss her.

Friday after breakfast, Severus left the school for a formal meeting with the school governors. Afterwards, and since he was in London and not far from the Ministry, Severus decided to inform Kingsley about the approval of the dates for the Hogsmeade weekends, and to also check into the death of his great uncle in the Ministry archives.

After presenting his wand for registration with the watchwizard and inquiring which level the office was located, he strode to the lifts. When the lift doors opened, he walked down the corridor, looking for the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office. He stood before the door a passing clerk had pointed out to him. The two plaques on it read:

## Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office of the Magical Licenses and Certificates Department

### Magical Licenses and Certificates Department

#### Muggle Marriage Assistance Program

He took a deep breath, drawing himself up to his full height and carefully putting his most stringent professor demeanor in place before he opened the door and walked in. He fully expected to be confronted by Mrs. Whitmire about his impending Bonding forms before she'd acquiesce to his request. To his surprise, the chair behind her desk was empty. He glanced at the table where the three magical ledgers sat with the magical quills poised at the ready, wondering if he'd been declared dead when Hermione reversed the Inferius on him.

"I'm Roberta Shelton; may I help you, sir?" a kindly woman asked, walking out from behind a patrician.

"Possibly," Severus replied, relieved to see the elderly lady. "I am Professor Severus Snape. I would like to inquire about the cause of death of a relative."

To his relief, Mrs. Shelton smiled. "Mrs. Whitmire is not here at the moment, but I should be able to assist you. Who is the person in question, and do you know the date of his or her death?"

He handed her the copy of the *Daily Prophet* with John Prince's obituary. "His name is John Howard Prince. His brother, Edgar Albert Prince, was my grandfather."

"Oh, this makes things so much easier," she exclaimed, after looking at the front cover of the paper. "If you'll have a seat," she said, indicating the chairs behind the patrician, "I'll be right back with the ledger for that decade."

Severus smiled and nodded, watching the woman disappear through a door. The plaque on her desk matched the second one on the door:

### Mrs. Roberta Shelton

#### Magical Licenses and Certificates Department

#### Muggle Marriage Assistance Program

Several framed pictures on the two bookshelves, one beside him and the one behind the desk, showed Mrs. Shelton posing with various members of wizard society, including the last four Ministers, the last two Heads of the MLE, and with the various members of the Obliviators office, one apparently from a farewell party. *Robbie, you will be greatly missed,* was written on the frame by Mr. Aguilar. *So she'd worked for the Head of the Obliviators office...* In another picture, she was with four ladies, all of them wearing ridiculous hats, one lady he recognized as Maybelline Quirk, Kingsley's secretary.

"Here we are, Professor Snape," Mrs. Shelton said as she entered the office space and took her seat, completely nonplused to see Severus looking at her photographs. Severus sat across from her and waited. "You wanted to know his cause of death, am I correct?"

"Yes, please," Severus said with a slow nod that went unnoticed as Mrs. Shelton scanned through the ledger.

"Yes, here it is: John Howard Price." She looked up, her smile now replaced with a look of sympathy. "According to the ledger, he died of heart failure. There was no apparent investigation; the ledger says he died of 'natural causes.' I hope that brings you some comfort."

Severus nodded. "It does, thank you." He considered inquiring after Miss Prisswell or Charles Osgood, but since he didn't know Miss Prisswell's full name, or if it was her real name, and he knew nothing yet about Mr. Osgood, he changed his mind and rose to leave. "I appreciate your assistance."

Mrs. Shelton rose to see him out properly. "It was my pleasure."

Out in the corridor, Severus checked his watch. Lunch would be over at the school, and Hermione would be attending her lessons by now. Deciding he wanted answers, but not ready to involve the Aurors yet, lest they arrest Miss Prisswell, he decided to visit Talfryn after a brief visit to Kingsley.

~H~

Hermione sighed in relief as she finished the last line of her essay for Transfiguration. She read it over one last time, catching a few errant commas and correcting a comma into a semicolon and then placed it in her folder on top of her completed History of Magic essay. She glanced at her watch and smiled. She still had over an hour left of her revision time before dinner. After putting her books on the trolley, she went to retrieve one of the binders of old *Prophets*. So far she'd already exhausted the ones from the 1930's and 1940's, had read through the ones from 1950 to 1953, and was a quarter of the way through the 1954 issues. She pulled the binder for 1954 off the shelf with both hands and returned to her table.

Finally, in a June 1954 issue, Hermione found a marriage announcement squeezed between the article introducing Tilden Toots new radio program, *Toots, Shoots 'n' Roots*, on the Wizarding Wireless Network and the Aethonan race results.

Charles John Osgood married Aledora Wrentall this last Saturday, the thirteenth of April, in Devonshire.

She used the Replication Charm to copy the announcement on a piece of parchment, writing down the date and the issue number, as if using it for a reference for an essay, and continued her search.

As the bell tolled for the end of the last lesson, Hermione's Word-Search Charm highlighted the name Osgood in bright yellow. The tiny announcement squeezed between two articles read:

John Talfryn Osgood was born to the proud parents Charles and Aledora Osgood this last Monday morning at three-thirty, the seventh of May in Sturminster Newton, Dorset.

She turned to the front page and smiled. It was a Thursday issue from November 1954. *That was fast... Only five months!* She copied down the announcement and the reference information and then packed her things to go get ready for dinner.

~S~

Miss Prisswell scowled at Severus when she opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

"I was nowhere in the neighborhood and decided to drop in on my great-grandfather. Now move aside, please, and let me enter," he said, walking past her into the house. "Has he had his lunch?"

She closed the door and followed him to the stairs. "It's not a good time for him to receive visitors," she stated with hesitation in her voice.

"I'm not a visitor, Madam, I'm a relative. That's the inconvenience of having relatives – they stop by on occasion unannounced," he said with a smirk. He noticed Miss Prisswell make a quick worried glance to the left, down the main hall.

Severus paused, watching her, then turned and walked purposefully down the corridor to the kitchens. He stopped to glance quickly into the first room. His great-grandmother's parlor with its large windows and gauzy curtains under the fringed, cinnamon velveteen drapes was exactly as he'd remembered it: the hand-carved chairs with the light peach diamond-tacked velvet cushions with the intricate hand-embroidered throw pillows, the matching lounge by the window, the pianoforte and the harp both protected under a drape. The silver candelabras still had their crystal Bobeches on each tapered candle. It was apparent that the room was still in use, most likely by Miss Prisswell, although it looked like it hadn't been dusted for a while.

"Mr. Snape, really I must insist..." Miss Prisswell said.

Severus walked away, stopping to look in the dining room. The green taffeta drapes were drawn, making the room dark, and the Hepplewhite furniture on the green Persian rug was shrouded with sheets. The room was obviously unused and had been for some time, judging by the layer of dust.

"What is it you need?" the irritating woman asked, trailing after him as he walked into the kitchens.

Unlike the other two rooms, the kitchen was bright, warm, and spotless. "A glass of water," Severus stated, rounding on the woman who recoiled at the coolness of his tone.

A very old house-elf walked around the scrubbed wood cooking island, using a well-worn stick for a cane and holding a glass of water in his shaking hand. "Your water, sir," the old elf croaked as if straining to speak at all.

"Thank you," Severus said and quickly accepted the glass from the unsteady elf.

When the old elf bowed, the cane slipped, and Severus reached down his hand to steady the creature lest he fall. "Dustin is good, sir. Dustin will wipe up the water, sir," he grumbled as he slowly ambled back behind the counter.

"That one is completely useless," Miss Prisswell stated with a snort.

Severus glared at her. "If you think so," he said sharply and turned to go back to the stairs. When Miss Prisswell made to follow him, he added, "I have no need of your assistance," curtly.

She huffed in indignation, and he left, moving slowly so as to double check the rooms he passed. Nothing seemed out of place, but he couldn't be certain. When Severus entered Talfryn's bedroom, Pepper was shaving the old man. "You're back," Talfryn stated.

"Yes," Severus replied, sitting in the chair by the bed. He smirked when he noticed that Pepper was using a butter knife instead of a razor. She laughed nervously and wiped the rest of the magical depilatory shaving foam off the old man's jaw. "You're looking better," he said when Pepper scrambled off the bed.

"I have good days and bad days. This is a good day," Talfryn said and folded his hands. "So, what brings you by?"

"Concern." Severus turned his head to the side and back when the old wizard snorted. "Maybe I just wanted to see you."

"I'm not changing my will," the old man grumbled.

Severus laughed. "I'm not expecting you to." Talfryn's gaze snapped to meet Severus'. "Hermione found an article in an old *Daily Prophet* that made me curious. I hope you don't think me impertinent, but it concerned my grandfather's brother, John Howard Prince." When Talfryn didn't answer, he continued. "According to what Hermione found, apparently he'd married a young witch and then he'd died of natural causes, but there may have been a question regarding his widow's son."

The old man's eyes narrowed and his frown lines deepened. "Oh, that old nonsense," he said dismissively with a wave of his hand. "Why ask me?"

Severus shrugged. "Curiosity about my mother's family. Mum rarely spoke about you and never mentioned she had a brother. I now find out she may have had a cousin as well. Certainly you can understand my curiosity about him."

"How did your wife ever find that old... What was she doing digging through old papers?" Talfryn asked, trying to avoid answering.

Severus smirked slightly before replying, "She is very thorough with her studies and likes doing research. But I admit the article was quite intriguing. It strongly suggested that the boy was John Prince's – not Thomas Osgood's, the woman's second husband."

Talfryn glowered at him and then relaxed. "Might as well tell you. My son John married Francis Griswold on one of the coldest Decembers ever, but he became ill and died before the Ides of March. The girl remarried not even a month later, which should tell you what sort she was. Her son was born late November sometime, if I recall correctly. She came by here once, showing me his birth announcement and claimed it was John's. Hogswallop if you ask me, the boy was registered as Osgood in the Birth Registration ledger in the Magical Marriage and Birth Registration Office, Charles John Osgood. But that insolent boy started calling himself Prince, if you can believe that. Even tried to register at Hogwarts as Prince, but I put a stop to it. Not that Thomas Osgood amounted to much. Joined up with that Dark Lord – same one you bowed to until you came to your senses. Think he was killed by him, too."

"What is Charles Osgood doing now?" Severus asked, effectively concealing his surprise that Hermione was right. At least about the boy.

Talfryn was quiet for several seconds. "I don't know... Why?"

He thought about it for a minute. "What about my mother's brother? I saw a picture of my Grandmother holding an infant with a toddler at her side."

"Charles? He's a ne'er-do-well – gambles at the races. I tossed him out soon after Delphinine died. She doted on the boy," Talfryn said with a frown. "Edgar tried to keep a tight hand on him, but it didn't do any good."

"Where is he now?" Severus asked, surprised both at the name and that his great-grandmother had favored her grandson so.

"Last I knew he was living somewhere in Devon," Talfryn stated and started to cough. Pepper appeared and handed him a small cup, smiling at Severus when Talfryn drank the potion. "So when will I meet this witch of yours?" he asked, handing the elf back the cup.

"Whenever you feel up to it," Severus said softly as he thought about the information Talfryn had given him. He hadn't expected to learn that his uncle was named Charles, not Clemet. But it was a bit of a coincidence that Charles possibly lived in the same area as the Osgoods.

"What?"

Severus turned his head in the old man's direction and spoke a bit louder, "Whenever you like. But it will have to be a weekend. She's in school."

"Well, bring her soon. I'm dying and want to meet her before I go," Talfryn stated, settling back against his pillows and gripping his bed covers over his chest.

Severus smirked slightly. Even he could see the old man was doing better. "I'll bring her tomorrow if you like."

"That will be fine," Talfryn stated and laced his fingers together. "So, tell what you've been doing with yourself when you're not punishing children."

Severus refrained from rolling his eyes, but didn't stop the quirk of his lip. *Of course the old man knows of my reputation.* He told him about his latest potions experiments.

~H~

"Where are we going?" she asked for the fourth time. He was being extremely tightlipped, saying only that they had an appointment. His note that morning with her present had been just as cryptic:

*Meet me at the Entrance hall at one.*

Wear the enclosed.

SS

"You will see shortly," he replied this time, opening the school gate for her.

Her present was the robes she had on under her black cloak, beautiful robes in a rich, creamy topaz edged with intricate dark topaz stitching that nearly took her breath away. Even Ginny had been impressed when Hermione had opened the box after breakfast. The robes were a tad loose, but it was cut on the bias, which made it hug her body regardless, and the scooped neckline was modest.

Taking her arm, Severus Apparated with her, arriving on the overgrown lawn amidst a tangle of various magical plants, flowers and herbs. Hermione grasped Severus' arm tightly to steady herself for a moment and take in her surroundings. Large, bushy hedges, straggly trees and a low rock wall surrounded what may have been a rather nice garden once. There was even a pond and a water fountain. She turned around and gazed at the large, three-storied, grey stone, Queen Anne house and then looked up at Severus. "Where are we?"

"Yorkshire," he stated and guided her to the door.

She wished he'd tell her what this was all about, but he refused to answer any questions, remaining tightlipped and distant. However, Hermione was completely taken aback when the witch from the memories in the Pensieve opened the door.

"You're back again so soon?" she asked, clearly annoyed to see Severus. "And who is this? He's not—"

"This is my wife. We are expected," Severus said, pushing the door open and ushering Hermione to enter.

Hermione was struck by his statement. *Prince – his great grandfather!? Of course, this is his house!* He stood behind her as she looked around the main foyer. A grand staircase faced her. To the left down the main hall, she could see a parlor or drawing room and beyond that what could be a dining room, and the entry to what looked like a kitchen. To the right, the hall passed through what looked like a formal lounge and ended at double doors.

"Your cloak," Severus said, placing his hands on Hermione's shoulders.

She let him help her with her cloak, and smiled slightly at the look on Miss Prisswell's face as he handed her their cloaks. The witch was quite unassuming in person, very thin, almost bony, but it was her eyes that unnerved Hermione; there wasn't any of the warmth or kindness one would expect to see in a Healer in Miss Prisswell's cool, blue eyes.

"This way, Hermione," Severus said, indicating the stairs.

"He's not fit to receive visitors," the witch stated, tossing their cloaks on a chair instead of hanging them up properly in the coat closet.

"I'm not a visitor, Miss Prisswell, I'm family," Severus said in a low, smooth tone that made Miss Prisswell purse her lips in annoyance. "We are here at Mr. Prince's request."

Hermione smirked at his statement. *Request? So this is at Mr. Prince's request – not because Severus wanted to introduce me?*

He made a slight shove with the hand resting on her lower back. "Hermione, after you. Straight up and to the right."

Hermione nodded and proceeded up to the master suite, several questions quickly passing through her mind. The door opened, and Pepper bowed deeply before moving aside. "Master is waiting on you for his tea, Sir, Miss."

The room was huge, dominated by a large bed with amber and topaz drapes. A soft amber damask lined the walls with white painted wainscoting, wood moldings and corbels, and Victorian wall decorations. The furniture and marble mantle were all white with touches of gold, and the tables had marble tops. A large mirror in a gilded frame with large candle sconces on either side hung over the mantel, and another gilded mirror hung over a vanity table between twin candelabras. Even the ceiling was decorated with a mural with a crystal chandelier in the center.

"Well I haven't all day for you to gawk at my bedroom," a gruff voice said, drawing Hermione's attention to the three chairs by the fireplace. A hand on a thin arm stuck out from the chair facing away from her and waved impatiently for her to approach. "Come here. I want to see you."

She walked over to the chairs and peered at the old man sitting comfortably with a throw blanket tucked around him for warmth. He resembled Severus: a long face, large nose, and intense, dark brown eyes. He had large ears and fuller lips though.

He was sizing her up as well, his gaze sweeping over her slowly. "I see you're wearing my favorite color. It looks good on you."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, sitting in the seat across from him. The moment Severus sat in the seat to her right, Pepper arrived with a tea tray, loaded with all types of delicate foods and sliced fruits.

"So, are you that Hermione Granger I read about?" Mr. Prince asked, accepting a cup from the elf without taking his eyes off Hermione.

"Er, possibly, I'm not sure what you mean by 'read about.' But I am – was Hermione Granger," she replied.

"Harry Potter's friend. The one that broke into the Ministry and fought that Voldemort wizard, then broke into Gringotts and rode a dragon out, fought in the war, and all the other stuff."

"Yes," she said, lowering her cup to her saucer and glancing quickly at Severus. "That would be me. Although the *Daily Prophet* has on occasion li – exaggerated the truth a bit. However, *The Quibbler's* accounts of Harry and my activities are generally accurate." Severus only smirked as he sipped his tea.

"The *Daily Prophet* lies, has for years," Mr. Prince stated with a scowl. "So you tell me how it was different. Did you or did you not ride a dragon?" Pepper placed a small sandwich on the old wizard's saucer, and Talfryn shoved it in his mouth as he watched her expectantly.

Hermione told him a brief account of what actually happened in Gringotts. Mr. Prince then wanted to hear about the incident in the Ministry her fifth year and the counter spell she'd discovered to reverse the Inferius curse. He asked her about her classes and her friendship with Harry and Ron. Apparently he'd read quite a lot about her, and she was amazed at how sharp his memory was. Hermione began to relax as she answered his questions, finding his interest in her to be honest curiosity and his gruff nature somewhat charming.

Miss Prisswell entered the room to give him his afternoon potions only to be summarily dismissed by the old man. "I've got company. My grandson knows potions; he can give them to me," he snapped, which irritated the witch.

Pepper smiled apolitically to Severus and ran to retrieve the bottles from the bedside table.

"So, are you and my great-grandson going to have children?" he asked when Severus measured out a dose of a potion into his cup.

Hermione had nearly choked on her tea at the blunt question. "Not right now – I'm in school. Severus and I have only discussed this once." She glanced at him hoping he'd agree.

"Should we decide to have children, it will be a few years," Severus said, handing Mr. Prince his cup with his next dose as Pepper handed Severus the next bottle.

Mr. Prince swallowed the potion, scowling at him. "Don't wait too long or I won't be around to see them." His gaze snapped to Hermione's. "You going to marry him or just remain Bonded?"

She covered her mouth as she swallowed the bite of sandwich she'd just taken. "We're undecided."

"Well, if you do before I die, you can have it here," he stated. He looked up at Severus as he handed the old man his next potion. "You couldn't do better. She's too young, but smart, and I like her spunk."

"Thank you," Severus replied, sitting down. "I agree with you, but the Moon-song Spell matched us so she's stuck with me."

The old man laughed, which ended up in a hacking cough. "Read about that, too."

"Mr. Prince, if I may, I'd really like to know a bit about you," Hermione said, hoping to learn more about the wizard.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, eating a piece of fruit Pepper had speared on a toothpick and placed on his saucer.

Hermione smiled at the man. "Did you attend Hogwarts, and what did you do, I mean, did you work?"

Mr. Prince smiled at her and sighed. "Yeah, I worked. I was the owner and chief executive wizard of the Tweedales and Pepperell Mill for producing magical fabrics. I married Delphininea Pepperell right out of school and went to work for her father. When John Pepperell, of Howard & Pepperell died, Jonathan Tweedle and I went into business together, but he didn't have the head for it like I did. Drank too much. Muggle-borns don't have the resilience to it like us pure-bloods. We were dorm mates, John and I. When he died in 1907, I had three mills producing yarns and textiles for magical clothiers."

Hermione sipped her tea and listened to Mr. Prince tell her about the magical textile industry and why Muggle fabrics didn't do well with Charmed clothing.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

I want to thank, Arabellebloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I

really appreciate it very much.

TPP: Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

In regards to my calculations in this chapter, I did my best, but I admit, maths isn't my strong suit. So if there are errors, forgive me. They are just general ballparks anyway and not really all that substantial to the plot except to show a general age for the Osgoods.

## The Osgood Family Secret

Chapter 37 of 63

Even though Hermione is busy with revision, essays, the translation of cursed Ancient Runes, and very involved, complicated Arithmancy calculations, she still finds time to work on her theory about the Osgoods. Oh yeah, and Rita's at it again.



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### The Osgood Family Secret

*She was in a stone corridor lined with sturdy wooden doors and fallen debris. Huge fireworks and jets of bright lights lit the high ceilings of the corridor, the fireworks replicating themselves with each contact of the misfired spells. Hermione followed the curve of the corridor, keeping tight to the wall to avoid the jets of bright lights shooting around her. She was being followed, and down the corridor ahead of her, the person she sought eluded her, the hem of his dark robes always just at the edge of her line of sight. A loud explosion echoed off the walls around her, followed by another, frightening her.*

*Hermione pressed herself against the nearest door for what little protection it could give her, and she heard an angry voice growling behind the door: "Did you really think that it would be like in the dreams? Or possibly like our first coupling under the influence of your curse? You silly girl, reality rarely is." Hermione staggered backwards in shock, stumbling into another door, and Severus' voice became louder. "Honestly, do you really wish to be married to me? Do you expect me to think that I'm the man you would've chosen to marry? You did this with a spell Dark Magic to be precise. You entrapped me into this where this is the consequence. You are now stuck with me. Deal with it..."*

*She backed away from his voice, saying, "I am," and heard Ron's voice coming from the door behind her.*

*"I don't like it; she was my girl, and he stole her! Snape! And now she's with him. Why him of all people?"*

*Hermione turned around, and Ron suddenly appeared in front of her. "I'll wait for you I still love you," he said, reaching out to her, his eyes moist and pleading with her.*

*"I love you too, Ron," she started to say, but instantly knew that her feelings for him were not the same. "But as a best friend, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen," she said as he turned, but not before she saw the pain and hurt in his blue eyes, and he ran away. "I didn't choose him, Ron! It just happened!" she shouted after him. Too late; he was gone.*

*One of the Chrysanthemum fireworks burst slowly above her with Luna's voice wafting from the center of the explosion, "He's closed like a book you have to open; he has shielded his emotions for so long, he's just hard to read. But, if you're careful, you can peel his guards and masks away; he's willing if only you'd capitulate."*

*"Capitulate?" she asked as the sparkles faded. "Give in surrender unconditionally to this I won't be used!" The last lone spark erupted again with a loud crack, and Hermione crouched to the floor, covering her head. "This is not how it's supposed to be..." she whimpered. "You're supposed to marry the person you are in love with!"*

*When she looked up, Mrs. Longbottom was standing in the corridor behind her. "It doesn't consist of only gazing at each other, but of looking outward together in the same direction. It requires sincerity, respect, and trust. It can move you, but cannot be unless you are willing to surrender your resistance and give into it unconditionally," Mrs. Longbottom said and disappeared through the wall as if a ghost.*

*"What does?" Hermione shoved open the nearest door to follow her and saw Severus in the room, treading through the water of the pond in the rain towards her, his dressing robe open and trailing behind him. She stared at him, unable to move, taking in the sight of his naked body glistening with raindrops. Her breathing hitched as her eyes fell on his engorged penis protruding from his dark pubic hair just above the water. She glanced up at him and inhaled sharply. His gaze on her was feral, radiating overmastering sexual desire and pure unrelenting determination...*

*She yanked the door closed and heard Ginny's voice coming through the wood, "I know it's Severus Snape, but really, the spell wouldn't have matched you if you weren't compatible. He'll come around and things will be fine."*

*"It hasn't been fine he doesn't even like me. Okay, maybe that's not true anymore... but he doesn't love me, and I won't be used as his sex toy!" she shouted at the door and backed away. Turning to run, she saw Severus standing in the corridor in his teaching robes, smirking at her. "I don't know what you want of me. You kept pushing me away telling me to get an annulment then not to, and now you want me with you. What do you want?" she shouted at him, moving backward.*

*"I have not asserted my husbandly rights on you even though you are my Bonded mate," Severus said smoothly, moving forward, matching her step for step. "As you are well aware, I have respected your wishes in every way while you deny me mine."*

"Your rights?" she asked, shocked. A bright red jet of light shot by her head, and she ducked.

He stepped forward again, closing the gap between them. "The comforts of dwelling together in the same habitation, eating meals at the same table, as well as asserting my right to intimacies... Yes, Hermione, my rights." Another jet of spell light shot past them, barely missing his head. He didn't even flinch.

"But you don't want me ME, Severus. You only want someone to share your your bed..." she stammered, stuttering slightly. A jet of sickly green hit the wall beside her.

"I have you, Hermione. You made the arrangement, which we consummated. In regards to wanting you we're Bonded. You're my wife. Why wouldn't I expect you to be in my bed?" he asked, kicking a large chunk of rock on the floor aside easily with his foot as he moved closer. "And I want to know why." He was so close she could smell the scent of cedar from his robes, mingling with the patchouli and citrus scent of his soap.

"I just can't... I don't," she protested. "You me, I don't just want to have sex..."

His look of surprise was quickly masked. "Sex you're afraid of having sex with me?"

"Sex as opposed to making love," she said to clarify it for him.

"Love?" he asked with a quirk of his brow. "Would you make some bloody sense?"

"You don't love me," she insisted, turning away from him. She saw a man in dark, billowing robes turn the corner, and she hurried after him, but once she rounded the corner, she faced a dead end. Outside the window, the rain continued to pour, making streaks like tears on the glass panes.

She turned back, wondering where she was, and saw George leaning against the wall. "I know that magically aligned unions can go through a rough period, but usually the couples work things out, and in the end they generally turn out well," he said with a sympathetic smile. "I think things are better than you think they are." He stood up and walked through a door before she could ask him how he knew.

She tried to follow him, but the door was locked. She jerked on the latch with no avail. To her amazement, the cracks between the wood panels formed two eyes and a mouth and spoke. "I'm just two and two that make one. I am warm I am cold; I am lawful I am unlawful. A duty, a fault, a pleasant surprise, I am often sold dear. Good for nothing when bought; an extraordinary boon, a matter of course, and yielding with pleasure when taken by force."\*

Amidst the sounds of the fireworks, the explosions, and an owl hooting outside her window, she could hear the sound of the heavy patter of rain and the taps of a beak on glass as she pondered the riddle. "A kiss," she finally told the door.

"Don't mind if I do," Severus said in her ear from behind her, his voice silky and resonant. Strong arms wrapped around her waist, and warm lips nipped softly on her neck. She could hear the sound of her heart blending with the patter of the rain and the dull hum of a hairdryer. "Tell me to stop or tell me yes," Severus asked as he kissed her above the shoulder strap of her pajama top. His fingers slipped underneath the fabric of her pajamas as he explored her body leisurely, and she moaned with pleasure from his touch. "It won't be bad, Hermione. It will just take some adjustment to get used to each other. Given time you may even come to like this."

"You'll have to be careful in your relationship with these boys, Hermione," her mother said, standing beside them.

Still held firmly in Severus' embrace, Hermione turned her face to her mother. She felt ashamed to be caught in such an intimate situation. "Mum?" Severus' hands never relented; one hand slid down into her pajama pants, the other holding her firmly to his groin, his penis hard against her back, and his mouth was doing unbelievable things to the skin just below her ear.

"Sex is not love, Hermione, and there cannot be love without respect. You will have to think very carefully about what you want. Men don't marry women who give in to them so easily," her mother said and walked away with a disappointed look. "Why buy the cow if you're getting the milk for free."

Hermione reached out for her, crying out, "Mum, wait... I haven't!" as Severus' fingers stroked her clit, making her knees buckle.

The owl tapped on the window again, this time more insistently.

"Maybe we should check on her?" Wendlynne asked, and a bit of bright light made Hermione turn her head.

"No, let her sleep. She came in late last night, and she does have a free period before Herbology," Alestra said softly. "Besides, it sounds like she's having *good* dream."

*Herbology? Monday?* her sleep fogged mind asked.

"But she never lies in," Deborah said.

"When is...? Wh-hawt time?" Hermione asked as she rolled over, yawning.

"Hermione, I'm sorry to wake you," Wendlynne said, still holding one side of her bed hangings open.

Hermione sat up abruptly and stared at the girl. "What time is it?" The events of her evening came crashing down on her. She and Severus had stayed with Mr. Prince for at least two hours, maybe longer. Afterwards, Severus had taken her to the hillside of a lovely valley overlooking a lake. They had walked all the way to a quaint little village, identifying various plants and talking about which clubs she'd like to join and what projects she might try. They had enjoyed a leisurely dinner in a small inn, then had taken a stroll along the country road and had drinks in a local pub.

Afterwards, very late in the evening, Severus had Apparated them to the gates of the school. They had walked in relative silence through the castle, all the way up to the seventh floor, and stopped in front of the gargoyle. When Hermione had wished him goodnight, Severus had insisted that she go up to his rooms, which she'd protested, stating that it was late and she had school work to do. She'd hated the way his expression had become stony, hated it even more that he'd crossed his arms, remained silent, and had just stared at her.

"I really do have work to do that has been put off all day to spend it with you."

"Which I have stated you can do in my sitting room," he persisted. "I will even help procure the books you need..."

"I'll spend what time I can with you around my revision schedule..." she started to say, then paused.

He stood watching her at the top of the stairs with his arms crossed. "Fine. Go," he finally said, holding his hand out, indicating the way to her common room with his hand.

She'd hesitated as she decided what she wanted to do. Even the gargoyle had looked impatient with her. She had finally relented to stay for a while longer and followed him upstairs. He had opened his door, allowed her to enter, and then had followed her up to his sitting room. They had sat in silence for a while, and Hermione had tried several times to engage him in conversation, but he'd resorted to his usual avoidance to her questions or had given only minimal answers. So, she'd started going through the copies of the *Daily Prophet* he still had stacked on his coffee table while he had read another what had looked like this morning's paper, not an old one. When she'd had



enough, she had risen to leave. He had walked her to the door and opened it for her, but he hadn't tried to kiss her. It had been awkward as she had stood there, stared at him in anticipation, and wondered if he would but he hadn't. And as much as she'd tried to concentrate on her essay in the common room afterwards instead of why he hadn't kissed her, her mind had kept wandering to why he'd been so petulant that night.

"Well, it's six thirty; if you don't hurry, you'll miss breakfast...", Wendlynne stated.

"Thanks, Wendlynne," Hermione said as she scrambled from her bed and quickly dressed. She picked up her revision guide off her bedside table and checked her watch. She had an hour break after breakfast. *Blake said something about Quidditch practice, I think... I might catch him at breakfast and ask* She looked up. Ginny's bed was empty. *Probably already at breakfast* She wondered briefly what Harry and Ron were doing today. She packed what she'd need in her bag and hurried off for the Great Hall.

\*

Severus walked to breakfast in a foul mood. Not only did it seem that he was losing ground with Hermione instead of wooing her, his inquiry into the identity of the blond wizard he'd seen in Ashton Foulkes' memory was at a standstill. Or at least it seemed that way.

The wizard Lucius had identified as Clemet King or Clement Richfield, he now assumed was his mother's brother, Charles Prince, and there was a definite family resemblance. The location of Charles' last known address matched the same general location of the Osgoods, so it wasn't too much of a stretch to believe that they knew each other, especially considering what Severus knew of the man. Charles Prince, aka Clemet, and the blond wizard were definitely involved in the poisoning of his great-grandfather. That could only mean the men were after the Prince family estate, assuming of course that Talfryn still had money. At one time the Prince family had been quite wealthy. Who knew if the old wizard still was? Although, Severus was willing to assume he was.

The thing was the blond wizard looked younger than Charles John Osgood, the son of John Howard Prince, more like Severus' own age if not slightly older. It was possible that Charles Osgood had a son very possible.

Severus decided that he'd just have to ask Minerva for the school register for the 1940s and see if his uncle and Charles Osgood attended Hogwarts, and while he was at it, check the 1960s register to if there was any other wizard with the name Osgood. He couldn't recall anyone by the name Osgood in his year...or the year above his... and definitely not in Slytherin while he'd been a student. There was a girl in Hufflepuff who had been a second-year when he'd started teaching... but whether she had a brother or not should be easy enough to check on.

Severus neared the first floor landing of the marble staircase and watched as Hermione dodged through the students on the landing ahead of him, rushed down the stairs, and hurried over to a group of young men in the Entrance Hall. She came to an abrupt halt next to Mr. Blume and touched his arm. Severus watched from his vantage point at the top of the stairs, suppressing a feeling of jealousy as Mr. Blume turned, smiled, and touched her arm in response. The young men shifted to allow Hermione room in their little group as she and Mr. Blume spoke. Severus clenched his jaw upon seeing Mr. Blume's expression and how very intent he was toward *his* wife.

He couldn't see Hermione's face, but, by the body language of the four boys, all four of them were apparently on friendly terms with his wife. In fact, he'd seen her with Mr. Blume and Mr. Carlin a few times in the Revision Hall and several times working with Mr. Blume in the library, sitting with their heads close too close in his opinion. Mr. Blume nodded and looked up at his friends. Mr. Stewart shook his head, and Mr. Carlin laughed, shaking his head.

Hermione nodded, and Mr. Blume placed his hand on her lower back briefly, his body language indicating that she go with him. The other boys parted to allow her to pass and then closed behind Mr. Blume and Hermione to follow them...

"Excuse me, Headmaster," a female voice said as the owner of said voice scurried around him, taking his attention off Hermione for a second.

"Stop running in the corridors, Miss Wellington," he barked, making several students stop and stare or slow their own progress. "Five points from Ravenclaw." When he looked down into the Entrance Hall again, Hermione was gone. Severus ground his teeth in annoyance. He was certain that she hadn't gone down the stairs to the dungeons; she didn't have Potions until tomorrow, which meant that she had gone outside with the boys. Scowling, he walked purposefully for the front doors. Hermione did not have Herbology at this hour, and she didn't take Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid had lessons lower years, he believed so she wasn't going there. No, Hermione had gone out onto the grounds with those boys.

By the time he stepped through the oak doors and reached the top of the stairs to the school grounds, Hermione was nowhere to be seen. Cursing silently, he turned heel, his robes flaring out, making contact against the ankles of several students, and he strode purposefully for his office.

Back in his office, Severus stood at the window, staring out at the grounds. There were small groups of students sitting on the grass and a few students tossing a Frisbee. One of the house teams was tossing the Quaffle on the Quidditch pitch, but he didn't see any sign of Hermione there. Besides, he knew that she wasn't overly fond of Quidditch; her friends were, and Gryffindor had not booked the pitch.

Severus barked for Mисpy, asking the elf to bring him tea and toast.

~\*~

Hermione sat crossed-legged on one of the benches in the bailey after her last class, enjoying the sunshine that pierced through the gaps of the leaves of the camellia bushes. She opened up her revision guide and pulled out her folder. She thumbed through the essays, making sure they were ready to turn in as she checked off her completed assignments in her guide. That done, she looked to see when her other assignments were due, mentally prioritizing which one she should work on next. *Charms*, she decided, closing her revision guide.

Ginny had wanted to work on their Charms assignment together, but Ginny, Wendlynne, and Veronica were in the Revision Hall on the fourth floor. Hermione still preferred the solitude and quiet of the library. The noise level of the Revision Hall could rival the noise of the Great Hall during meals, even with the dampening charms, the thick tapestries that hung on the walls, and rugs on the stone floor. It was also rather crowded in the evenings since friends from different houses could mingle there. Shrugging, she collected her things and headed for the Revision Hall, hoping that it wouldn't be too noisy.

She was getting used to the furtive glances from the other students and ignored the way they stopped talking when she approached. Rita Skeeter had made another jab at her and Severus in her weekly column in the *Daily Prophet*. Maggie Whitmire had obligingly verified that she and Severus had yet to sign her forms, saying that *the Minister's extension for the request of annulment or for signing the necessary confirmation to validate the couples' Bonding is still in effect, and as such, I am unable to bring this matter to a close.* Rita had taken great pleasure in expounding on the *undefined period of time* she and Severus had been granted *to resolve personal issues* and had made broad speculations about her relationship with Severus.

She'd even pointed out to the entire wizarding world that she and Severus were not sharing living quarters: she living in the Gryffindor dorm and he in the Headmaster's suite. Rita had quoted precedence which allowed Hermione to live with Severus, but Hermione already knew them, having looked them up in the library on her own.

Blanche Dakdduk, one of the Hogwarts School Governors, had indicated that the Headmaster was very tight-lipped regarding his intentions toward Mrs. Granger-Snape, but had indicated that he was allowing Hermione to decide if she wanted to reside with him or not she also stated that she was pleased that he was allowing her to finish her schooling before asserting his rights. Ursula Waddlesworth, another member of the Hogwarts School Governors, had simply stated that the issue was 'tabled until they heard otherwise from the Headmaster,' but that Severus had 'made it quite clear his desire to have his Bonded mate live with him in the Headmaster's tower.' Rita's comments on the quote had made Hermione look like an insolent, spoiled school girl, afraid of her Bonded mate.

Thankfully, according to Rita, Minister Kingsley had refused to comment as had Harry, Ron or Mr. Weasley.

The most disturbing quote was from a 'fellow student and friend of Mrs. Granger-Snape,' which said that Hermione had been seen in the library lately with Blake Blume in 'a

rather cozy manner' as well as having 'shown interest' in Lawrence Carlin or Dean Thomas all of which were utter lies. She and Blake were still partnered for Ancient Runes, Lawrence and she were currently partners in Arithmancy on some very involved and complex calculations, and Dean was merely a friend. However, Rita had extrapolated on the rumor, even bringing up her past 'flirtations' with Harry, Ron, Viktor, and more recently with George and Draco Malfoy.

Hermione was certain that Severus would be furious about the article, but hoped that he didn't think she was the least bit interested in Blake, Lawrence or Dean.

When Hermione entered the huge Revision Hall, it took a moment for her to spot her friends all the way in the far corner. She hurried over and sat down next to Ginny.

"Have you seen the assignment board for Potions? You and I are brewing Polyjuice and Verso-Quixotically Potions. Should be easy for us right? You've already brewed Polyjuice," Ginny said.

"I'm surprised that Professor Reynolds gave us those two," Hermione said and quickly greeted Wendlynne and Veronica.

"I'm not; the Verso-Quixotically Potion uses some of the same ingredients, and it's a really tricky potion. Have you seen it?" Ginny asked, pulling a book from her bag.

"You brewed Polyjuice Potion? When?" Veronica asked, gapping at her in astonishment.

"Yes, in my second year," Hermione said as she read over the potion that reversed the effects of the Quixotically Curse. It was tricky, several of the ingredients were class level B Regulated-Tradable Goods, and the acidity would get rather close to melting the cauldron... and both potions would take a month to brew.

"You're joking, right?" Wendlynne asked.

Hermione looked up at the girl.

"Nope, brewed it in a girls' loo," Ginny said and laughed softly. "So, how about it? We can use them as our N.E.W.T. project if you'd like?"

"Well, I was hoping for something a bit more challenging," Hermione stated as she continued to read the directions. What she really wanted to brew was the Médousa Potion with Severus as her N.E.W.T. project.

"But at least we can be partners in Potions Club if you like," Ginny suggested, angling her head to look Hermione.

"Sure, Gin, that would be great." Hermione's finger stopped right after the boomslang skin on Chimaera eggs... a Grade A Non-Tradable Good. She looked up, shocked. She'd never seen any school potions that required a Grade A Non-Tradable Good. "Gin, did Professor Reynolds say why we're doing this one?"

"Yep, he said it would be a challenge for you," Ginny said with a huge grin, "and I can't wait to give it a go."

"Did you know that your article about reversing the Inferius was in *The Quibbler*?" Veronica stated, showing Hermione the article, clearly impressed.

Hermione looked up and sighed at the picture on the page. It was taken at St. Mungo's at some point when she'd been about to enter a lift. The image of herself turned her head to face the camera as she walked as if someone had called her name, but Hermione couldn't recall the picture being taken.

"My mum wrote me; she saw your paper in her Charms journal as well as in the Healers' journal," Veronica stated, taking the paper back.

"That was fast," Wendlynne stated, "but then it is you, right? The famous Hermione Granger, er, Snape. Even the *Daily Prophet* had an overview of your success. 'Course that was on page four Miss Skeeter's article about your refusal of your Bonded mate made the front page."

"I haven't refused him; I'm just finishing my schooling," Hermione stated, and both Veronica and Wendlynne stared at her. "I haven't."

Ginny turned in her seat to face her squarely. "I've been meaning to ask you how it's going between you two. You were spending more time with him, then you just stopped. What happened?"

"School work you know how much the teachers dump on us it's like they are cramming everything they can on us for our exams," Hermione said, trying to justify why she'd not found time to visit Severus more often. It sounded lame even to her.

"Yeah, just like in our fifth and sixth years," Veronica said. "I'm spending more time in here and the library than with Jeremy."

"Well, why haven't you signed the Bonding papers from the Ministry?" Wendlynne asked, tipping her head slightly.

Hermione sighed. "Severus won't. He said it's he just won't. So it's a moot point, isn't it?"

Veronica's forehead creased, and one side of her mouth twitched. "So you're staying Bonded after all?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's permanent, isn't it there is no way to reverse it. So he's my Bonded mate, for better or worse," she admitted.

"Glad you've come to your senses," Ginny said with a grin and a wink. "So, partners in Potions Club?"

"Only if you'll Partner with me in Charms as well," Hermione said, glad for the change of subject.

"You're on," Ginny stated, pushing the potions book at her. "Now, about the potion. So, should we ask Myrtle if we can use her loo?"

"Very funny, Gin," Hermione replied. "I'd rather use the lab."

~H~

Hermione finished her History essay and put it in her folder, then crossed it off in her revision guide. She was up to date with her assignments, enough to give herself a break. It had been a week. A very busy week. Hermione did manage to find times between her revision to look through the *Daily Prophets* in the library, but not a lot of time. Glancing at her watch, she decided to follow an idea she had regarding the Osgoods.

She did have what she considered a fairly accurate family tree for the Osgoods. John Howard Prince had sired a son with Frances Prince; however, the infant, for some reason, had been registered as Thomas Osgoods' son, Charles John Osgood. Charles, apparently knowing that he was John Prince's son, named his own son John Talfryn Osgood after his grandfather, John Prince, and great-grandfather, Talfryn Prince. It couldn't be plainer; Charles knew he was related to the Prince family and not Osgood's.

She put her things away and went to the section where the old *Daily Prophets* were. She opened the binder containing the *Daily Prophets* from the 1970s, knowing that John Talfryn Osgood was six years older than Severus, so she knew he'd have left Hogwarts either in 1972 or 1973. She used the Word-Search Charm on the name Osgood again to save time. This time the announcement was much larger.

*Mr. and Mr. Draken Graven*

*have the honour of announcing*

*the marriage of their daughter*

*Cedella Wendelline*

*to*

*Mr. John Talfryn Osgood*

*on Friday, the twenty-sixth of June*

*nineteen seventy-six*

*Bellingham Gardens*

*Sturminster Newton, Dorset*

The Gravens for some reason struck a note with Hermione. She remembered that someone named Graven was one of the wizards who testified against Severus at his first trial in 1981, in order to get a lighter sentence for himself. She quickly went and pulled out the heavy binder for the period of Severus' trial and easily found the page. There were many pictures in the *Daily Prophets* during the trials. She flipped through them and found one a picture of a burly wizard, possibly in his late twenties, in chains between four Aurors standing in the center of the courtroom next to Severus, who was bound by the chains of the magical chair in the center of the courtroom. The caption read, *Ludwick Graven, accused Death Eater, testifies to atrocities made by Severus Snape at his trial.*

Using the Word-Search Charm again, Hermione flipped through the papers, looking for any other reference on Ludwick Graven. She located the articles covering his trial.

In one of the pictures of Graven from one of the articles, the picture showed some of the people in the courtroom seats behind the accused. Hermione used the Magnifying Charm on the picture. Just behind Graven was a boy who greatly resembled the stocky, blond haired man from the Pensieve sitting with a young dark-haired witch who somewhat resembled a young, gangly version of... *Miss Prisswell Severus' great-grandfather's Healer? Cedella Wendelline Graven? Not Prisswell an alias* The young girl was wringing a handkerchief in her hands until the wizard next to her reached over and clapped her hands with one of his. The girl looked up, sat straighter and tried to appear more composed. It made her look arrogant in Hermione's opinion.

Just next to the couple sat an older, well-dressed witch, also looking worriedly at the scene before her. The older woman had the same tall, skinny frame, brunette hair with angled facial features of Talfryn's Healer as well. Only, the older witch's facial features were sharper, but her expression, though it was somber, was not as snooty as the younger witch's. Looking down, Hermione read the article, smiling when it mentioned that Ludwick Graven's mother and sister attended his trial.

She looked at the next edition of the paper and saw the article pertaining to Ludwick Graven's sentencing. He'd been convicted, of course, but the scowling glares of both Cedella Graven and John Osgood in the picture above the article showed how very angry they were at the outcome. Beside the girl, his mother was, understandably, slumped in her seat, crying.

Hoping that Madam Pince wouldn't notice, she placed a marker and shrunk the binder the best she could, then shoved it in her bag and did the same with the binder that had the marriage announcement.

Curious about the older woman, she began searching the *Daily Prophets* from the 1950s, starting from the latest issues, for any mention of a Cedella Wendelline Graven. She found three.

The first was a birth announcement for Cedella Wendelline in 1957.

*Cedella Wendelline Graven was born to the proud parents Draken and Wendelline Graven this last Friday evening at nine fifteen, the seventeenth of May in West Yorkshire.*

Next was the birth announcement for Ludwick Hayward Graven from 1952 and finally a wedding announcement for a Miss Wendelline Prisswell to Draken Graven *She is using her mum's maiden name as an alias.* Grinning, Hermione placed markers for the articles, shrunk the thick binder as much as she could and jammed the binder into her bag between her books.

"Hermione. Blimey, girl, I've been looking everywhere for you," Blake said, walking toward her.

Hermione hoped he hadn't seen her putting the shrunken binder in her bag, ever grateful for the Extension and Disencumber Charms she'd placed on her bag. "You've found me. What did you need?" she asked, trying to mask her guilt at possibly being caught stealing the binder.

"Well, I'm done with my essay and thought you'd maybe want to try working on the translation again. I have two hours of free if you have the time." He sounded hopeful in his usual upbeat attitude.

"Sure, I've got about an hour," she replied, shouldering the strap of her bag, and he smiled.

"Great."

They talked about the translation all the way to the Revision Hall. He waved to his friends, guiding Hermione over to them.

Lawrence Carlin smiled and moved some of his things to make room for them. "You found her," he said as Hermione kneeled on the bench.

"In the library," Blake stated, kneeling next to her.

"So, not much of a search then," Eduardo Delgado, Blake's dorm mate, said with a smirk.

"Very funny," Blake sneered and then turned to her. "So, who does the Charm you or me?"

"It's my turn," she replied as she pulled out the parchment. "Ready?"

"Always," he replied, grinning, his wand in his hand.

Hermione cast the charm on the parchment, the soft glow from her wand illuminating a nine-inch circle on the parchment.

"Damn, you're good at it now," Blake said, the shield charm from his wand making her hand warm.

He was mumbling as his Dictation Quill jotted down the runes revealed by the spell, but she forced herself to concentrate on her part of the task. She held the charm in place until she knew that she was starting to read the same lines over again. She disengaged the spell and watched the undulation illusion of the curse fall back into place.

Blake double checked what the quill had written down. "Not bad I've got another five inches of it."

"That's all?" she asked disappointed. She'd hoped for more. "Go again?"

"Sure. Ready?" he asked. The second time he managed to get at least seven inches. "How are you doing?" he asked, looking at her intently as if reading her eyes.

Hermione held up her hand with her fingers fully extended. "No shakes, no blurriness and the light isn't hurting my eyes."

"Wanna stop?" he asked, flexing his wrist.

She shook her head. "We only have six and a half inches to go; we should be able to finish it tonight," she stated.

He looked dubious, but shrugged. "If you think so, but it's not due until Friday," he said. "I have time Thursday night."

Hermione didn't want to put it off so close to the day the translation was due. "No, I'm fine. Let's do one more and then quit," she suggested, hoping it'd be enough. She cast the charm again, holding her wand steady, keeping the tip of her wand four inches off the parchment, making the nine-inch circle of illumination again. Beside her, Blake maintained the shield between her and the funnel-shaped distortion created by her charm and the curse on the parchment. She was determined to hold the charm until he said he'd finished copying down the revealed runes. She could see him from the corner of her eye, mumbling what he saw as the magical quill copied it down for him. Her eyes felt strained, and she was starting to feel the onset of a headache, but they only had two inches to go, so she was determined to finish up the translation.

"Hermione, stop," she heard someone say from somewhere off to her right. "You're starting to shake, stop."

"We can finish this," she wanted to say, but no words came out.

"Hermione," the voice said, "you're not moving, and I've got the translation already. Stop. We have to stop."

From deep inside her she knew the voice was right: she'd been holding on to the charm for too long. With great effort she managed to concentrate on releasing the charm and mentally braced herself for the backlash of the curse. Her head ached now with a dull pounding, and her vision was starting to blur. She could see the magic of the curse lift toward her as the charm faded, but it dropped just an inch from her wand tip, making the parchment seem to undulate and form rings like a large drop of water falling onto the surface of still water.

"Hermione, look at me?"

She set her wand down, and using her thumb and middle finger of her other hand, she rubbed circles around her eyes to relieve the pain. Someone gripped her chin with rough, calloused fingers, turning her head to the side, making her squint at the bright light from the magically illuminated windows. She could barely make out a curly, brown aura around the head of a silhouette in front of a large rectangle of light. "I'm fine," she finally managed to say.

"No, you're not. Open your eyes, Hermione. Can you see me?"

He leaned in close to her, and for a moment Hermione thought that he was going to kiss her. It felt wrong; he didn't smell right. It wasn't an unpleasant odor, just not the spicy and woody smell Severus had, more like leather, musky vanilla, frankincense, and sage, and she tried to pull her head away.

"Hold still," Blake said, sounding to her as if he were talking through a can. "Your eyes are really dilated. I think I should take you to see Madam Pomfrey."

"Don't worry, mate, I'll pack up your stuff," Lawrence Carlin said, sounding to Hermione as if he too was talking in a can.

"Thanks, Lawrence." Blake said. "Give her bag to one of the Gryffindors, will ya?"

"Sure," Lawrence said, and Hermione felt a moment of panic that he'd see the shrunken binders.

Her vision was starting to clear a bit. She was starting to see shadows and forms; she'd be fine in a moment. I can pack up my own stuff, thank you, she wanted to say, but didn't couldn't.

Blake put his arm around her to haul her to her feet. "C'mon, I think we overdid it. Let's get you checked out, all right?"

Hermione nodded, feeling lightheaded now that she was on her feet. She leaned on Blake as they walked because she was feeling really dizzy at the moment, thankful for his strong arm about her waist. She allowed him to maneuver her through the corridor, thankful that he was avoiding colliding with anyone.

Suddenly he stopped, and his arm tightened on her waist to keep her from falling. "Headmaster," he said in mild surprise. "I was just helping her to the hospital..."

"I can take it from here, Mr. Blume." Severus' voice sounded hard and cold, and Hermione cringed. He bent down and swooped her up in his arms, carrying her as if she weighed nothing at all. He smelled right, the soft musk and cedar scent mixed with lemons, mint, and patchouli. Hermione wrapped an arm around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder, trying not to give in to the nausea her dizziness was causing.

When she realized that they had finally reached the hospital wing, Hermione lifted her head. "It's the Bedydrian Curse," she said softly to Madam Pomfrey when she approached them.

"Yes, Professor Botcher informed me that you were working on cursed parchments," Madam Pomfrey stated. "Headmaster, if you'd place her over there, away from the windows."

Severus turned, making Hermione clench her mouth closed and groan as the nausea threatened to make her hurl on him. He set her down on the cot and pulled up a chair. "How long were you and Mr. Blume, I presume, working on the translation?" he asked.

"Maybe forty minutes or more," she replied, thankful for the cool hand he placed on her forehead. She opened her eyes when he took away his hand. "We were almost done with it."

His face was inches away from hers as he stared into her eyes. "You're not too warm. Was it forty minutes straight or in increments?" he asked.

"Increments we were on the third try," she replied. She struggled to sit up as the Healer arrived with her potions, and she swallowed the first dose Madam Pomfrey gave her.

"That will help the nausea and dizziness," Madam Pomfrey said, then cast a series of diagnostic charms on Hermione. She asked her to follow the tip of her wand with her eyes as the Healer moved it slowly side to side. "No apparent trauma." She gave Hermione another potion. "This should help your vision."

When Hermione handed back the cup, the Healer insisted she change into pajamas, then helped her into bed. The matronly woman stood up and handed Hermione a warm eye pillow that smelled heavenly of lavender, chamomile, and a hint of eucalyptus. "Lie back and place this on your eyes. No reading or eyestrain for the rest of the day."

Hermione lay there, trying to let her mind relax, already feeling a little drowsy. "Are you still there?" she asked. She could sense Severus near her, but he wasn't making a sound.

"I'm here," he replied softly.

"Thank you for helping me," she said with a yawn.

He reached down and touched her cheek. "You're welcome. Now rest."

\*

Severus waited until the Sleeping Potion Poppy had added to the Nausea Potion kicked in, then stormed out of the hospital, intending on finding Mr. Blume, furious that the boy had allowed Hermione to hold the curse long enough to nearly blind her. Three months of detention with him would make the boy more cautious in the future.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, Writermerrin, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*In regards to my calculations in this chapter, I did my best, but I admit, maths isn't my strong suit. So if there are errors, forgive me. They are just general ballparks anyway and not really all that substantial to the plot except to show an approximate age for the Osgood and Prince family members.*

*The riddle spoken by the door (indicated by an asterisk) I found somewhere on the internet while searching for another story I wrote, but it worked better here. However, I can't remember where I saw it.*

## Into the Flames

*Chapter 38 of 63*

The answers to Severus' mystery are solved. Severus gets a confrontation from an unknown ally, and Ginny and Hermione jump into action to save a wizard.



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Into the Flames

Hermione woke slowly, still groggy from the effects of the Sleeping Potion she'd taken the night before. She lifted the eye pillow and inhaled the heavenly scent of the lavender, chamomile, and eucalyptus before setting it on the table beside her. She sat up, stretched, and reached for the glass sitting upside-down on the neck of the bedside water decanter, smiling as it magically filled in her hand when she righted it. As if summoned, Madam Pomfrey stepped around her curtain.

"Ah, good, Mrs. Snape, good to see you awake," she said, placing a tray across Hermione's lap.

The smells of the beef and buttered toast made her stomach growl in anticipation. "What time is it?" she asked, slightly disappointed to find the chair by her bed empty.

"It's half past twelve," the Healer replied. "As soon as you eat, you may go."

Hermione was shocked she'd never slept for sixteen hours straight before, even with a sleeping potion. "It was the compress," the Healer explained while removing the cover on the plate. She smiled knowingly, watching as Hermione inhaled the scent of the steam from the freshly baked bread and thick beef stew. "You'll need to use it again tonight, but without the sleeping potion it will not make you sleep as long, although it will give you a very deep sleep. I will have it placed on your bedside table."

"Thank you," Hermione said and began to eat as if starved.

She heard Ginny's questioning, "Hermione?" before her friend's head appeared around the curtain. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. No lingering blurry vision or light sensitivity," Hermione replied and held out her hand. "Nor any shaking."

"Thank Merlin," Ginny said as she plopped herself down on the foot of her bed. "So, any thoughts about what you're going to do?"

Hermione swallowed another spoonful of stew. "Well, I haven't worked out the schedule yet, but I think we can divide the..."

"Not the potions. Severus," Ginny interrupted, laughing.

"Oh my gods, Severus!" Hermione screeched and dropped her spoon. "I have to find him."

"He's still in the Great Hall," Ginny stated.

Hermione scrambled from bed. "I have something to tell him!" She took a big spoonful of stew before she pulled off her pajama bottoms and again when she shrugged out of her top.

Ginny averted her gaze, grinning. "So will you be spending the afternoon with him?"

Hermione took another big spoonful of stew as she hurriedly struggled with her blouse. "I have class, but this is really important." She took another bit of stew, swallowing a bit of potato as she pulled up her skirt and tucked in her blouse. "I wanted to show him last night, but I fell asleep."

Ginny held her robe as Hermione shoveled another spoonful of stew in her mouth and sat down to pull on her sock. "All right, I'm sure if you hurry we can find him."

Hermione had another bite of potato and beef before grabbing the other sock. She stood, ate the last bit of stew, turned and slid her arms into her robe as Ginny pulled it up to her shoulders. "I have to go," Hermione stated, looking for her bag as she slipped her feet into her shoes. "Where's my school bag?"

"Here," Ginny said, handing her her school bag. "I knew you'd need this."

"Thanks," Hermione said as she reached for the bag and hurried for the door, Ginny hot on her heels.

"So what is this all about?"

"I figured out who the Osgoods are," she replied without thinking. Well, she was thinking, she was thinking about the discovery she'd made as she ran.

The corridor was filling quickly with students as they made their way the main staircase. "Lunch is over; maybe we should try the office," Ginny stated, pulling Hermione aside to let some third-years pass. Hermione nodded and rushed over to the stone gargoyle. He bowed and stepped aside for her, and, unnoticed by Hermione, Ginny followed her up the stairs.

The door opened, and she looked up into the startled face of Professor McGonagall. "Mrs. Snape, Mrs. Potter," she replied, opening the door wider.

"Professor. I need to see Severus," Hermione stated, anxious to show Severus her discovery and worried about what it might imply.

Professor McGonagall stared at them for a moment then stepped aside, saying, "All right, but you have lessons to attend. The Headmaster should be down in a minute."

Hermione thanked her as she passed, barely realizing that Ginny also exchanged words with the professor. She quickly walked across the office and up the stairs to the sitting room. Severus turned around and stared at her, or over her; Hermione was too excited to tell as she approached. "I found her."

"Whom?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Miss Prisswell, I think," Hermione replied, setting her bag on the enlarged coffee table desk and taking out the binders of the *Daily Prophets*.

"Now is not a good time," Severus started to say reluctantly, making Hermione turn her head. Ginny was standing not two yards away, watching them with unveiled interest.

"She's my best mate, and this is really important," Hermione said, enlarging the binders to their original size.

"You told her?" he growled out angrily.

"No," Hermione said emphatically as she opened to the first marker. "Look." She used the Highlighting Charm to illuminate the wedding announcement. "John Talfryn Osgood married *Cedella Wendelline Graven*," she said as she opened the 1981 binder. "And there is a picture of her," she stated proudly.

Severus made a quick glance up at Ginny as he bent down to examine the photo in the paper. His brows creased and he stood up, staring blankly at some spot in the room.

"Okay, look," Hermione said, opening the 1952 binder to the marker, hoping that the wedding announcement for Miss Wendelline Prisswell to Draken Graven would convince him. "It's her mum she's using her mum's maiden name."

Ginny had moved closer, and Severus' expression had darkened, but Hermione pressed on. "I have drawn the family tree. Look."

Severus snatched the parchment from her hand and studied it. Hermione reined in her impulse to keep talking, waiting for him to acknowledge she was right. She turned the pages in one of the binders to one of the other markers, waited until he read the announcement she highlighted and then showed him the others she'd marked. He was very quiet when he stood up, his expression blank as he stared into middle space again.

"Hermione, what's going on?" Ginny whispered, drawing Severus from his thoughts.

"That is a private matter, Mrs. Potter," he snapped coolly, his eyes narrowed at her friend.

"Severus, you can't keep everything so closed off. She's my best friend, and I'd have found this a month ago if I'd had her help but your pride and insufferable aloofness..."

"It is a personal matter," he growled lowly, now frowning at Hermione.

"What they're doing is a crime, and it will end up in the paper! Do you really think this is going to remain a carefully guarded secret? I was saved by *Draco*, and it was in the *Daily Prophet* the next morning that I was having an affair with him. I had lunch with George, in public, and Rita reported it as an affair same as the time when I was seen this summer sitting in the Leaky Cauldron with Ron. I'm partnered with Blake Blume for Ancient Runes and with Lawrence Carlin in Arithmancy, and Rita reported that I'm skirting around on you with both of them," she rattled off, trying to make him see reason. "Do you really think that something this juicy will not end up front page news in *Daily Prophet*?"

"It can be kept out of the *Daily Prophet*," he stated, crossing his arms.

"Don't be stubborn *everything* we do is in the paper just as *everything* we don't do is in the paper! Even that I... I..."

"What?" he asked, his expression getting darker again and a tick showing in his cheek. "What was in the paper?"

"You read it," she said, deflating slightly. "I know you saw it, too. That I'm some insolent, spoiled school girl, afraid of my Bonded mate."

"She's right, Professor," Ginny said softly, making both Hermione and Severus turn to look at her. "And no, she hasn't told me anything about this," Ginny added with her hand out indicating the binders on the table. "But it doesn't take a genius to know that something is up. The two of you have been Miss Skeeter's pet project all summer, ever since the Bonding. If she even catches wind that you have a private matter especially if it involves a crime it will become very public."

Hermione turned to face Severus but swung her arm toward Ginny. "She's my best mate, and girls tell their best mate everything. It's hard enough going through all of it, all of this, but doing it alone without someone to confide in is torture."

He exhaled slowly, his expression softening into his mask of indifference. "You have lessons to attend. I suggest that you depart. I will return these to Madam Pince."

"Severus..."

"Go." He stood as immobile as a manikin. "We'll talk about this later."

"Fine." Hermione picked up her bag and followed Ginny out of his sitting room, furious at him.

When they reached the corridor, Ginny turned and faced Hermione. "I have to go to the loo. I'll see you in class."

Hermione nodded and hurried off for class, determined to not let his snooty indifference get to her. *Bloody git! I solved it for him, all of it, and he didn't even thank me* she fumed, exhaled, and tried to mentally put it behind her. *There's no use getting angry it is just how he is. Damn him*

\*

Ginny took a deep breath and returned to the stone gargoyle. "I forgot something in the Headmaster's office," she lied.

The statue was still for a few seconds and then moved aside. Severus opened the door as soon as she knocked.

"Yes, Mrs. Potter?" he asked, his mood apparently not improved any.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm on your side," she stated flatly.

"Is that so?" he asked, and she placed her hand on the door.

"Yes, I am."

He stepped back, allowing her to enter.

"Look, I'm sorry I talked Hermione into doing this Bonding, and frankly I was shocked by the outcome. But as you and I know it chose you for her for a reason, and I'm I have been supportive of it from the start. You, on the other hand, have been a real prat." She mentally braced herself for his reaction.

He crossed his arms, stared down at her, and asked, "You expect me to believe you?" which was definitely not the reaction she'd expected.

"Yes." She stared up at him, exhaling the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in and forced herself to remain calm. "Yes, I do. And she's right, we tell each other everything. But she's been in turmoil *over you*. So..." She swallowed and inhaled. "I think you and I should... be friends." There she said it. She told the most feared man in Hogwarts they should be friends. It seemed ironic to her.

"Friends."

He hadn't moved or even blinked. This wizard was the hardest person to read she'd ever met. "Yes. Friends. And don't tell Hermione that she can't confide in me we've been confidants for years ever since her first night in my parents' house. I always keep her secrets, and she keeps mine."

"So, I should tell you my secrets, I presume," he sneered.

She shook her head. "No. But when she cries, at least she has me to talk to."

"She has me," he stated, his face an expressionless mask.

"Not yet she doesn't you're it's not working out between you, is it?" She held up her hand. That was not what she wanted to say, and she really didn't want to make him angry. "It should be you, too, yes, but for now it's me. I'm there to talk to when she's worried or confused, hurt or sad, mad or happy. That's what friends do they're there for each other. And yes, I'd have helped her on this... this... solving this crime she mentioned. And if you'd allow me, I'd be there for you as well."

"And why would you do that?" he asked, his expression showing the slightest flicker of curiosity.

Well, maybe she imagined it. He was still staring at her as if she were being reprimanded after class for destroying a cauldron. "Because she's my best friend, and you're her Bonded mate. You're stuck with me. Me, Harry, Ron, Luna, Neville, and my family we're part of her life and now yours. When you decided to accept her as your Bonded mate, when you decided you wanted her in your life I became part of the package."

"Anything else?" he asked in his deep, soft, you've-gone-too-far tone.

It was time to go before he gave her a detention; beside the fact she was now late for class. "Nope, that's about all I wanted to tell you," she said, starting to regret her outburst.

He opened the door. "Then I suggest you go to class."

She nodded and turned to leave.

"And if she tells you anything about our private lives, I expect you to keep it private."

Ginny smiled as she turned around on the descending stairs. "Absolutely, Severus." She turned back around, hurried down the descending stairs and cringed when she heard the door slam closed behind her.

\*

Severus closed the door with a little more force than he'd intended. The chit had had the audacity to use his given name and... and he'd not even reprimanded her for it. Her words still echoed in his mind as he walked back up to his sitting room.

She'd said she had been on his side from the start. Hermione had confided everything to this girl. What exactly she'd confided was a mystery, and he wondered just how much involvement Mrs. Ginevra, if she was going to have the temerity to say his name, he'd damn well use hers had in his relationship with Hermione.

He closed his eyes for a moment as he recalled Lily saying the same thing to him once *She's my sister, Severus; I tell her everything.* She'd said the same thing once about Mary McDonald. *She's my best friend, Sev. Of course I told her.*

On his enlarged coffee table lay the open binders of *Daily Prophets*. Severus picked up the parchment of the Prince and Osgood family tree Hermione had drawn and read the announcements she'd highlighted for him again and the articles she'd marked. They proved her theory and much more. "What a corker you are, Hermione," he said softly.

Seeing the pictures of Mrs. Graven brought back some suppressed memories. He vaguely remembered Draken Graven from his early years as a Death Eater. He had been a pure-blood elitist, even more prejudiced than most, and had a Celtic dragon tattoo spiraling down his forearm under his Dark Mark. His trial was held a few months after Severus'. He had been charged with crimes to wizardkind and against humanity, use of the Unforgivables and sentenced to be Kissed. He'd died in Azkaban.

Mrs. Graven was very tall, extremely thin with sharp features and her pale blue eyes usually had a knowing, penetrating gaze, but she had a warm voice and smiled often... before the trials. There was something more, something he'd forgotten something he knew, but couldn't recall. *Almost as though I'd been completely snookered... or Obliviated.*

He knew that Rowle and Gibbon were good friends with Ludwick Graven, and they had been at Ludwick's house for most of the summer following... In fact, they had lived there until the fall of the Dark Lord: Rowle, Gibbon, Thortenson, Rosier, Mulciber and Kolsson... Rowle and Gibbon's circle.

He looked at the picture again. Miss Prisswell was definitely Cedella Wendelline Osgood, nee Graven. Severus wrote, *I would like to see you at your earliest convenience.*

*The sooner the better,*' on a slip of parchment with the school coat of arms, folded it into an airplane, went to the Floo, and knelt down. "Minister's Office, Ministry of Magic," he said clearly as he tossed Floo powder into the flame. With a flick of his wrist, he sent his note flying into the green flames and rose.

Twenty minutes later, Kingsley stepped into the headmaster's office. "So, what news have you for me today?"

"Two things. One, a possible location for some of the old associates to hold up the..." he said and his words choked as if he couldn't say Fifehead Stoke. "The..." He choked on his words again. Frustrated, he said, "Graven's estate. It's near Bulbarrow Hill in Dorset, a Galleon's throw from the tower." He shook his head to dispel his annoyance. "The other is the identity of the wizards from the memories taken from Ashton Foulkes the ones I suspect of foul play regarding my great-grandfather."

"The Gravens live in Sturminster Newton," Kingsley stated, his forehead wrinkling in confusion.

"There is another house, a farmhouse in Dorset. It's protected under the Fidelius, apparently, because I cannot say the name of the house or where it is precisely. But I'm certain that I was taken there a few times when I was a young Death Eater," Severus replied, wondering what he'd seen that they had felt that they'd needed to be Obliviated for if that was why he couldn't recall the memories associated with Mrs. Graven.

"Not a problem. If you can point out where the house should be, we can place an Anti-Apparation barrier around the property. I've approved the use of the Apparation-Detection Charm, and we can use the Magical-Use Detection Charms. We can easily block any and all Floo access registered under the name Graven, and post a Junior Auror in the area."

"Might I make a suggestion? Mrs. Figg," Severus stated. "She's a spry old lady and doesn't miss much."

Kingsley smiled. "I will see if she'd like an official assignment. Now, about the other matter?"

"I'll make a deal with you," Severus said. Hermione's warning about the Skeeter witch still rankled with him. "I'll lead this raid on the Gravens if you will not only help me capture the wizards who are poisoning my great-grandfather, but make sure that it will be reported as a raid on Death Eaters, and leave my personal reasons out of the official reports. Besides, I now have reason to believe that one or more of them might have been fellow associates."

"Oh, I can definitely do that," Kingsley assured him with a smile.

"Follow me," Severus said and led the way up to his sitting room. He quickly summarized the information that Hermione had uncovered and showed him the articles and announcements she'd used to prove it to him. "So, from what I have pieced from all this is that my Uncle, Charles Prince's aliases are Clemet King, Clemet Richfield, and possibly Clint Richman. I looked my uncle's name up in the school registry and his full name is Charles *Clemet* Prince. I was told that he's a ne'er-do-well living in Devon, but I suspect he may be in living in Dorset."

He handed Kingsley the parchment with the Prince family tree Hermione made. "My great-uncle, John Howard Prince, had a son I believe is one Charles John Osgood. That would make Charles John Osgood my Uncle Charles' cousin," Severus said, pointing out the names on the family tree.

Kingsley nodded. "So Clemet, er, sorry, Charles Prince and this Charles Osgood have teamed up to kill your great-grandfather?"

"No, I believe his son has," Severus said and rested his hands on the table top. "Charles John Osgood was killed by the Dark Lord the summer of 1995. However he had a son, John Talryn Osgood. This boy, a direct descent of my Great Uncle John Prince, married Ludwick Graven's sister, Cedella Graven, and apparently, they have joined with my dear Uncle Charles to kill off my great-grandfather. Although this is all speculation, with proper persuasion, it can be easily verified."

"Easily verified?" Kingsley asked and then held up one hand at chest level as he shook his head. "I'm not going to ask how you intend to persuade them to implicate themselves... So, let me get this straight. Charles Prince, this John Osgood, and Ludwick Graven hired a Healer to give your great-grandfather poisons and bad potions?" he asked, setting down the parchment.

Severus turned the pages in the binder to the marker showing Ludwick's trail. "No, I don't believe that Miss Priswell is a Healer at all. She is, however, Ludwick's sister, Cedella Wendelline Graven, now Osgood by marriage. Their mother's maiden name was Wendelline Priswell, the name Cedella Osgood is currently using under my great-grandfather's employ."

Kingsley's head snapped up. "Priswell? I knew the Priswells. They were one of my assignments as an Auror. I think it's time we go to the Ministry."

"First things first," Severus stated and walked over to his Floo. He sent a message to Minerva, telling her he'd be gone for an undetermined amount of time, then to Poppy, asking her to meet him at the Ministry with her reports on his great-grandfather's potions as Kingsley shrunk all the binders so they'd fit in his pockets.

"After you," Severus said, handing Kingsley the Floo pot. Severus waited until the flames died down, then Flooed to the Ministry himself and took the lift with Kingsley to the second level. The few occupants in the lift eyed Severus with speculative looks, which he was well accustomed to receiving. When the doors opened, Severus squeezed between two witches, who were whispering to each other about him, and followed Kingsley to the Auror department.

When they entered the long room of cubicles, Kingsley's shoulders seemed to relax. "The Priswells were a moderately well-off family as I recall. Pure-bloods. He was an architect, specialized in magical additions, secret passageways and hidden rooms or compartments. He was arrested on suspicion more than once and always had an alibi," he explained as they walked. "The archive room would have the files."

Kingsley greeted Hayward Blume as they walked down the rows of desks. "May I help you, Minister?" Auror Blume asked.

"I want to check something in the Priswell files," he replied.

Blume entered the archive room and pulled out his wand. "Allow me, Minister." He handed a thick file over and sat on the edge of the desk. "Anything I can help with?"

"I'm back, er, hello, Minister, Headmaster," Harry said, stopping in the doorway. "The Barkwidth matter is resolved, and Ron and I are back from the Knockturn Apothecary."

"What was taken?" Blume asked.

"I have a list of the potion ingredients," Harry stated. "Fresh murdeckle root being one, Vipertooth venom, and Bundimun secretion, possibly Lobalug venom." He pulled out a report pad from his pocket. "The man in question was described as having stringy, dark hair pulled back in a leather thong, a long, pallid face, heavy eyebrows, and thin frame in brown robes that were too big for him. He was in his late fifties or so and unshaven."

That got Severus' attention. "When was the theft, Mr. Potter?"

"Two nights ago; the Apothecary was slow in reporting it," Harry replied, handing Severus his report pad so he could read the list. "Not that we aren't shorthanded."

"Matches the description of Clemet King," Kingsley stated.

"Yes it does." Severus pursed his lips, his mind racing through a list of what potion or potions they were going to try and use on Mr. Prince this time.

Ron entered the cramped space. "Oi, there you are, Minister," he said, moving passed Harry and handing Kingsley a thick letter. "This just came, and I was told to give it to you straight away."

Kingsley opened the letter, glancing at the pages. Severus got a good look at the sheets as Kingsley put one behind the rest and kept reading. He recognized the writing



and assumed they were Poppy's finding on the potions. "Doxycide in a sleeping potion?" Kingsley asked, looking up at Severus with raised eyebrows.

"And murdeckle root and Bundimun are used in Doxycide," Severus stated.

Kingsley nodded and handed Blume Poppy's report. "So, how about filling in Blume, Potter, and Weasley on the situation."

Severus shook his head. "I want to keep this a private matter."

"Not happening, man. You'll need the backing of the Aurory on this one. However, I will do my best to contain the situation," Kingsley promised.

Severus nodded, since he knew the wizard was right, and outlined what he knew about Ludwick Graven, Ashton Foulkes, Charles Clemet Prince, and John Talfryn Osgood. "Apparently, Miss Priswell is Ludwick Graven's sister, Cedella Wendelline Osgood, and is married to John Talfryn Osgood," he concluded.

"Mrs. Snape had found the announcements in the *Daily Prophet* archives at Hogwarts linking them all together. I brought them with me, but I can have the necessary articles copied for the file on this later," Kingsley said to Blume, who nodded in consent.

"Whether this Miss Priswell or Cedella Wendelline Osgood is a Healer or not is easy enough to check you can't hire on as a Healer without showing your certifications," Harry stated. "I can go check with the registry office in St Mungo's." Blume nodded to Harry his consent, and Harry ran off.

Ron had been writing down the names Severus mentioned. "I saw the name Clemet King on some recent reports I had to file I'll pull those and anything I find on Clemet Richfield or Clint Richman," he stated, turning to leave.

Meanwhile, Severus and Kingsley pored over the Priswell file for any clues. Blume pulled out the Graven folders and then left, returning a moment later. He handed Kingsley a thick file on Ludwick Graven and handed Severus a file on Ashton Foulkes. "Thought you'd like to see what we came up with," he stated. "That wizard's a tough one to crack, but the threat of Dementors really got him talking."

Ashton's file didn't illuminate Severus on anything pertinent to his case. The wizard was your typical street thug with a wand and not above doing theft or mugging for what he wanted. Graven's was just as useless, mostly petty crimes, a few suspicions and photos, although Severus fully suspected him of being a Death Eater.

Ron came in with a stack of files on Charles Prince's aliases, which were passed around or stacked on any available surface.

"Might I recommend moving to a ward room?" Blume finally suggested. "It gets bloody hot in here if there are a few bodies heatin' up the place, and I want to see those articles you mentioned."

When Harry returned, Ron, Severus, Hayward Blume and Kingsley were all reading files in a small ward room, and the binders from the Hogwarts library were all spread out on the table, opened to various articles. "Got it. Miss Wendelline Priswell was a Healer." Harry flipped the leather cover of his report pad up and lifted the first page, reading the one beneath it. "According to her file, she was a Healer on the spell damage ward at St. Mungo's, one of the best, only she was occasionally accused of healing wizards in her home who wanted to avoid St. Mungo's, especially those suspected of crimes or wanted by the Aurors, although it was never proven. However, she was relieved from duty in 1952. The official statement is that she quit to get married well, asked for a leave of absence.

"Recently, she filed her application for Home Healers, but she was denied because it's been over forty years since she's been an active Healer, even though her certification is still current." Harry let the top page fall back into place. "What I did find out is that the woman's right hand was mutilated by a curse, and she's living with her sister in Coulogne, a commune in the Pas-de-Calais, France. So, it's not possible for her to do home healing." Harry flipped the cover closed on his report pad. "Apparently, she's a right-handed witch. Also the woman in the Home Health office said that the woman who she'd interviewed was remarkably well preserved for her age and had no such deformity."

"Either this Cedella Osgood looks old for her age, or she could have used Polyjuice. If the hair was from before the curse, the hand would look normal," Blume pointed out. "So, we go get her."

Severus shook his head. "We need to catch them at the residence. Removing the witch would only create problems or be detrimental to Mr. Prince's life," he stated. Blume's forehead wrinkled as he narrowed his eyes, and Severus shook his head. "I've been secretly replacing my great-grandfather's potions, and so far the witch hasn't noticed. If we move on Miss Priswell, it's possible they will replace her with someone I can't fool it's why I have delayed in reporting this."

"Who would have hired her if the Home Healers didn't?" Ron asked.

"I suspect Mr. Prince hired her," Severus replied. "He's ill, but he's not mentally impaired in any way. The few times I've seen him recently, he was cognitive and aware of current events from the papers."

"I think we have enough to go on," Blume stated.

Kingsley dropped his left foot from where it had been perched on his right knee to the floor and sat up straighter. "Let's not get hasty. Severus is right. If he's switching the potions without her realizing it, then she has no affinity for the art. That means it is very likely that she has impersonated her mother to obtain the position. The question is, why are they trying to kill him. I'm assuming it's money."

"O' course it's the money," Blume stated bluntly and then looked questioningly at Severus. "The man has money, right?"

"I'm sure he has some; the Prince family was quite well off at one time. Miss Priswell has accused me of trying to ingratiate myself into the will," he said with a smirk. "I think it annoys her."

"I bet," Blume stated. "So according to the files, these wizards, John Osgood and Clemet sorry, Charles Prince live in Dorset, possibly Devonshire and are possibly associated with Ludwick Graven, a known Death Eater." He opened a drawer in the cabinet in the corner, pulled out a map and laid it on the table.

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"All I'm saying is that maybe you should spend some time with him, you know, hanging out," Ginny said as they walked through the corridor, heading for the common room. "It's not like he wouldn't understand that you have revision and essays to do."

"It's easier in the library," Hermione stated. "If I read something and I want to clarify it with another source or if I want to cross reference the books are all there."

"Okay, so it's not the most convenient place for you to do research, but I know you; you draft your essays and make thousands of annotations and footnotes, then rewrite it at night on your bed. Why not do the rewriting in his sitting room? It's not like he didn't make you a desk there," Ginny persisted.

"Footnotes! Gin, I left my revision guide in his sitting room," Hermione said, stopping short.

Ginny laughed and turned. "Giving yourself excuses to go see him?"

Hermione scrunched her face up and shook her head at her friend, making Ginny laugh harder.

"C'mon, let's go get it."

The gargoyle moved aside for Hermione as she approached, and the girls went up to his office. "He's not here," Ginny stated the obvious.

"I'll check upstairs," Hermione said and walked quickly up to the sitting room. The binders she'd shown him were all gone, and the family tree she'd drawn was still on the coffee table, however her revision guide was nowhere to be seen. Also, Severus wasn't there to ask about it either, and she was loath to check for him in the bedroom. "Severus?" There was no response.

Suddenly, a loud pop made Hermione whirl about-face and instinctively draw her wand to defend herself. "What the..."

"Miss no hurt Pepper," the elf begged, cowering behind a torchiere floor lamp and the legs of a chair.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Hermione said, lowering her wand as thudding footsteps could be heard on the stairs. She recognized this elf; she was Severus' great-grandfather's house-elf.

"What happened? I heard a loud pop and then you screeched?" Ginny asked, coming into the room with her wand drawn.

"Pepper must finds Mr. Snape, Miss. It's urgent that I's finds him," Pepper pleaded with Hermione, wringing her hands nervously. "Pepper must finds him now, Miss."

Hermione knelt to be level with the elf as she asked, "Why? What happened, Pepper?"

"Bad wizards wants to smother my Master. The other wizard wants to Avada Kedavra him!" She let out a sob and then stepped out from behind the lamp. "They means to kills him, Miss! He is not dies fast enough," Pepper stated, moving closer to Hermione. Her ears were drooping, her forehead was wrinkled, and her worried eyes were brimming with tears. "They says he is better, not worse, and must dies."

"But we don't know where Severus is," Ginny stated as Hermione jumped to her feet.

"I know who to ask," Hermione said as she ran from the room. She stopped in front of Severus' desk and looked up at the painted face of Dumbledore. "Headmaster, please. I think Severus' great-grandfather is in grave danger, and I really think he should know immediately. I know you can't break a confidence, but please just tell me where he went. It could be a matter of life or death!"

Dumbledore opened his eyes as Headmaster Black admonished Hermione for her impertinence. "I'm afraid that Professor Snape went to the Ministry with Minister Shackbolt," Dumbledore said kindly.

Hermione looked down at the elf by Ginny's side. Pepper was twisting a corner of her tea towel in her hands as she looked up at Hermione with tear-filled eyes. "Theys going to kills my Master they says they is going to kills him," she said, two tears sliding down her cheeks, and Hermione felt worried for the old wizard.

"Gin, I have to go. I can barricade him in his room or something. Or I can I dunno move Mr. Prince to safety or something. It may give Severus time to come help."

"I's can takes you," Pepper said, her smile not yet erasing the worry in her eyes.

"I'll Floo to the Ministry and see if I can find Harry or Ron. Maybe they can help me find Severus," Ginny suggested, grabbing a handful of powder. She was gone in a flash of green flames as Pepper walked up and grasped Hermione's hand.

"Headmaster, if Severus comes here first, tell him to go to his great-grandfather's house immediately," Hermione pleaded just before she felt a sharp, searing pain and the jolting tug at her navel. She landed among weeds and fell to her knees, trying to shake off the pain and inhale at the same time.

"Miss come with Pepper," the elf pleaded, trying to help Hermione to her feet.

Hermione rose slowly, glad she hadn't splinched. "I'm fine; it just knocked the wind out of me," she said.

Pepper waved for her follow her to the back of the house. "They is in the kitchen, Miss. I can'ts takes you in through the door. But Pepper can gets Miss in." The elf snapped her fingers and vanished. Hermione squatted down below the window, wondering if maybe she'd been too impulsive, when the window above her head opened. "Hurrys, Miss," Pepper whispered.

Hermione climbed in through the window and landed on a sofa in a large formal lounge.

"This ways, Miss," the elf said, waving her on. Hermione cast a silencing charm on her shoes and Disillusioned herself. She crossed the room and peered down the long hallway that ran straight down the center of the house. The room at the far end was lit brightly. The rest of the house was lit with the soft natural illumination from windows. She could hear a woman's voice, and then a man's coming from the far end of the house. Although she was too far to catch the words, they were definitely arguing.

Pepper went first, hurrying for the stairs, beckoning for her to follow, and Hermione trailed, staying close to the wall. Pepper motioned for her to go up, so Hermione ascended the staircase as quickly as she could. Pepper was waiting for her at the door to the master's suite. "He is sleeping, Miss. Miss Prisswell, she gives him his potions only a little while ago."

Hermione nodded in understanding and closed the door. She cast every protection spell on the door and wall that she could think of and turned to survey the room. "Pepper, is the Floo connected?"

"No, Miss," the elf replied. "The one downstairs is, Miss, not this one."

*One problem solved.* She cast Strengthening, Unbreakable, and Shatter-proof Charms on the windows and added a Reflection Charm on the diamond panes. Now she could see out, but no one could see in.

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Ginny exited the Floo and ran for the lifts as fast as she could. The doors opened, and she jumped in, pressing the button for the second level. One wizard, possibly a clerk, eyed her, frowning, while the other occupants stared at the illuminated number. She clenched and unclenched her hands as the lift doors closed, trying to appear calm, like she had every reason to be out of school and in the Ministry of Magic. In the afternoon. On a Thursday.

The voice announced the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as the doors opened, and Ginny slipped out of the lift. A sign on the wall told her which way to go. She ran to the Auror offices, praying that Harry or Ron would be around and would know where Severus was. She slowed only enough to check each cubicle as she made her way down the walkway, grinning when she spotted Harry's messy brown hair through the window of an adjacent room. She pulled open the door and was startled to see the very wizard she needed to find, leaning over a map on a large table, staring at her. "It's an elf Peeper, Pepper... She said someone some wizards were going to kill her master. They're in the house," she managed to get out even though she was breathing hard.

"When?" an Auror asked.

"Are you sure they're in the house?" Severus asked, standing up.

Ginny nodded. "She Hermione and I went to your office, and the house-elf showed up. The house-elf said the bad wizards were going to kill him smother him anyway, she'd said they'd said that he had to die, so Hermione went with her to try and move your great-grandfather."

"She did what?!" Severus growled as Harry shouted the same thing.

Ginny took a deep breath. "She went to the house with the house-elf."

"That's it, we go now," Kingsley stated, heading for the door. Harry turned and exited after him.

Severus had literally leapt over the table and rushed past her next out the door.

The Auror grabbed her by the shoulders. "You're to return to Hogwarts, young lady. We'll handle it from here."

"Way to go, sis," Ron said, slipping through the door and running to catch up to the others.

"I mean it, young lady, Hogwarts," the Auror said as he moved away. "Fairley, can you see that this girl gets back to school? Tucker, follow me. We may need the back up."

A large wizard with strong, muscled arms stepped out from a cubicle. "Sure, Blume. This way, Miss."

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"Where are they, Pepper? Can you hear them?" Hermione asked, and Pepper turned her head, one of her huge ears fully extended and angled toward the door.

Hermione was debating pushing the furniture against the door as a barricade and then enlarging them or making them extremely heavy. But if the wizards used Bombarda or something stronger, then they'd fly into the room, possibly harming Mr. Prince. If she shrunk them, then they'd be no help at all. She'd already removed the mirror from over the mantel and placed it, now only eight-by-eleven inches, in the wardrobe. She'd also magically hung the rugs on the frame of the four-poster bed to protect him from any flying debris if the men did try to blast open the door.

Pepper turned to face her. "I hears them, Miss. They is deciding how to kills my master."

Hermione suddenly got a bright idea. "Pepper, can you hold things here for a minute."

The elf's forehead creased and she frowned, but she nodded. "Yes, Miss."

Hermione quickly undid the charms on the doors and slipped out. She eased down the hall to the stairs. The stairs in the dorm room turned into a slide when anyone male tried to climb them. It was a series of complicated spells, but she'd tried it once at home at Grimmauld Place, effectively making Harry slide onto his bum when he'd come home. He hadn't been amused, but if it could work at Grimmauld Place it could work here.

She began the first complicated spell, keeping her determination and intent focused on the stairs and not on the sounds coming from below in the house. Some of the voices sounded as if they were moving closer, a man and a woman, but she strengthened her resolve, blending the second spell with the first. The stairs started to glow: first a soft blue, then white for a second as she initiated the last part, and finally a pale yellow glow that faded into the burgundy carpet. *Done.*

The male voice seemed to retreat a bit, but another male voice was approaching... They were arguing about whether to use the Killing Curse or not.

She hurried quickly back to the bedroom and started putting the spells back up on the door.

"I hears them coming," Pepper said, standing determinedly by the rugs protecting her master's bed.

Hermione held her wand ready, her senses on alert for the sound of the wailing klaxon on the stairs or Apparation in the upstairs hallway, hoping they wouldn't simply Apparate directly into the bedroom.

The wait was unnerving.

Hermione could hear herself breathing, and she loosened her hand on her wand because she'd been gripping it too tightly. Her magic thrummed in her being and through her as she decided which spells to use for whatever might happen next. Beside her, Pepper remained poised, ready to shield her master.

She thought she heard loud cracks of Apparation, like cars backfiring, but couldn't determine where exactly. There was shouting in the house from below. A door slammed shut. Cursing. More shouting.

Two bangs, followed by several explosions. She could hear glass shattering, and a dull thud sounded like something hitting the house from outside, making the windows vibrate slightly. Her body tensed up, and her adrenaline surged through her, which made her even more alert to the sounds below. Beside her, Pepper fidgeted slightly, but stood her ground. The shouts became desperate, and she heard the definite sounds of spells bouncing off walls.

Another explosion shook the windows again, this time more forcibly, and more yelling. She wondered what was happening, but didn't dare leave Mr. Prince's bedroom. More shouts, followed by the wailing klaxon of the stairs. More bangs and shouts and screams came from below, followed by more explosions. Hermione fought back the panic welling up as memories of the fights at Hogwarts filled her thoughts. *Shake it off, Hermione. Focus,* she scolded herself.

There was a loud shout from somewhere, and another.

Then quiet.

Hermione strained to hear anything.

A log in the fireplace cracked. She could hear Pepper shifting her feet nervously, and Mr. Prince's soft snore.

Outside the door, below in the house, the house was eerily still.

"Do you hear anything, Pepper?" she whispered.

Pepper nodded. "Mens, Miss. I hears mens talking."

"What are they saying?" Hermione asked, wondering who the men were and who won the fight.

"Ties them up. Is anyone hurt? We should checks upstairs," Pepper said and took a deep breath.

Hermione braced herself for the inevitable. They, whoever they were, were going to try to come upstairs.

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Severus smirked at the bodies of Ludwick Graven and John Talfryn Osgood lying unconscious in a crumpled heap at the foot of the flattened stairs. He spread his arms and flew up the ramp that had been the staircase, landing lightly on the upper floor. He quickly scanned the area for any other traps his wife may have devised, shaking his head when his wand only illuminated at the door. He pounded on the door with his fist. "Hermione, its Severus. Open up."

He could feel the magic dissipate as she disengaged her spells. "Severus!" she cried, rushing to hug him as soon as she'd opened the door.

"Are you all right?" he asked, holding her tightly and stroking her hair with one hand.

She nodded against his chest. "Yes, we're fine."

He leaned back and tipped her face up to look at her.

"I had to, Severus. I had to protect him."

Her earnest expression and the deep worry in her eyes melted his temper slightly. "I know," he replied and kissed her.

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*Author's notes:*

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*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Interrogation and Inquiries

*Chapter 39 of 63*

Hermione is questioned regarding her actions, and Severus decides to take a more affirmative action.



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### Interrogation and Inquiries

The next day, after their last class, Severus brought Ginny and Hermione to the Ministry for questioning. Hermione sat between Ginny and Severus at the oval table while both Ron and Auror Blume asked questions regarding the events leading up to the raid on Mr. Prince's house. Ron was heading the briefing, and he was being very thorough, his quill scratching away as he took down everyone's statements. Madam Pomfrey, who had been there when they'd arrived, sat next to Harry, having already given her findings regarding the potions Severus had given her.

Ron looked up at the Healer. "Madam Pomfrey, I know you are a very busy woman. Your reports are very thorough. If you need to go, I think I have all I need from you for now. Be advised, you may be called in to testify at a formal hearing."

Madam Pomfrey rose gracefully to her feet. "Thank you, Auror Trainee Weasley. If you need anything more from me, please contact me at the school."

Auror Blume looked directly at Hermione. "Now, Mrs. Snape, please tell me why you felt it necessary to make an unauthorized departure from the school instead of informing the Aurors of the situation?"

Hermione sighed. She knew she'd be reprimanded for her actions yesterday. She'd already had an earful from Severus after returning to the castle last night. "It was the urgency of the matter. Ginny was going to the Aurory to inform Harry and Ron, and to find Severus. Pepper, Mr. Prince's house-elf, implied that the men in the house were going to kill Mr. Prince. I thought that if I could only hold them off until Harry and Ron got there – that I might be able to protect Mr. Prince until you came." She could feel Severus stiffen beside her. "Headmaster Dumbledore's portrait said Severus had just left for the Ministry with Minister Shacklebolt. I hoped it would only take minutes to have Severus and the Minister notified as well..."

"And you're bloody lucky that's how things went down. Thankfully, Ginny found us in time. Now, what were the spells you used on the room?" Ron asked.

Hermione calmly listed off the spells she'd used, including the ones on the stairs, even though she was quietly seething at Ron's curtness toward her. Okay, she'd acted rashly, but it had all worked out, and Mr. Prince was now safe with two Junior Aurors temporarily assigned to guard the house.

Ron repeated the list back to her and made another notation on the parchment. "What time did you leave the school precisely?"

"It was about three o'clock, maybe a little after. The same time Ginny Flooded to the Ministry. Pepper pulled me along with her through some type of trans-relocation – their version of Apparation." She wasn't sure it was the same, since no one had ever really studied house-elf magic enough to have written about it. It certainly hadn't felt the same as when she Apparated.

"And after you warded the stairs, door, and windows, what did you do next?" Ron asked.

Hermione shrugged, the memory from the tense moments leading up to Severus' knock on the door still vivid in her mind. She related what she could remember calmly and in as detached a voice as she could muster.

With an equal, no-nonsense tone, Ron asked Ginny her accounting. Ginny related what she'd seen and heard from Pepper and why she'd used the Floo to find Harry or Ron, stating that she'd been relieved to find everyone she'd sought in the small room in the Aurory.

Ron tapped his quill and looked over at Severus. "Headmaster, do you have anything to add?"

Hermione listened intently as Severus calmly related his version of the events, starting with his notifying Kingsley of Hermione's discovery, going to the Ministry to search through the files there, Ginny's arrival at the Aurory and up to when he'd knocked on Mr. Prince's bedroom door. Auror Blume likewise gave Ron his account as did Kingsley. Hermione listened to their accounts intently.

Apparently, everyone had arrived at a distance from the house and ran the rest of the way to avoid detection. Severus and Kingsley stayed at the front of the house while Harry and Ron had Apparated to the old stables, and Aurors Blume and Tucker to the back of the house. Severus, Kingsley, and Aurors Blume and Tucker placed an Anti-Apparation barrier and the Apparation-Detection Charm around the property. Aurors Blume and Tucker had tried to get to the back entrance unseen as Ron and Harry had moved from the old stables to the entrance off the kitchen.

When Blume and Tucker had positioned themselves at the back entrance, Blume had apparently been seen, which had started off the fighting. Severus and Kingsley had rushed in from the front door when the shouting had started. Blume had had to blast open the glass doors that led from the foyer to the back gardens to get in, but Tucker had been hit by a curse before he could follow Blume inside. Ron and Harry had burst open the door to the kitchen, but they'd lost the element of surprise.

Harry and Ron had engaged Mrs. Osgood, nee Miss Prisswell, and Charles Prince in the kitchen. Even old Dustin had tried to help, but he was felled by a curse from Charles Prince. At one point Mrs. Osgood had tried to Apparate, but splinched herself, and Ron had stunned Charles Prince.

Blume, Severus, and Kingsley had engaged Ludwick Graven and John Talfryn Osgood in the foyer. John Talfryn Osgood had tried to run up the staircase, which had suddenly turned into a slide, making him tumble into Ludwick Graven. It had been a very nasty but quick fight. Ron had taken Auror Tucker to St. Mungo's, and Harry had personally carried the old house-elf to the hospital, dragging Mrs. Osgood along by the wrist. Auror Tucker was still recovering in the Auror Security Spell Damage ward.

For the sake of the report, each wand was checked for the spells cast and recorded as well.

"All right. That's all we need from you at this time. We'll interrogate the prisoners and file the official report," Ron stated, tapping his quill on the parchment.

"Which will be on my desk before you file the official findings," Kingsley stated authoritatively. "I assume that Severus will press formal charges against the accused; however, this was a raid on suspected Death Eater activities until you hear otherwise from me."

Ron, Harry, and Blume looked surprised, but Blume nodded, saying, "Of course, Minister. The preliminary report will be on your desk first thing."

"And I'd like to interrogate the prisoners," Severus said in a cold drawl that made Hermione turn to look at him, startled.

Kingsley held up his hand, but Harry spoke up first. "If you'd allow me, Professor. If you're filing formal charges, that wouldn't be appropriate. Thanks to our private Occlumency lessons and my training here at the Aurory, I've gained a fair ability at Legilimency. That, and we use Veritaserum on those accused of Death Eater activities, which is witnessed by two Aurors and recorded by an Echo-Ingeminate Orb. I will be happy to do these inquiries for you. I'll even allow you to write down what questions you'd like asked."

"Believe me, Severus, Harry and I will be quite thorough," Kingsley stated, smiling at him.

Severus reluctantly relented, allowing Harry and Kingsley to handle the interrogations. Kingsley offered the use of his Floo for Severus, Hermione, and Ginny to return to school. Harry escorted Ginny to the Minister's office and kissed Ginny quickly before she disappeared in the green flames. Hermione and Severus went next.

When they arrived, Severus turned to Ginny. "While I'm grateful for your assistance, Ginevra, I would appreciate a few minutes alone with my wife."

Ginny smiled knowingly, but Hermione thought she might be making an inaccurate assumption to Severus' meaning. "All right, Severus. Hermione, I'll see you later," she said with a wink and turned to go.

\*

Maggie couldn't believe her eyes; Mr. and Mrs. Potter and Mr. and Mrs. Snape were leaving the Aurory with Minister Shacklebolt. Everyone was somber but smiling and looking for all intents and purposes as if they'd had an important meeting – well, except for Mr. Snape. But then she'd never seen that wizard smile. At least he wasn't frowning or sneering, but then he didn't look all that pleased either. Maggie hurried into the office to file her report of the newest entry in the Obituary and Life Termination register. However, no matter how she tried to pry into the reason for the Snapes and Potters to be in the Aurory, Miss Hartshorn wouldn't divulge anything.

"It's the Minister's new Fides Troth of Confidentiality Charm, Miss Whitmire," she said politely, infuriating Maggie. "All of the support staff in the Aurory had to be placed under it."

"But does it have to do with the Snapes' Bonding?" Maggie persisted. "Their files are still pending their decisions on my desk. I happen to have all the forms ready in my office..."

"I'm not at liberty to say, Miss Whitmire," Miss Hartshorn replied, tapping a purple memo with her wand so it folded neatly into an aeroplane and flew away.

Maggie turned and decided to confront the Minister in regards to the Snapes' marital standing. The door to his office was closed.

"May I help you, Miss Whitmire?" Maybelline Quirk, the Minister's secretary, asked, carrying an armload of files to her desk.

"I would like to see the Minister," Maggie said, trying to sound as if it was important.

Maybelline set the files down and looked at her. "Did you have an appointment? He's still in a meeting, I'm afraid."

"With whom, may I ask?" Maggie asked tactfully. "I might have questions for Mr. Potter and Mr. and Mrs. Snape."

Maybelline didn't even flinch or blink at the mention of the names. "I'm sorry, Maggie, but Minister Shacklebolt has issued a Fides Troth of Confidentiality Charm on all Ministry matters on a need-to-know basis only. I'm really not at liberty to confirm or deny with whom he is meeting. If you'd like, I can see when he'd have a spare moment for you?"

"Fine," Maggie said, her feelings now hurt.

After checking a schedule roster, Maybelline said, "If you'd like to come back at eleven tomorrow, you may have ten minutes."

Maggie accepted and turned to leave, walking as slowly as possible, hoping to overhear or see anything that could give her a clue as to what was going on.

When she entered her office, there was a note on her desk for her to go see the Head of her department.

\*

"Is there anything you can say to make me understand why you'd knowingly put yourself in danger instead of alerting the proper authorities?" Severus said, annoyance making his tone sharp. He crossed his arms and stared at Hermione as if expecting an answer.

They were standing in the middle of his office, their robes still dusty with Floo ash. "Ginny went to the Ministry, and I went to the house," she stated again. They'd talked about this last night; why was he drilling her again? Not to mention she'd just covered all this back at the Ministry.

"I'm aware of that." Severus relaxed a fraction. He raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "In order to move my great-grandfather from his home, against his will, or so I was informed, to some undisclosed location, or so you said."

"To save his life," she snapped, but instantly regretted it. Being petulant was not going to help her win this argument, and she knew it. It certainly hadn't helped her last

night.

"You were well barricaded in, as I recall," he said in his less-than-scathing tone. He looked at her thoughtfully and then amended his statement, "You set the stairs up as a trap, which I appreciated by the way, and secured the bedroom."

"That's the gist of it," she replied with a nod of her head.

He looked down at her, his dark eyes narrowing. "Why?"

She just couldn't believe that he didn't understand. "Because he's your great-grandfather – the only family you have left!" And she liked the old wizard.

His lips curled as he smirked at her. "I have an uncle," he said condescendingly.

"Who's in Azkaban now," she pointed out. She tried a new tactic. "When have I ever not stood up for people I care about?" He looked at her dumbfoundedly, but she had to make him understand. "He's family, Severus. He's old and ill, and I had to do something."

He ran his hand through his hair as he turned away from her, then faced her again. "I suppose I should just learn to expect this sort of thing from you?"

"I can't stop being who I am," she said. He knew her, sort of; he'd been her teacher for six years. She was a doer, and that wasn't likely to change.

He stepped forward and caught her by the wrist, pulling her closer to him. "I never knew you had a heroine complex." His hands gripped her shoulders tightly as he looked at her as if trying to read her intentions in her eyes. "I always thought of you as the brains of Potter's schemes and assumed Potter was the rash one." His fingers relaxed slightly, although he didn't remove his hands altogether.

The heat of his hands penetrated her jumper. She looked up at him, trying to read his eyes. "I was, as well as his voice of reason, but I was with him in all of it," she said, wondering why he only saw her as a brain. She was more than just her brain. She was a witch. She'd fought in three battles, and she'd helped Harry on most of his adventures.

Severus' face relaxed and he snorted. "You frustrate me to no end," he sneered softly, but without the vinegar it previously had.

"I know," she said in a heavy sigh.

His next moved startled her. He lifted her up and set her on his desk, stepping between her knees as he kissed her. She inhaled, and he pressed forward, deepening his kiss, his body making contact with hers as he held her in a steel embrace.

"Not here... the portraits will see," she managed to say against his mouth.

"Fine," he said, taking her hand, pulling her off his desk and upstairs to his sitting room. He quickly snaked one hand in her hair, the other at her lower back, kissing her soundly as he turned with her, backing her up as if in a dance. Her head felt like it was spinning, her stomach quivered, and for a moment she was lost in his magnetism, the deep passion of his intense kiss. He sat her down on the sofa, never once breaking the kiss.

He pushed her down gently as he leaned over her and devoured her mouth relentlessly. Hermione matched his fire, feeling heady, her senses soaring, and her hands caressing, exploring his body as if of their own volition. One of his hands slid under her jumper and cupped a breast, the other at her side, pinning her in place beneath him. His hand felt hot through her cotton blouse, and she moaned at the contact. Severus trailed kisses down to her throat and neck as his hand slid down to her groin and cupped her, rubbing his hand across her conjuncture, tantalizing her clit. Hermione stiffened. "Why not?" he asked, stopping.

"You know why!" she said, still breathless.

"No, actually, I don't," he growled deep and low, sending shivers down her spine to her groin under his hand – exactly where she didn't want to feel it.

She squirmed to ease the tingling sensations. "You – me, I don't just want to have sex," she tried to explain.

His hand moved as he shifted his weight, but the feelings he'd aroused hardly ebbed. "Sex – you're afraid of having sex with me?" he asked, clearly astounded.

"Sex – as opposed to making love," she protested. She was still pinned beneath him and wanted to sit up.

"Love?" he asked, his dark eyes, now much darker due to his lust, staring into hers as if to read her. "Would you make some bloody sense?"

He wasn't using Legilimency on her; the intrusion wasn't there. "You aren't in love with me," she stated, lowering her eyes to his mouth. His lips were slightly swollen, still moist from their kiss and parted slightly.

He pushed up so he could see her better, but that only made his dark hair frame his face in shadow. "You expect me to love you?" She could tell he was trying to follow her rationalization, but regret flickered in his eyes the moment her expression turned stony and she tried to push him off her. "Let me rephrase that – you won't have sex with me because you feel I won't make love to you, is that it?"

She relaxed her arms, and her head and shoulders fell back onto the sofa cushions. "You say I'm yours, your wife, but we're not married...only Bonded, and I – I have no idea how you feel about me," she admitted. How could she make him understand? With him looking at her this way, being so close, his scent, it was so hard to think.

"How I feel? I desire you."

Her gaze locked with his at his admission. "Great," she sighed and looked away. *Yes, I know you want this – you want me physically.*

"I would kill for you."

That didn't surprise her either. *And of course you'd kill – you were a Death Eater... you're a possessive man – a protector...*

"Hermione?"

She looked up at him, and all she saw was lust and confusion. She tried to move out from under him, and he held her tighter. "Hermione, have you ever heard the phrase, 'Love comes softly'? It's common among those in arranged marriages or Bonded unions to have to grow to love one another."

"But," she protested, propping herself up slightly on her elbows.

"Have you never considered that the spell you used matches soul mates? Not lovers – soul mates. Did you honestly think that all soul mates automatically love each other at first sight?"

She sighed. "No. Yes. I don't know. Maybe. Yes, I did. I mean, it's like that for Ginny and Harry and Luna and Neville."

His hands were now planted on either side of her shoulders, his arms fully extended as he looked down at her face, but that only made his groin press more firmly against her inner thigh, and she could feel his stiff penis twitch as if begging to have her relent.

"And Mr. and Mrs. Potter were a couple in his sixth year, if I recall. Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom were well-acquainted friends in school, especially in their fifth and seventh

years. I'd be surprised if there wasn't a mutual attraction then. You and I did not have such an amiable relationship previous to your casting of the spell. Larissa Roquewood hardly knew Theodore Nott at all when they were matched with a plight spell, and she was given six months to acquaint herself with Mr. Nott before assuming her role as his wife."

She knew he was making sense, but it wasn't what she wanted to hear. "You were awful to me," she said, pouting. Gods, why did she feel like such a kid around him?

"I was; I admit it. I was furious that I'd been trapped – we've discussed this," he said, angling his head slightly to the side to try and look her in the eye. "Damn it, Hermione," he growled, pushing himself off her, but still on all fours above her. "You respond to me; I know you feel it. Your body is saying yes; I can feel the passion from you, and then you say no. It's driving me insane." He backed away from her, kneeling above her and staring down at her.

She knew he wanted an answer; his expression was stony, angry, but she had no idea what to say. Hermione sat up and stared at her hands. *Ask him. Just ask him.* She didn't want to. It was something that should come naturally, like in the books. "Maybe I should go?" *Coward. Ask him.*

"No."

Her head snapped up, and she couldn't help but gape at him.

"You'll stay. I won't touch you, but you're staying." He turned and walked to the nearest shelf, randomly pulled a book out, turned and thrust it at her.

She swallowed nervously as she accepted the book and read the title: *The Manipulation of Matter and Form*. He sat down in a chair, picked up a book on the small table next to it and began reading. Hermione opened the cover and saw *Property of the Half-Blood Prince* written on the bottom of the front cover. She turned the page and scanned down the list of spells, flipping to the pages indicated for some of them. It was a book on Transfiguration spells, but these were Dark spells, manipulative ones, not generally taught in Hogwarts. Severus' miniscule writing was on the pages, similar to his *Advanced Potions* book. She turned back to the first entry and began to read, taking the time to read his notes, spells, and comments in the margins of the pages, and his drolleries and drawings as well.

A house-elf appeared, carrying a tray with thick sandwiches of savory roast beef along with sliced apples, cubed cheese, and two mugs of tea. Hermione ate, completely engrossed in the book. For some of the spells, his teenage self had worked out variations, some subtle, some rather complex. A few of the variations didn't have explanations as to what the variation did. Other times it looked like he had created a spell – or curse. She recognized the abbreviation 'nvb' from his *Advanced Potions* book and knew it to mean non-verbal. On one page, the annotation read: *If preformed while still under the influence of pain potions – will cause great pain.* She didn't want to ask who had to be *under the influence of pain potions* – caster or victim – or how he knew this.

When the curfew bell tolled, Severus lowered his book to his lap and looked up at her. "You should go. Leave my book."

Hermione nodded and reluctantly set the book down reverently on the coffee table, her fingers sliding on the cover as she stood up. She looked at him, expecting him to see her out, but he merely arched an eyebrow and remained seated. "Good night, Severus," she said, turning to leave.

"Good night, Hermione. Don't stay up too late," he said softly as she walked away.

## N

Narcissa peered into the den, looking for Lucius, frowning because the room was empty. Although he'd been given a pardon by the Wizengamot for his participation during the first war, they were not as lenient at his second trial for his returning to the Dark Lord's side in 1995. However, there was very little actual evidence of Lucius' involvement.

He'd spent most of his time the first year of the Dark Lord's return recruiting or planning the retrieval of the Prophecy, one bungled job on a bridge over the River Stour, in Dorset, and the unfortunate battle later that same year in the Department of Mysteries, but that was all they could find against her husband. Lucius had spent the following year in Azkaban, serving time for his involvement in the Department of Mysteries. After that, from the time after his breakout up to the eve of the final battle, he had been held homebound and wandless by the Dark Lord. The rosewood wand Lucius had been given for the final battle hadn't responded well to him – so he'd been kept back in Hogsmeade with the Dark Lord and hadn't engaged in the actual final fight. In fact, he'd entered the castle and used shielding charms as he'd tried to find his wife or son. However, regardless, the Wizengamot had been less than forgiving, and Lucius had paid dearly for bearing the Dark Mark. Only his continued cooperation with the Aurors had kept him out of Azkaban this time.

As Narcissa walked to the library, she considered going to the stables to look for Lucius. She entered the large room, hoping to see Lucius or Draco seated comfortably with a book, but instead was surprised to see Severus on the ladder, checking through some of the darker Potions books. "Severus, what a nice surprise."

He turned slightly and nodded in greeting. "Narcissa, I hope you don't mind the intrusion. Lucius granted me permission."

"I don't mind; you're welcome here anytime, you know that. I was looking for Lucius," she replied, moving closer.

"It's been at least an hour since I've seen him," he said apologetically, and set the book he'd held back on the self.

She sighed silently and smiled. "How are things at the school?"

"Tolerable," he replied, climbing down with three books in one arm.

"And are things better between you and your Bonded mate?" she inquired, knowing he preferred that Mrs. Snape be referred to as his mate rather than wife.

His expression morphed into the blank mask he used when he didn't want his feelings known. That in itself spoke volumes. "We are getting to know each other," he said, placing two of the books on a table.

She smiled, one side of her mouth pulled back farther than the other, and one brow rose slightly. "From what I hear, things are not progressing very well." For the teeniest flicker, there was a stony glint in his eyes before his expression faded quickly back into his mask of indifference. "I see."

"You see what, precisely?" he asked, looking up from the book in his hands. His tone was still polite, but cool. She'd definitely hit a nerve.

"Oh, nothing," Narcissa replied with a knowing smile.

As she turned to go, he snapped the book closed and took a step in her direction. "Who has said what, precisely?"

She turned to face him once again. "It's not my place, but as a friend, I care about your happiness. You've had to deal with enough hardships – enough for several lifetimes – and I know things aren't going as you'd like. So as a friend, and a woman, this is my advice: let her get to know that witty, sarcastic sense of humor you have. Let her get to know how brilliant you are. Let her see your charm." She pointed one perfectly manicured finger at him. "It's in there, buried down deep, but every once in a while, it breaks free." She dropped her hand and tilted her head slightly. "And you should smile more."

"Me, smile?" he asked with a scowl. "You do remember whom you are addressing?"

"Severus, believe me or not, when you smile, your eyes light up, they sparkle and are entrancing." He scoffed at her, and she laughed softly. "You could try to sweep her into a corner for a heated kiss, press up against her in the library and kiss her neck when no one is around, or have her snuggle on your lap by the fire. Try reading to her; she would love that, I'm sure. When you go gather potions ingredients, pick a flower and give it to her. That would mean a lot to a girl like Mrs. Snape."

His eyes narrowed. "A girl like – who've you been talking to?"

His warning look didn't faze her in the slightest. She could almost see him cataloging her suggestions as he stared at her. "Don't interrupt. Spend time with her doing what she likes to do. Show an interest in what she does."

"We do. She reads or revises an essay while I read." He said briskly, his poise like a sailor on a ship, holding his book to his chest with his arms crossed. "I have shown plenty of interest in her scholastic pursuits."

"I have no doubt you have. She's in school, Severus. Surely, she likes other things; do them with her. Engage the girl in a discussion about a book she's read." Astoria was certainly right; there was a growing rift between them. "Take your meals together."

His lips curved into a smirk that didn't reach his eyes. "We do. She sits at the Gryffindor table, and I sit in the Headmaster's chair."

"Breakfast in your tower then," she suggested. She'd hoped that this would have been easier; they'd been friends for years. "Make an effort, Severus. This may surprise you, but talk to her. Women are vocal creatures. We have to hear you say how you feel and what you think."

"I know," he said with a smirk. "They also meddle."

Narcissa chose to ignore the last barb. "We can also be quite insecure. Give her compliments. You do know what a compliment is?" His eyes narrowed again, and she smiled. "See, it's not so hard to be romantic." He scowled again and she chuckled. "If you see Lucius, please let him know I'm looking for him."

"I will," he said, still staring at her. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome. If you'd like to stay for lunch, you're welcome; if not, give my best to Mrs. Snape," she said and then turned to leave him to his thoughts.

## S

Severus sat in the Great hall at lunch, watching the students, especially those sitting around Hermione. Although Ginevra sat on her left, Mr. Thomas had taken the seat on her right. Misses Blackpoole, Warwick, and Jameson, Hermione's dorm mates, sat across from Ginevra and Hermione. But several young men of her house, Messrs Sloper and Coppersmith, who sat to Miss Jameson's left, and Messrs Randell and Wevernthral, who sat on Thomas' right, were all clearly engaged by the conversation as well. It was apparent that his wife had gained popularity in her house, and yet she was remarkably untainted by the new attention.

Hermione's routine hadn't changed very much at all. He knew that she still preferred the quiet of the library to that of the Revision Hall or his presence in the Headmaster's tower, and the later irked him. He was through playing nice. He was going to get her; she was his wife, and things were going to progress.

A Rudbeckia flower lay on the table next to Hermione, one of Narcissa's favorites. He knew that the soft pink petals would darken, as if blushing, when one's emotions, especially embarrassment or lust, grew strong. The flower was light pink at the moment, which pleased him. The dark center was actually a hundred tiny dark seeds and a potent potions ingredient. The scent was also a favorite perfume for those few ladies who could afford it. However, the flower only bloomed in the spring and into late summer. It rarely ever bloomed this late in the fall, even in greenhouses, except by those few who had an affinity for magical floriculture. Yet, Hermione had one lying beside her. If she had an admirer, he'd kill him. Or give them enough detentions that they'd have no time to pursue his wife.

He timed his exit from the Great Hall so he could approach her. "Where did you get that?" he asked, indicating the flower when he caught up to Hermione.

"I don't know," she replied, waving off Miss Blackpoole, Miss Warwick, and Ginevra. "It came by owl and there wasn't any note. I had thought it came from you." The color of the flower intensified as she spoke, which pleased him.

He forced himself to relax. "I'm not the flowers and candy type," he stated.

"I know," she said, glancing quickly at the girls waiting for her. "I was just hoping... I'm going to be late."

"Come up tonight," he stated, not exactly making it a question.

She turned back to look at him. "May I finish the book you gave me Wednesday?"

"Yes." *Fine.* He'd pulled it out in anger, not really caring which one, and had only realized which one he'd offered after she'd left. It wasn't one he'd have normally allowed her.

"I have some research to do for my essays, but I can come up about eight-thirty?"

He nodded. *Okay, that gives me an hour and a half.* "I'll expect you tonight, then."

He watched her go with a newfound determination. Severus was tired of playing by the rules. Doing things by the guidelines of the school charter and dictates of the school governors was not getting him anywhere. It was time to be more aggressive in his relationship with Hermione. He'd been a student here at this castle for seven years and a teacher for seventeen, and he'd seen the angst of the young wizards, knew all the hiding places better than Mr. Filch or any other teacher at Hogwarts. In fact, he knew the castle even better than Black and Potter had when they'd been here. Severus smirked; he'd use the same ploys the boys did, only he wouldn't get caught.

He knew her schedule by heart, knew her favorite places in the castle, and he had the advantage of knowing what her coursework was in her subjects.

~H~

Hermione stood in the Potions section of the Restricted Section the next day, looking up at the binders. She made a surreptitious glance back at the portrait of Corcoran Maolduin to see if he was still watching her and frowned when she realized he was. The old Gaelic wizard considered himself a guardian of the Restricted Section and a friend of Madam Pince, and he frequently rattled on the students who wandered from the aisles for which they'd been granted permission. At least Hermione did have permission to be in the Potions section, as well as the sections for four of her other classes.

She had permission, but not for the project she was currently doing. She was searching for anything she could on the Médousa Potion, when she should have been looking up material on the Verso-Quixotically Potion, the one she and Ginny were working on as their N.E.W.T.-level project. Only there was hardly anything at all on the Médousa Potion. She found plenty on the Medullaoblongata Potion, but the only books to even mention the Médousa Potion variation did only that: mention it.

Hermione closed the book and put it back. She pulled out a thick book and opened it to the Potions index. The book reminded her of Severus' old book, only far less temperamental. Thinking of his book made her thoughts drift to him. Their last evening together had ended rather poorly. Well, several of them had recently, but his words from their last night together kept haunting her today.

*She had just closed the book and set it on the small side table to leave when he lowered his and stared at her. "It's ten of ten; I have to go," she said, rising from her seat. "I'll try to come up on Saturday, but I need to meet with Blake tomorrow and work with Lawrence on Friday."*

"Hermione," he said in the deep drawl he used when angry.

She looked over at him, wondering what the problem was. "What?"



He stood up, his hands curled and then relaxed at his sides. "Why do you refuse to spend time with me?"

"I spend time with you," she protested.

"You spend more time with your friends than with me – your Bonded mate," he said coolly, then his tone became even and low. "As per our agreement you're to spend evenings and weekends with me, but I've been lenient with you due to your studies. However, I have told you repeatedly that I want you here. With *me*."

*"I've been with you every night this week." She could see the tick in his cheek from gritting his teeth in frustration.*

"Hermione, it is expected that when magical betrothal charms are used to bind a couple, that the couple be allowed an adjustment period to get to know one another. It's not uncommon for the couple to live in separate rooms of the same domicile, or to have the witch move into the home of the wizard's family. I do believe that Mrs. Longbottom had Luna Longbottom move in with her during the adjustment period – just as I allowed you to reside with Harry Potter during yours. And only *because I knew that he would have no interest in you in a sexual nature due to his own Bonding with your friend Ginevra. I've been more than patient with you.*"

She pointed out, "Luna returned to school just as I have and no one is stopping her..." then held up her hands and closed her eyes for a second. She didn't want to fight him over this.

"It not the same," he said.

"It is very much the same," she stated and instantly regretted it.

The thing was she liked being in the dorm now that the girls accepted her. Alestra, Wendlynne, and Veronica had become her friends; Sunita had finally started treating her like a normal girl and not some celebrity, and she and Ginny – she loved sharing her evenings with Ginny. They were closer now than ever. Nadine and Deborah – well, they were gossips and usually kept to their own space.

*"I want to stay in the dorm with my friends," she stated.*

"Which I have allowed. All I've asked is that you spend evenings and the weekends with me because, as you so amply pointed out, you still see me as your stern, snarky professor. I have been more than generous, making allowances regarding your studies and revision times, but you still refuse to spend your evenings with me – we've yet to spend a weekend together. I have also abided by your wishes and have not pressed myself on you, physically. It's you *who hasn't upheld the agreement we made,*" he said softly and sternly.

The thing was, Ginny was asking her the same thing: *"Why aren't you spending more time with Severus?"*

"I do," Hermione replied as she checked Robberson's theory of matter rearrangement against Smeltings'.

"Hardly, you have been spending only an hour with him on the nights you see him," Ginny said, sitting crossed-legged at the foot of Hermione's bed.

"No, sometimes I stay for two," she replied, knowing that those times were far fewer.

Just last night when she'd returned to the dorm, Ginny had asked her why she was back so early.

*"I have revision to do and essays..." she said for the umpteenth time.*

"Gods, I'd give anything to have Harry here in the castle with me. I'd shag him senseless each night instead of sneaking out to shag in the Shrieking Shack."

Hermione looked up in shock. "Gin!"

Ginny sighed, her gaze upward as she stared into space. "It's been three weeks, and he's sooo busy," she said, closing her eyes. She opened them, and her gaze met Hermione's. "I can't believe that you're not itching to spend the night with Severus. I don't mean an hour or two, I mean all night! He'd allow it, I know he would."

"Gin!"

"I can tell – you're still holding back. Your still treating him like he's a guy from another house, and you're saving yourself. I mean, gods, Hermione, why? From what you've told me, the man can really kiss. Imagine what he could do if you'd let him. Merlin, what I wouldn't give to have all night with Harry."

"It's not the same as with you and Harry..."

It wasn't. She could still remember the soft gentle sounds coming from Ginny's bed when they'd thought she'd been asleep. She could also recall the forcefulness of how it had been with Severus at the Manor and at his home in Spinner's End. He'd taken her – it had been sex – not lovemaking. Sure it had been good when she'd visited him in jail – but really, sometimes he was just so... so... intense. Controlling. Demanding. It frightened her. Ron had never been like that – well, he'd never kissed her with such intensity. His kisses were sweet and gentle... and wet. And he'd told her he loved her. Every time. She knew he loved her – still loved her.

*Augh! I can't compare them. Severus isn't Ron – they're like night and day! A white knight and a rascalion... no, a scoundrel. No, Severus is more like a... a black knight... or Byronic hero. The dark, brooding, enigmatic, romantic... As it is, I barely make curfew, for crying out loud!* The last thing she wanted was to run into Filch after having an intense snog with Severus.

Making another furtive glance at the old Gaelic wizard, she moved down the aisle where he couldn't see her and drew out another potions book. She turned to the index and scanned down the list of potions and ingredients. Some of the ingredients of the Médousa Potion were listed, but not the rarer ones.

"What are you reading?" Severus asked smoothly from behind her.

Startled, she tried to turn around, finding that he was standing so close she accidentally elbowed him. "Oh, I'm sorry! I'm doing comparative research on the Medullaoblongata Potion," she stated.

He leaned closer, his body pressed against hers. "It's not in that book." His head was right next to hers; his words, soft and deep, were spoken right next to her ear. "I thought that you and Ginevra were brewing the Verso-Quixotically and Polyjuice Potions." His one hand now rested on the curve of her hip, and she could actually feel the heat of his hand even through her school robes.

"I – we are. I was – I'm interested in the Médousa Potion," she stammered.

"That potion is not taught at Hogwarts," he said, turning his head slightly, which only brought his lips closer to her ear. His other hand was now on her abdomen, effectively keeping her bum pressed against his front. "And there has been only a few successful attempts since its discovery."

"Only a few successful attempts..." she repeated, distracted by his closeness and the realization that if she didn't move she would feel his stiffening... She inhaled as she mentally shook off her train of thought. "But I thought that the potion was being used for medulloblastomas?"

"No, it's not. The first batch was an experimentation. The creator, Barrett Muldoon, did manage to repeat it, and it's use was documented, but he blew himself up not too long after. Most of his records were singed. That and he was notorious for being paranoid; he frequently used a variation of the Bedydrian Curse to hide the

documentations of his experiments."

Hermione tried to twist about to look at him. "It was a fluke?"

He took the book from her, and it levitated to its place on the shelf. "Most experiments are, at best, calculated risks. No matter how carefully you calculate the possible outcome or envision how the ingredients will react – in the end, it's pure hypothesis, trial, error, and discovery. That is why it's so frowned upon at Hogwarts – it's very dangerous to experiment with potions."

His voice was now smooth like silk, but she could sense the exhilarating thrill he must feel when experimenting by the tone of his voice. She turned around to face him, and his hands slid up on her rib cage under her robes as he pressed her against the pillar supporting the tall bookshelves. "Severus, we'll be seen," she protested. His lips brushed hers sensually. She rolled her eyes to try and see if anyone was at the end of the aisle, thankful that they were alone.

"I'm no adolescent, Hermione. I know how to be discreet. As for being observed, we are under the Dissimulata Charm and will be unnoticed. I could cast the Disillusionment Charm as well, if you'd like, but I rather enjoy watching your face." His fingers brushed her breasts, making her inhale sharply and her gaze snap back to him.

"Severus, no not here," she admonished him. He wasn't supposed to be doing this. "You'll lose your job. Professor McGonagall said—"

"Do you really think that I would do this if I wasn't absolutely sure that we'd not be seen?" he asked with a smirk.

She opened her mouth to protest, and he took advantage of her reaction by closing the short distance between them with a consuming kiss. His hand still cupped her breast; the other was at her waist, pinning her. His tongue stroked hers in a teasing dance, and his fingers made warm, kneading swirls even through her blouse and bra. "Do you have any idea how you make me feel?" he purred against her mouth.

"I have an inkling," she replied, and her eyes closed as he leaned into her. Hermione tried to match the light, gentle probing of his tongue with hers. His responding moan sounded like a feral purr. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, enjoying the heady feel his kisses gave her.

"I have to... revise," she tried to tell him, running her fingers through his hair.

"If you come see me tonight, we'll talk about your Potions project," he said silkily against her cheek. He bent lower, kissing the soft skin of her breast between the open buttons of her blouse. She placed her hand on his shoulders to push him away, but it didn't faze him as he ran kisses down her cleavage, pulling on her bra slightly so he could have more access to her tender flesh. He flicked her nipple under the edge of her bra with his tongue, sending more shock-like sensations shooting down her body to her core.

"Severus, please, I – I have to..." she said, and he captured her mouth with his, cutting her off. She closed her eyes, lost in his kiss, and her head fell back again against the pillar as he trailed kisses down her neck. Her cheek brushed his as she angled her head down, and his mouth claimed hers again. In the back of her consciousness, she heard the bell toll the hour. He stopped suddenly, and it took a second for her mind to register the fact and react.

He rested his forehead on hers, his breathing ragged against her skin. "If you come see me tonight, we'll talk about your Potions project," he repeated, his voice remarkably even.

She forced herself to think properly. "I have what I need for the Verso-Quixotically Potion and all my notes on the Polyjuice."

He moved back as he tried to button her blouse. She shook her head as she took over for him. *He'd had no problem undoing them*, she mused ruefully.

"Why Reginald gave you Verso-Quixotically Potion as a project astounds me – it's well below your skills," he stated.

"What would you have given me?" she asked. She ignored the look of disappointment that flickered across his face as she tucked in her blouse, then straightened and smoothed down her robes. "I want to do the Médousa Potion."

"The directions are incomplete," he stated.

She looked up at him in shock. "What?"

"Every version of the Médousa Potion I have is based upon a translation from the original version. But they vary, likely because of the Bedydrian Curse. It appears to affect every version, magically copied or hand copied – it doesn't matter – it's there." He stepped back slightly and crossed his arms.

"Professor Reynolds and I have been working on it, but we've been unable to determine the missing steps. That's why the Medullaoblongata Potion is still being used: Barrett Muldoon died before he published his potion, and he was too paranoid to trust anyone with his work. Of the Potions masters known to have tried to brew the Médousa Potion: five were permanently incapacitated from the backlash of the curse, three were moderately successful, but they were unable to replicate their success, but there were two who were successful enough to be able to recreate a viable potion. Unfortunately, one of those two developed senile dementia and his notes on the directions were lost; and the other successful Potions master was murdered – by me."

"Who?" she asked, staring at him, dumbfounded by his confession. "Dumbledore? Did he...?"

"No, not Dumbledore; contrary to everyone's belief – he didn't know everything. It was Aramound Gruener, a pure-blood that defied the Dark Lord. He was also a close friend of Dumbledore's and had been on friendly terms with Barrett Muldoon. His notes say that he found the missing ingredients, but it doesn't say what it or they are," he stated.

"But why did you kill him?" she asked as she mulled over his statement.

He sighed angrily.

She shook her head. She didn't mean it the way it had come out. "No, I mean, was it because Vol – he told you to?"

Severus relaxed slightly. "Master Gruener was in the Order – indirectly – but involved. When I had to create poisons or potions for the Dark Lord, Master Gruener would brew the antidote for St Mungo's. The Dark Lord had thought him to be a supporter. He felt betrayed and wanted him brought to him for punishment. The wizard was three hundred and fifty-nine and weak—"

"You made it quick and painless, where You-Know-Who wouldn't have," she finished for him.

"I had little choice, and he knew it. I was not alone," he stated. He looked over her shoulder at the books as he continued. "Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Lucius were with me; Lucius was searching for him downstairs – Rodolphus and Bellatrix were coming up from his kitchen..." He met her gaze, but his eyes looked haunted. "He asked me to take all his books, notes, and journals – to finish his work – and begged me to be merciful."

Hermione nodded in understanding; it was one of the ones he'd wanted to forget.

"I don't want—"

She shook her head as she looked up at him. "No, it's all right. If he asked you to take all his notes and journals, he must have known he was trapped... Is there any copy of Barrett Muldoon's original parchment? The cursed one?"

"Master Kirkwell Ogden had one, but when he passed away, his writings were divided up between myself, Master Terrell, and Master Reynolds. Raymond Terrell apparently doesn't have it, nor do I nor Professor Reginald. Reginald thinks the answers are among the annotations on the Medullaoblongata Potion in Master Ogden's journal... but none of them have been successful so far."

Hermione leaned back against the pillar and thought about what he'd just said. "The Bedydrian Curse disguises the text, even changing the variations. Mine showed us Elder Futhark, Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, Younger Futhark and Danish Rök runes..."

"What are you babbling about?" he asked, scowling and his eyes narrowing. "I'm quite capable of handling the Bedydrian Curse."

She looked up at him and smirked. "You are, yes. You are well versed in the Dark Arts and Charms. But is Master Terrell or Professor Reynolds?"

He didn't answer her. Instead he kissed her, a long, searing kiss, then wished her a good day and left. Hermione let out a deep sigh and turned back to her research, only this time for the Verso-Quixotically Potion.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

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Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

## Trying Romantic On

*Chapter 40 of 63*

Severus decided he's tired of playing by the rules.



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Trying Romantic On

When Hermione arrived in the Headmaster's office, Severus had been waiting for her. True to his word, Severus had seven books on the Polyjuice Potion plus nine books on various examples of the interactions between the primary ingredients and their magical properties. Their discussion was unlike any they'd had before, and certainly unlike any lecture he'd given when he'd taught the subject.

He showed her the variations that Polyjuice had taken over the centuries. She already knew that, according to myth, Merlin brewed the potion and used it for his 'shape-shifting' into various human forms, then later gave it to Uther to allow him to impersonate Gorlois so he could lie with Ygerne, thus making Uther father to Arthur. In the twelfth century, Marconus of Boscastle claimed to have rediscovered Merlin's 'shape-shifting potion' and profited from its use, illicitly, by seducing women whose husbands were away at war.

Severus then told her about his version of the Polyjuice Potion which allowed him to remain transformed for almost two hours. "Two hours? How did you do it?" Hermione asked, amazed. "The books all say the potion only lasts for up to an hour."

Severus smirked at her slyly and said smugly, "By accident, of course."

Hermione was fascinated as Severus explained that the life cycle of the boomslang had an effect on the quality of the skin which could enhance the efficacy of the potion. "I read an article in my fifth year by Suel Foster Penny, who discovered that the skins of older specimens, being more brittle, were easier to shred but were also less potent than the skins of the first few sheddings. Most of his contemporaries discounted his premises, but I thought it made sense. Likewise, Niphus Moufett's *Magicus Insectorum Theorartificium*, chapter nine, suggests that lacewing flies caught during their first week were more desirable since all the magical essence was weakened the longer they survived as adults."

She already knew that the average lifespan of the bugs was twenty to forty days.

"When I applied these two theories in my lab, they alone increased the efficacy of the potion by another fifteen minutes," he said. "I sold my batch to my dorm mates for several Galleons, and they wanted more. I brewed another batch of my improved Polyjuice Potion in my private lab, but when Avery used it, he claimed that it lasted an hour and forty-five minutes, another twenty minutes longer than it should have. I went over the directions again to try and determine why it happened, and I tried to repeat the process. It wasn't until I was looking for my robes, the ones that I usually wore for Care of Magical Creatures because they were thicker than my other ones, when I realized what had happened; I found some remnants of Acromantula web stuck to the cuff of my robes. Then I remembered seeing some remnants of Acromantula web stuck to the rim of my cauldron when I had cleaned it so I decided to experiment," he explained as she listened in rapt attention.

"Acromantula web? How did you get it?" Hermione asked, fascinated by his telling of his experiments. He made it all sound so easy.

"As you are well aware, Hagrid had released an Acromantula pair in the Forbidden Forest years ago." Severus toyed with a strand of her hair as he spoke. "I'd stumbled into an Acromantula web that afternoon, and I'd managed to escape the huge spider that day, but as I said, I still had remnants of the web on my robes. However, it wasn't until I returned to Hogwarts as a professor that I had opportunity to try again. After several unsuccessful attempts, I finally managed to reproduce the increased effect, but I

also realized that it wasn't the web I needed so much as the secretions from the spinneret glands. So I knew I had to capture an Acromantula, and I found I could capture one easily enough with the Levicorpus but that I had to cut off its legs and head with my Sectumsempra."

"But that's barbaric!" she gasped at his description.

He chuckled at her, a deep, rich, amused chuckle. "You wouldn't think so if you'd ever come across one. They're extremely dangerous monsters, Hermione. There is a reason their venom is a Class A Non-tradable ingredient; few who face them survive. It's unfathomable to me how Potter and Weasley managed to escape their lair in their second year. One three year old has a leg span of two meters and can capture and kill a fully-grown mountain troll. I've seen it not a pretty sight, I assure you. Fully grown, their leg span can reach over five meters, and they can capture and kill immature giants." He took a sip of his wine. "And one mated pair can produce thousands of offspring. The Centaurs have become quite adept at killing them, believe me."

Hermione nodded in understanding. Ron had said they'd barely escaped with their lives in her second year. She'd thought at the time he'd been exaggerating. She knew that even though Severus was relaxed, sipping on elf wine, he wouldn't really exaggerate about how dangerous the huge spiders were.

"Since they grow to be huge, it's easy to harvest the secretions from the spinneret glands located at the tip of their abdomen well, once you cut off their legs, that is," he stated. "I collected the venom to sell and used the secretions to increase my potion's efficacy." He handed her a ceramic jar with a twist off lid. "For you, fresh from an Acromantula's abdomen."

She stared at the jar in her hands and then looked up at him amazed. "You went out there and caught an Acromantula just for me? When? How...? Okay, you said how, but why?"

"I thought that maybe you and Ginevra might brew my variation of the Polyjuice Potion under my supervision, of course. If you and Ginevra can brew it three times, each time with the same efficacy and transformation duration periods, we will print your findings. In other words, you and Ginevra will validate my discovery and be published."

She smirked at him, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You mean you want us to prove you right?"

"I mean, you'll prove it's viable." He tipped her face up and kissed her briefly. "Even though I've brewed it and used it numerous times, it's not been verified. Each step of the process must be documented properly before a potion can be published. If you're interested, you may validate my discovery and publish your findings. Both you and Ginevra will be credited for proving the potion variation viable, but yes, I would be credited for its discovery. However, it will never be accepted unless properly verified, and I've never told a soul my secret. Until now. I will even provide you with the first sheddings of a bloomslang and freshly hatched lacewing flies."

Hermione sat in shock for a moment and then squealed, "Oh, Severus, thank you," as she flung herself at him when what he'd said sunk in.

His arms wrapped around her, and he pulled her onto his lap as he asked, "So, I take it you accept?" all too smugly.

"Yes, well, I'm sure I can convince Ginny, but yes," she said. "It will be fun to brew an improved version of the potion, even if your motive is to become famous."

He shook his head and chuckled at her. "Impertinent witch." One of his arms held her firmly as he leaned forward, making her body follow his as he set his wineglass on the table, and then pulled her back with him as he settled comfortably on the sofa. "Fine. Now, how about showing me your gratitude," he said silkily as he cupped her face and kissed her.

A half hour later, and a little disheveled, Hermione pulled away from him. "That was the bell for curfew!"

"Yes," he said drolly.

She shoved at him as she scrambled out from under him. "I'm late!"

"I'm Headmaster," he said.

She shook her head and exclaimed, "Filch!"

"What has he to do with anything?" he asked as she shoved a foot into one of her shoes.

"I don't want to be caught by him," she explained while bending over to find her other shoe under the sofa. When she caught sight of his scowl, she realized that she might not have conveyed her concern about being caught by Filch effectively enough; she knew that he would take one look at her and know she'd been snogging Severus. "I don't want detention with Filch for being out after curfew, especially if I have to explain why."

"You could simply stay here?"

She shook her head. "I..."

"Fine." He rose and pulled her to her feet. "Then, I shall escort you to your common room." She looked at the books and parchments. "Leave them. You and Ginevra meet with me and Professor Reynolds tomorrow night, and we'll work out your brewing schedule."

Hermione nodded and picked up her bag. "All right."

~\*~

The next morning, as they dressed for breakfast, Hermione told Ginny what Severus had suggested.

"You're kidding me, right?" Ginny asked. "Oh, my gods we'll be famous! Do you know what this means? We'll get royalties!"

"Royalties?" Hermione asked, confused. "No, Severus will. We will just get credit for validating his discovery."

Ginny shook her head. "I keep forgetting you're Muggle-born there are things you don't know. Look, no potion or spell can be published without proper validation. The creator cannot validate his or her own work it has to be validated by someone with an expertise or mastery in the art or field. Otherwise every magical accident would be published especially those no one can replicate. If Professor Reynolds supervises us and monitors our work, he can validate our research and give us accreditation... superior respondent academia. It's how it's done. We get credit for proving the potion works! Especially if Severus publishes his findings as well he'll get credit for the discovery, but we'll be credited as well. See? Oh, this is so exciting!"

Ginny's excitement was certainly contagious, and Hermione now knew exactly what Severus was offering.

"When do we start?" Ginny asked.

"Tonight. You and I are to meet with Severus and Professor Reynolds to arrange our brewing schedule. Oh, and Gin, Severus made changes to the Verso-Quixotically Potion as well. Mostly just preparation techniques and his 'once clockwise' stir..."

"Both?! He improved both? We get credit for both?!"

Hermione had never seen Ginny so elated before not even after any Quidditch victory. "Yes, he said that we could use his directions for both potions."

Ginny actually squealed as she spun around.

"One more thing, if we do this, I intend to push Severus and Professor Reynolds to let us help them on the Médousa Potion," Hermione stated. "I want that to be our N.E.W.T. project."

Ginny was, thankfully, serious again. "What's that the Médousa Potion? You've mentioned it before."

Taking her hands and drawing her to sit on her bed with her, Hermione explained what she knew of the Médousa Potion. "It's dangerous, because the original versions are hidden by a variation of the Bedydrian Curse, and apparently, there are missing steps or ingredients... but think, Gin, what if we help uncover the missing pieces and help them brew it!"

Ginny lunged forward and hugged her. "I knew getting you to partner with me was a brilliant idea!" She sat back, grinning with her hands clasped tightly between her knees and her arms extended. "Do you think they'll let us?"

"I'm not taking no for an answer," Hermione stated.

~S~

Severus watched Ginevra and Hermione from his seat at the staff table. Judging by the elated expression on Ginevra's face, Hermione had told the redhead his proposal, and she'd accepted. *Okay, Narcissa, if that isn't getting involved in what Hermione likes to do, I don't know what is.* Telling Hermione about his discovery and his experiences with the Acromantula had been awkward, but he'd dropped his normal tendency of being guarded of what he said and tried being witty, even if he'd felt silly doing so.

He decided on which action he should try next. When Reginald rose to prepare for his first lesson, Severus rose too and intercepted him as he walked past the house tables. "Reginald, a word?" he asked smoothly.

"Of course, Headmaster," Reginald said with a quirk of his lip as they walked out of the Great Hall together. "I'll even allow you two."

Severus ignored the taunt. "I've agreed to supervise my wife and Mrs. Potter in experimenting with their assigned potions," he stated.

Reginald stopped and turned to face him. "You did what?!"

"I'll walk with you to your classroom," Severus stated.

Reginald nodded, and they crossed the Entrance Hall together. "All right, give?" Reginald finally insisted as they descended the stairs.

"During my apprenticeship, do you remember my mentioning that I'd improved the Polyjuice Potion?" Severus asked.

"So you claimed," Reginald stated with a smirk. "I've yet to see proof, but Master Ogden was frequently furious with you for your experiments, so I'm not all that surprised."

Severus nodded in affirmation.

"So, when do I get to know what variations *my students* will be doing and exactly how much experimenting will be involved?" Reginald asked, looking sideways at him.

Severus stopped and smiled. "Tonight. The young ladies will be meeting us in your office to work out their brewing schedule."

Reginald crossed his arms. "Well, thank you for informing *me*," he said with a curl of his lip.

"You're welcome," Severus stated, turning to leave. "Until lunch."

"Yeah, lunch," Reginald said and turned to leave in the direction of his classroom.

~2~

Hermione stepped out from her Transfiguration class and leaned against the wall as she checked through her essay folder. Although she had a free period now, she had Ancient Runes next, and she wanted to make sure that she had her translations ready to turn in. Satisfied, she shoved the folder back into her bag. She and Blake had finished the third set of translations, this time on ancient Egyptian cursive hieroglyphic script and hieratic.

Bill Weasley, working as a locum tenens professor assisting Professor Bocher for several weeks now, had been lecturing them on the cursive hieroglyphic script and the charms needed to break Egyptian curses the ancient Egyptian wizards used to protect their secrets. Today the students would be tested on their ability to successfully demonstrate the use of the charms before being given cursed documents to translate on their own.

She was looking forward to see Bill again.

Hermione hitched her bag on her shoulder and headed for the Revision Hall to meet up with Lawrence and his friends to work on their Arithmancy equations. She hoped that Jack Chen and Tadashi Takara, two other students in her class, would be there as well. She wanted to compare her multi-linear quadratic solutions with them.

She sidestepped some first-years running down the corridor toward her and turned, watching them turn the corner, one actually sliding on his feet. She grinned when she remembered doing the same to get to classes on time.

"Hermione."

Severus' silky voice made her jump and turn around quickly. "Oh, you startled me," she said, placing her hand on her beating heart.

"I'm sorry for that," he said smoothly. "But I'm glad to have run into you." He reached out his hand, placing it on her waist, and drew her closer to the wall. To her surprise the rock gave way, and she found herself in a dark archway. He leaned closer to her and nudged her cheek with his nose. "I believe you have a break in your schedule, do you not?" His fingers tipped her face upwards as his lips sought out hers in the dark.

"Yes, but I-I am me-meeting a few fr-friends in the R-revision Hall," she stammered against his insistent lips on hers. The man was insatiable!

"I only wanted to see you," he said, his fingers stroking her jaw as he placed feather-light kisses on her cheek, the corner of her mouth and lips.

"You can't see me, it's pitch black here," she pointed out, tipping her head back as his mouth moved along her jaw.

His other hand moved around her and drew her body tightly against his. "Feel you, then, if you must be so literal." The back of his finger stroked her face as he kissed her neck. Hermione reached out and clasped his robes to keep from swaying on her feet, which only made them lean backwards against the rock behind her. "Hmm, much better," he purred just below her ear.

Even in the dark, she closed her eyes at the sensations he aroused in her. "Severus?"

"Yes," he drawled out slowly, his mouth capturing hers.

Unfortunately, whatever her thought had been, it was immediately erased from her mind. In the dark, her senses were on high alert, her sense of smell catching even the subtle hint of woods, oak leaves mixing with his familiar scent. She was acutely aware of him, every aspect of him, even though her mind was fogged with that

lightheadedness he frequently evoked. Her skin tingled under the delicate touch of his fingers and the warmth of his body so close to hers. Even her hearing seemed overly attuned to every possible sound: her heartbeat and his breath that warmed her skin on each exhalation, the subtle taste of tea on his tongue...

His hand moved slowly down her neck and pulled open the front closure of her robe. She inhaled sharply when she felt his hand slip under it and trail lightly over her breast. "I l..."

"You what?" he purred seductively, his voice seeming loud in her ears even though she knew it was only a soft drawl, one he'd used often with her.

She wrapped her arms around him. "I can't stay here," she protested.

He chuckled, a low, deep sound that sent shivers through her. "Those boys can wait," he said languidly, passionately deepening his kiss.

When he stopped, she was breathless, her heart pounding, and her equilibrium off. She leaned forward, clutching onto him for support. She suddenly realized her blouse was open. "You are *soo* impossible! I have to go face everyone now, and you're undressing me?!"

"I'm impossible?" He stood up and moved away. How far she couldn't tell, but she could sense that he was still in front of her.

She tried to see him in the dark.

"*Lumos*," he said, and his wand emitted a soft glow.

"Thank you," she said, buttoning her blouse. His gaze was transfixed on her hands as she made herself presentable.

"Will I see you tonight?" he asked, making a flick with his wand to increase the light.

"Of course you will; you're supervising Ginny and me, remember?" she replied and looked up at him, then smiled at his scowl. "And there is, of course, time afterwards, if you'd like."

He reached out and stroked her cheek. "Afterwards, then."

He opened the archway and Hermione gasped. They were standing in the short passageway through the thick stone wall that led to an old, unused room.

"This way, Hermione," he said as he led her out of the archway and into the corridor as casually as if they'd simply left the classroom together, instead of having just had a snog in the dark.

The light blinded her for a second as her eyes adjusted.

"So, what are you and Mr. Carlin working on during your revision period?"

She looked up at him amazed. "Linear probabilities and congruent variables," she replied. "How did you...?"

\*

He simply raised one eyebrow as he smirked at her and started walking in the direction of the Revision Hall. She hurriedly caught up with him *Sweep her into a corner for a heated kiss check*, he thought with a satisfied smile. He'd restrained himself, even though she'd completely surrendered in his arms and swooned when he'd abruptly stopped. *Soon*, he told himself. *Soon*. It had been a very satisfactory twenty minutes.

Hermione looked up at him, and a soft blush colored her face and neck; however, he was already planning his next move.

"Do you have to look so smug?" she asked, hitching her bag higher on her shoulder.

He drew his wand and said, "*Ameliorate mōres*," with a minute flick of his wand at her bag, and it instantly became lighter.

"Thank you," she said, mentally categorizing that one for later use.

"Any time," he replied. He stopped at the juncture of the corridor. "I'll take my leave of you. Until tonight," he said with the quickest flicker of a wink. He turned on his heel and scowled at some girls lollygagging in the corridor. They immediately scurried away. *Oh no, I'm not losing my touch. Not at all.*

\*

"What kept you?" Lawrence asked when Hermione dropped her things on the table and sat next to him.

"I was I was detained," she replied.

"So, how is the Headmaster?" Lawrence asked nonchalantly, but he had a bemused smirk on his face.

*How? Bugger.* "He's fine," Hermione said as she pulled out her pages of equations, hoping he'd not seen her blush. She glanced around the room. "Where are Jack and Tadashi?"

"Oh, you know, they probably stopped on the way to have a snog," he said casually as he wrote on his parchment. "You know how lovers are."

Now, she knew she was blushing because her face suddenly felt like it was on fire.

\*

"Good work today," Bill said as he approached Hermione's desk after class.

"Thank you," she replied, looking up at him after storing her book in her bag. "Your lecture was really fascinating."

"Thanks," he said, standing with his legs slightly parted and his arms crossed like some sailor on the deck of a ship. With his long hair tied back in a thong and his fang earring, it was almost comical. "So, how are things going with the ol' Bat?"

"He's not a bat," she snapped softly as if he were Harry or Ron and not her per diem, locum tenens professor. "And I'm sure he's fine."

He held up a hand in supplication. "Hey, just asking. Mum wanted to know."

She stood up and shouldered her bag. "What else does she want to know?"

"Oh, the usual. Is he treating you right? Are you adjusting to your Bonding? Are you doing all right in your studies? Are you sleeping where are you sleeping? Is he nice to you? that was Dad's, by the way. Kingsley wants to know if you've made your decision regarding the annulment or should he keep the hold on your file... That sort of thing." His cocky smile was contagious, and she smiled in return. "So, do you mind if I sit with you and my sister for dinner?"

"I'd be delighted," she replied. "And do assure your parents that Severus is treating me well enough, he's being nice, hasn't locked me away in his tower, and yes, I'm doing fine, eating and sleeping, and I'm keeping up on all my schoolwork."

"Touché," he said and chuckled at her sarcasm. "But I already knew that." He held up his hand. "Shall we go? I'm hungry, and I would like to see my sister."

3

The girls had left Reginald's office only twenty minutes ago, and Ginevra had indicated that she wanted to spend her evening with her brother, Bill, so Severus had granted her permission to fly in the pitch with him until the lower-years' curfew.

Severus sighed at his appearance. He'd opted to wear only black slacks and a lightweight, black turtleneck to appear casual. Muggle casual. He'd transfigured the coffee table into a huge Alpine lambskin rug, and Mispy had brought a tray with melted chocolate in a small pot that would keep it warm for hours and small bowls of strawberries, grapes, sliced bananas, marshmallows, cubes of brownies, and pound cake to dip into the chocolate. Two glasses and a pitcher of spiced cider sat on another tray on the floor. The fire in the grate danced on the ever-burning logs, and he'd selected a light, classical guitar on the magical play box the equivalent of a wizards' cassette player.

Hopefully, Hermione wouldn't protest to curling up with him, eating the fruit and relaxing before the fire. He'd purposefully had the house-elves serve lemon tapioca for pudding at dinner, knowing that it wasn't something Hermione preferred.

When she arrived in his sitting room, her eyes widened slightly as she took in his appearance, then she looked around with a wary smirk on her face. "Let me guess, seduction one-o-one?"

"An evening without books or scholastic pursuits to talk and get to know each other," he replied smoothly. "The pudding tonight left much to be desired, and I know how much you enjoy chocolate." He indicated the foods on the heavy pewter platter on the rug.

As expected, her eyes as well as her smile widened in delight. "Chocolate fondue?"

Severus lowered himself to the rug and watched with delight as she knelt beside him. He speared a banana slice on one of the forks, dipped it into the chocolate and held it out for her. He nearly choked, watching her lean forward with her hands on her knees as she accepted the morsel with her eyes half closed. He tried another, this one she pulled off the fork with her fingers and popped it in her mouth.

"Oh, heaven," she replied, licking her lip and then her fingers. The truly innocent display was surprisingly erotic.

Severus picked up a strawberry, dipped the tip in the chocolate and held it out for her. Smiling, Hermione took the offering, her lips barely grazing his fingertips. The shock he felt was both pleasant and unexpected. He repeated the move, watching as Hermione leaned forward, her eyes nearly closing as she ate from his fingers. He exhaled slowly, realizing that this exercise would really test his self-control. He sipped on his cider, smirking at the lingering taste of liquor, possibly the same that had been used in the chocolate.

Hermione picked up a cube of pound cake and, after coating one corner with the fondue, offered it to him. He mimicked her actions, his lips brushing her fingertips. He smirked at the not so faint taste of liquor in the melted chocolate.

He summoned a pillow and placed it beside her. "Why don't you relax?" he suggested, taking another bit of banana and coating one half with the chocolate. Hermione settled herself on her side and accepted his offering. He picked up a grape and held it out to her, watching her lips as she bit off half the fruit. He popped the other half in his mouth.

"How in the world did you know about fondue?" she asked, taking a drink from her own glass.

He wasn't about to tell her that the house-elves had thought of it; all he'd asked for was some delectable chocolate dessert for two to share. "Not to admit my age, but it was the rage in the seventies," he replied, holding a chocolate-covered strawberry above her mouth, just far enough that she had to strain her neck to reach it. She laughed as she wiped the bit of chocolate from the corner of her mouth. "You?"

"Christmas it's a family tradition. Although," she said, preparing a strawberry for him, "this is much more fun than sitting at the table listening to Christmas carols."

He engulfed her offering with his mouth, his lips sliding on her fingers as he sucked in the fruit. Her inhalation was amusing, as was the way her eyes widened and her pupils dilated.

It almost became a game, teasing each other as they ate. Severus picked up a large grape, stuck it in his teeth and leaned forward. He cupped the back of her head and brought his mouth close to hers. She giggled softly and bit off the end of the grape. He took advantage of her nearness and kissed her, transferring his half of the grape to her mouth. He found that the taste of strawberries and chocolate on her tongue was tantalizing, and he shifted closer so he could kiss her properly.

Eventually Hermione rolled onto her back with her head on the pillow. He dipped another morsel and fed it to her, being sure to get some of the chocolate on her lips. She reached up, and he stilled her hand with his. "Allow me, please," he said softly before carefully licking the gooey bits off her lips with the tip of his tongue and then kissing her passionately. She sighed and turned toward him. Moving the tray with a wandless spell, he moved closer to her and deepened the kiss. He kissed her languidly: light, teasing kisses that turned more demanding and then backed off again. He kissed her nose and then her neck, nuzzling the spot by her ear that made her react so deliciously, almost wantonly. One of the erogenous spots he'd discovered.

He hated that she wore a sweater, because he knew she wouldn't allow him to take it off, and it didn't have any buttons to slyly pop open. Nevertheless, it was soft and luxurious to the touch. Slowly, he caressed and kneaded her body, exploring her with one hand, while ensuring she was properly distracted by what he was doing with his mouth and tongue. She undulated under him, her kisses sweet and tender when he was, fierce and unrelenting when he became the aggressor. Her hands sought out him as well, her delicate fingers tracing his abdomen muscles through his turtleneck jumper, and sliding her hand up his arms and down his back. He made sure that her explorations went unimpeded, lifting or shifting, all the while acutely aware of her touch.

His hand slipped under her sweater, and she inhaled sharply. "Relax, I'm not going any farther than you allow me to," he purred in her ear, smiling when she relaxed.

"All right," she murmured.

After a while, he summoned a pillow, rolled onto his back taking Hermione with him so she now lay snuggled alongside him and tucked the pillow behind his head. She rested her head on his shoulder, her hand making lazy circles and swirls on his person. "This is nice," she said dreamily.

"Yes, it is," he said, then grumbled to himself, *Since this is all I'm allowed.* He turned his head to kiss the top of hers. She looked up and lifted herself up, leaning down to kiss him. Automatically, his hand rose so he could slide his fingers in her hair. She kissed him for a while, even deepening the kiss hesitantly at first until he silently encouraged her to take more aggression by opening his mouth wider and guiding her with his tongue.

After a while she slumped back down and fitted herself against him comfortably.

The log crackled.

The damned upper-year's curfew bell tolled.

"I have to go," she said, sounding slightly dreamy as if she'd nearly fallen asleep.

He tilted her face up and kissed her one last time before rising with her and walking to the door. He escorted her to the portrait of the Fat Lady, kissed her tenderly and

wished her a good night.

Frustrated, but knowing that he was at least succeeding in his seduction, he turned heel and headed for the battlements to go fly off some of his antsy feelings and clear his head.

Forty minutes later, he landed on the Astronomy tower, chilled, tired, but not the least bit clearheaded or less frustrated. He decided to walk his rounds on his way back to the Headmaster's tower.

There wasn't even a wayward student breaking curfew that night to appease his disquiet.

\*

Hermione lay in bed, staring up at the canopy. Tonight had been the most romantic night of her life, just like out of a romantic movie or book. He couldn't have planned it more perfectly.

She rolled on her side and touched a finger to her lips. His kisses had been so amazing, soft and gentle one moment, deeply passionate and hungry without the desperation or crushing, demanding forcefulness like he'd been before. And this time, he'd let her kiss him.

She sighed, tucked her hand under her cheek and looked out the window at the night sky. The moon was out, and the stars looked like thousands of tiny dots of light, twinkling in the velvety black sky. Severus had been dropping his guard around her more often, allowing her to see his more human side. He had a witty, sarcastic sense of humor she was getting to know, and his intelligence they could talk for hours about any subject; she was sure of it.

Sighing, she rolled back onto her back and put her hands on her face *Would it really be so hard just to give into him? It's not like he's impeding my school work or preventing me from seeing my friends.* Sighing again, she lowered her hands to rest them on her chest.

*I wonder how Larissa and Theodore are doing?* Neville and Luna were writing to each other every other day it seemed, but Luna was feeling a strain from missing him so much. She was even more distracted and dreamy than ever before. Ginny and Harry were apparently doing fine. Ginny was sneaking out of the castle two nights a week to see Harry. She hoped that Severus never found out about that.

As she crawled into bed, she wondered about Ron. He'd only written her five times, and each letter had sounded the same: he was fine; Auror training was hard; he wished he had more time to play Quidditch or to attend a game; he hoped she was happy, that Snape was being good to her and hadn't hurt her. He'd ended each one with his parents sending her their best, and he'd signed each one:

*I still love you,*

Ron

~4~

Severus walked down the path beside Hermione as she chatted with Ginevra and Luna, talking about the articles in *The Quibbler* of all publications.

The students only had five hours in town as was arranged with the Minister, from ten in the morning to three in the afternoon, and they had to all stay on the main streets of shops and not wander away. Severus had insisted that each Head of House take the responsibility of not only informing the students of the restrictions but chaperoning as well. Even John Dawlish had been enlisted to stand guard at the school gates with Hagrid.

In the village, every Junior Auror and Auror trainee was present, with at least two posted at the entrance to every other shop. Severus spotted Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley stationed outside of Honeydukes, Miss Chang and Auror Aaron Brodes guarding the Three Broomsticks, and Mr. Finnigan standing outside the stationery shop with Auror Fairley. All of them seemed to be wearing the same dark blue, belted robes. Severus shook his head. *So much for having discreet, competent security detail; might as well put out a sign Junior Aurors and Auror trainees on duty, inexperienced and inept security on duty. Don't they realize that seasoned Death Eaters could run havoc here and get away with murder? Junior Aurors are not trained to fight those who are ready to kill. Well, with the exception of Potter and Weasley... maybe Finnigan, but the rest?* He scanned the street discreetly and forced himself not to frown.

Hermione looked up at him, and a worried crease formed between her brows. "The security," he voiced his concern softly and stopped.

She looked around, not as slyly as he'd done, and then shrugged when she looked back at him. "Harry and Ron are here."

*Oh yes, that makes all the difference,* he wanted to tell her but, again, refrained. "Yes," he started to say 'Potter' and bit back the formal addressment. Hermione wanted him to call her friends by their given names, a concession he'd acquiesced to but wasn't really ready to accept. "Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley are." There. That was as informal as he could get. Hermione smirked at him, and he sighed to himself. If it was that important to her, he supposed that he could at least try.

Ginevra ran up to Harry, but he held out a hand to stop her. "Gin, I can't, not today. I'm on duty and..." Hermione and Luna moved closer to them. "There have been threats. Just go inside and don't linger unnecessarily on the street today, okay?"

*All right, so the boy is finally showing some common sense, a sense of duty and restraint. There is hope for him yet!* Severus thought.

"Sure," Ginevra replied, and Severus refrained from rolling his eyes at the pouty look Ginevra had at the standoffish behavior.

Ronald stroked Ginevra's arm reassuringly, and Luna beamed at Ronald, her hands clasped behind her back. "The blue makes your eyes bluer," she said, and then turned to Harry. "Congratulations on leading your second raid."

Harry mumbled his thanks the same time Ronald so eloquently replied, "Er, thanks, Luna," and turned to his sister.

"Snape almost had to cancel all Hogsmeade weekends, but with the added security, things should be fine," Ronald stated and looked up over his sister's shoulder. "Headmaster."

"Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter," Severus greeted them politely and turned to survey the street. "I'll wait here, Hermione." Hopefully, his past associates would also consider this 'added security,' although Severus doubted it.

"Sure, Severus," Hermione answered, a bit pointedly. "I won't be long."

Severus turned to look at her and smirked. *Use their given names around her.* "Take your time," he said smoothly.

"I'll see if I can get permission to visit after," Harry whispered to Ginevra, brushing his lips on her cheek.

"I'd like that," she whispered back, grinning up at him with joy.

Harry winked at her. "Get inside. And remember, don't dally on the streets."

Ronald tried to show the girls some modicum of courtesy and opened the door for them, which meant that his attention was focused on the girls not on his duties. "It's good



to see you," he said.

"Thank you, Ronald," Hermione replied, smiling at him.

The boy's ears flushed, and he looked away, far too telling for Severus' comfort. He'd hoped by now that the boy would have found other interests, but apparently he still harbored feelings for his wife. Severus retained his composure, watching both the street and the interaction with an appearance of cool detachment. Hermione entered the shop and looked back at him; Severus nodded politely to her and gave her a nonverbal indication with his eyes to go shop. She smiled and turned her attention to the confections.

"It's good to see you, too." Luna said as she passed Ronald and followed Hermione inside.

Severus turned to Harry and inquired about the threats. Either due to Severus' involvement with the Aurors or his position as Headmaster, Harry was openly forthcoming with the information. Nothing he said surprised Severus in the least. "So, general threats, nothing specific or directed to anyone individual in particular?" he asked.

"Nope," Ronald said, pausing as some students walked passed them to enter the shop. "There are, of course, the concerns for Hermione's safety and your own," he said, then paused as some students exited the shop, "but so far only a few letters sent by unbanded owls."

After the war it became common practice to have all personal and business-owned owls given a color-striped band on their left leg with a small silver, numerically stamped tag specifying the identity of the ownership.

"Maybe we should move a bit?" Harry suggested, backing a few steps so they now stood at the window, barely enough to give them complete privacy, but still close enough to their assigned post.

Severus nodded and took the few steps necessary to be close enough for a private conversation, but not too close as to block Harry's view, and stood with his back to the window. "I'd hardly think Dragen would make an overt gesture to make any plans he concocted known. He'll want the element of surprise and have a decoy of some kind to draw attention away from his intended target." Ronald stood next to him, facing Harry, angled to watch the other direction down the street.

"How well do you know him?" Harry asked.

Severus waited for the group leaving the shop to pass and then for a small cluster of students entering the shop. "Not as well as I'd like given the circumstances. Even though I knew his cousin well, I don't really know how similar they are. I can only make assumptions. However, I do know that Dragen used the same curses as his cousin and with the same efficiency. They were both raised by the same governess, but Dragen attended Durmstrang due to his mother's family's influence. Dragen is younger by five years, and he lost his wife in the war she fell into disfavor with the Dark Lord." He searched his memory for any real relevant information. "Considering his recent actions, however, I believe that he was close to his cousin."

"What did his wife do?" Ronald asked.

Severus pursed his lips as he tried to remember. "I think it had to do with her failure to recruit significant numbers of the Durmstrang students." He turned his head to look Ronald in the eye. "Not as many of the Slavic pure-bloods rejoined when the Dark Lord returned. Some tried to hide; others simply made promises to do various..." He waited as a group of girls walked by, many of them ogling the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice and the Wonder-Boy-Sidekick and giggling. "They made promises to recruit and to pursue the Dark Lord's interests in the countries they were residing. Most failed and were considered deserters. No one who was Marked, and I mean *no one*, left the Dark Lord."

"Like Karkaroff," Harry said with a sigh, ignoring a gaggle of giggling sixth-years.

Severus nodded. "Like Karkaroff. Only the past associates and supporters who had remained unmarked were able to hide. Like Milos Klimnits, Kazimir Maschke, Boris and Miesha Garst, Anatol Schimke, and Dimitri and Ondrea Vondran, some of the parents of the Durmstrang students who were visiting during your fourth year." He could tell that the names meant nothing to the boys. "I suppose you never bothered to get to know the boys from Durmstrang that year. Pity."

"Harry and I had other things on our mind that year," Ronald said defensively.

"A missed opportunity," Severus said as Hermione and her friends exited the shop. "Konrad Vondran was Keeper for the Vratsa Vultures in Bulgaria, but he's made it known he'd like to play for the Ballymena Banshees in Ireland, and Kazimir Maschke III is going to be playing for the Chudley Cannons next season. He's asked to visit with Hermione." He's asked to visit with Hermione."

Hermione looked delighted. "Kazimir! In England?"

"Yes," he said with a smirk, "although, he's yet to confirm as to whether or not he'll accepted the Malfoys' invitation. I believe Viktor Krum and Konrad Vondran have also been invited to their home for Christmas through the New Year." Severus didn't bother to conceal his smirk at the look on Ronald's face at that announcement. "I believe, my dear wife, that you and I are invited to attend as well." Hermione looked skeptical as he took her arm with his.

"Are you serious? Kazimir Maschke is playing for the Cannons?" Ginevra asked in shock.

Ronald nodded. "They had to drop three players after this last season: two to injuries and one is quitting to have a family. I know they recruited a Beater from Portugal, Baltazar Bartholommeo Gonçalves. Plus, the team is under new management."

"It's Bartolomeu Gonçalves, Ron," Ginevra corrected him. "Baltazar Gonçalves is his brother. I'd heard that if Bartolomeu Gonçalves makes the team, Baltazar will attend Hogwarts for his last two years." She looked at Severus as if to silently inquire as to the validity of the rumor.

Severus shrugged. "I cannot confirm his transfer. Harry, Ronald, a pleasure. Please come up to the castle for dinner. I'd like to talk to you both in private," Severus said. It was a lie, but Ginevra looked pleased.

As they walked away, Severus leaned down to whisper in Hermione's ear, "If you like, I can make a veiled suggestion to Narcissa regarding your friends. They are famous, you know, and would add color to her guest list. Besides, Narcissa wants to throw us a Bonding reception." Luna smiled at him, even if Hermione appeared somewhat apprehensive at the idea, and Severus knew that, somehow, he'd see that it happened.

Severus guided Hermione and her friends to Scrivenshaft's to buy ink and then to Gladrags to buy Hermione new robes. When Hermione had stepped from the dressing room wearing a robe in a Mediterranean green color, Severus nodded approvingly, doing the same when she'd tried a golden copper one and then a garnet-colored robe as well. He held up a long, elegant, form-fitting, camel opera coat with fur trim at the collar for her to put on and smiled at the fit. "I'd like to have these sent to the school by owl," he stated to the shop assistant.

Hermione turned from where she'd been admiring the coat in the mirror and gaped at him. "Severus, why...?" she started to ask and was silenced by his smirk.

"First, it's nice to see you in robes. Secondly, this attire is more appropriate for a witch." He laughed at her suspicious expression, adding, "In case my great-grandfather wants to see you again, I can't have my wife wearing the same robes each visit." He turned to the assistant. "She'll require some formal robes."

Ginevra, who'd been fingering the sleeve to feel the butter softness of the wool, turned and stared at him, too. "You're serious about the Malfoys?"

"Yes, and it would behoove you to look at formal attire as well," he said with a smirk. "I'm certain that Harry can well afford it." Ginevra ran out of the shop, presumably to ask Harry's permission. *Young people. It is the boy's duty after all.*

When Ginevra returned, with Harry now standing guard at the shop entrance, the assistant had armfuls of robes for the girls to try on. In the end, Ginevra chose a lovely scooped-neck robe in Christmas green. Hermione chose an elegant black velvet gown with a wide neckline that left her shoulders bare. The open cutwork across the neckline also encompassed the sleeves and was decorated liberally with black crystals. Luna was longingly eyeing a lovely silver robe decorated with tiny aurora crystals. Severus asked the shop assistant to hold the silver robe. He'd personally send a message to Augusta Longbottom regarding the robes and the impending invitation.

"It's true? We'll be invited to the Malfoys' ball?" Ginevra asked Severus quietly as Hermione asked, "I thought you said *you thought* she would invite them not that it had been confirmed."

He placed his hand on her lower back to guide her from the shop. "They're my friends, Hermione. Yes, Ginevra, I'm quite certain that you'll be invited, considering how your Bonded mate stood up for them at their trials. I was going to make it a surprise. Or don't you like surprises?" he asked as they exited the shop.

"I like surprises just fine, but I still wish you would've told me," Ginevra stated. Hermione turned to say something to Ginevra and Luna, but Luna was staring at the sky.

"They really are quite aerobatic, flying freely like that," Luna said dreamily, indicating the thestrals that were making loops in the air above the castle. "I love surprises. I've heard that the Malfoys throw very elaborate parties."

Severus lowered his head, mentally shaking it for looking upward at the thestrals. "Yes, Mrs. Luna, they do," he replied. He still wasn't used to thinking of the girls by their given names, especially since technically they were still his students.

"Grandmother Longbottom wants to hold one," Luna stated. "She's already asked me who I want to invite." She looked at Hermione and Ginevra. "Of course it will be you, Harry and Ronald. I have few friends." She turned and looked at Severus as if just realizing he was standing there. The girl could be quite unnerving at times. "Of course, you're included, but please don't make Neville nervous. I'd hate for him to be unnerved."

Severus smirked at her. "I'll do my best and I'm sure Hermione will keep me in line." Hermione said his name in shock over his comment, and he laughed softly. "How about an hour in the bookshop? There is one in Dove Town I've wanted to go to sometime," he said, his attention diverted to three fourth-years acting up outside of the apothecary. "They have an extensive classics section."

Ginevra, who'd been looking down the street, turned and stared at him, too. "You're leaving?"

"No, not today," Severus said as he indicated that they walk on. "If you like, I'll ask Auror Blume to have Harry and Ronald escort you back to the castle," he said and smirked at her.

"Would you? I mean, I'd appreciate it," Ginevra replied and exited the shop.

Hermione turned to Severus as soon as he'd closed the door to the shop, and asked, "When would we go? Or *is this* another surprise?"

He placed his hand on her lower back to guide her to the next shop. "I thought to make it a surprise, Hermione. Or don't you like surprises?" he asked again with a smirk. He spotted Harry and Cho talking to Reginald and wondered what about.

"It will be nice to spend some time with Harry and Ronald," Luna stated wistfully.

"So, how about lunch and a butterbeer?" Ginevra suggested, looping her arm with Hermione's. "Before Severus here absconds with you to the bookshop?" Hermione stared at Ginevra. "Oh, c'mon, you know you want to go it's a bookshop! Besides, I now have permission to spend my evening with Harry at the castle!"

He rolled his eyes heavenward and followed the girls to the Three Broomsticks. Severus paid for her friends' drinks and leaned back in his chair, holding his ale as they talked. At least he had the bookshop to look forward to.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*For those of us who aren't familiar with the metric system, the sentence Severus said about the size of a Acromantula would read: "One three year old [Acromantula] has a leg span of six feet and can capture and kill a fully-grown mountain troll. I've seen it not a pretty sight, I assure you. Fully grown, their leg span can reach over sixteen feet, and they can capture and kill immature giants."*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, WriterMerrin, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Trying Assertive Romance

Chapter 41 of 63

Severus decides he's tired of playing by the rules; he's now doing it his way.



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## Trying Assertive Romance

He found her sitting crossed legged in an archway in the bailey that overlooked the courtyard, the same one he'd preferred as a student because, not only was it partially hidden by a huge camellia bush, it was at the end of the walkway and, therefore, very secluded. Her head was bowed as she read from the book propped open on her legs where her ankles crossed, and she held a notepad propped on her one knee with a quill in one hand the same quill he'd given her at the start of term. The dappled light breaking through the leaves danced on her curls, giving her hair an angelic glow. Two Ravensclaws greeted her as they walked by, and she looked up, saying hello to them in return. Her head turned in Severus' direction when she caught sight of him, and he moved closer. "I was just passing by," he said and decided not to make excuses for his presence.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd think you came here looking for me," she replied. She laid the quill in the box it had come in and looked back up at him expectantly as she placed the notepad on top of her book.

"Who's to say I didn't?" he asked with a smirk. He stopped next to her and peered down at the book. He was going to play this Narcissa's way. "Transcendence theory?"

"Non-constant polynomial equations with rational coefficients in application with large numeric variables," she replied.

"You're using qualitative and quantitative equations from the fundamental theory that where a non-zero polynomial exists with intercoefficients the polynomial will have its root in the complex numbers."

"Yes. Exactly," she said, smiling up at him. "You took Arithmancy when you were a student?"

"I carried eleven courses my N.E.W.T year," he replied, returning her smile, checking in his peripheral vision if anyone was paying them undue attention. Most students were walking by quickly and avoiding eye contact with him, although one girl did wave at Hermione. "Arithmancy was one of them." Cringing inwardly at what he was about to do, Severus pulled a small vial and a pocketknife from his pocket. He deftly cut a twig off the camellia bush and uncorked the vial, sticking the twig into the pale orange liquid. Within seconds, tiny buds appeared on the twig, swelling extremely slowly as the twig began to absorb the liquid. "By tomorrow they will bloom." He handed it to Hermione. "It will only last about nine weeks."

Her eyes widened as she took the vial, staring at the offering, then looked up at him, her eyes wide and searching, questioning. "I thought that you didn't do flowers," she said softly, her expression still conveying her astonishment.

Her reaction was surprisingly worth the effort of brewing the elixir. "I made an exception."

"Thank you," she replied, still holding the plain glass vial as if it were a treasure.

He nodded and scowled at some students who were gawking at him. They scurried away quickly. He turned his attention back to his wife. "I would like you to have dinner with me, just the two of us. I've made arrangements." He'd asked Mispy earlier that morning to set up the same room he'd used the night he'd brought her here for dinner over the summer for a romantic setting for two. The elf had been delighted. He could only imagine what frivolity Mispy would consider as being a romantic setting, but at least he'd be alone with Hermione.

"I'd be delighted," she replied, smiling warmly at him.

The corridor of the bailey was filling with students, so he merely bowed slightly and walked away. She had lessons now anyway. He smirked at the idea of what would go through Minerva's mind when she saw the small token.

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Hermione packed everything away as the bell tolled the hour. She held the vial carefully in her hand so as not to let the camellia branch get bumped, lest a bud break and fall off, as she hurried to Transfiguration. She set the gift on her desk before sitting and pulling out her things for class. Hermione looked up and saw Professor McGonagall's gaze flicker from the camellia branch to her with a questioning quirk of her eyebrow, but Hermione only smiled back at her.

"Okay, who gave you the leaves?" Alestra asked, sitting in the seat beside her and peering closer at the twig. "Is it yes, it's got flower buds, hasn't it?"

"It's from Se-Professor Snape," Ginny said, having caught herself from making a faux pas and using his given name.

"That's a tricky elixir," Luna stated as she sat down beside Ginny. "It forces the twig or branch of a plant to go through a full cycle in only two months."

"Severus said it would take nine weeks," Hermione said, still smiling at the thought that he took the time to give her another gift. "It's a camellia branch."

Ginny chuckled. "Imagine him flowers. Who knew? Next thing you know, he'll send you chocolates."

Alestra and Ginny laughed at Hermione's response of, "He's not the flower and candy type though, is he?"

"Apparently, you're mistaken," Luna stated, indicating the twig now sporting four flower buds. "I hope he sends you Doven's Doves. They're divine. Neville sent me some."

"Ladies, if I may have your attention, I'd like to begin class," Professor McGonagall admonished them.

"Sorry, Professor," Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Alestra said, almost in unison.

~6, 7, 8~

Dinner had gone surprisingly well. Mispy had created a very elegant setting with candles and a table next to the window, much like their previous evening in the room. Only this time, the table had been set up more formally than before with a black tablecloth and napkins, the gold charger plates and goblets, and fine white china. Each course had appeared with perfect timing for a long, leisurely dinner.

Afterwards, he'd asked for their cloaks and had taken Hermione for a stroll along the battlements, even recklessly kissing her as if they were adolescents. Well, as if he were one; even though she was technically adult, she was still only nineteen. Standing on the battlement, watching tendrils of her hair whip around in the breeze had given him an idea. He'd cut a lock off and placed it in his handkerchief while he'd jokingly promised not to use it for any illicit purpose or for Polyjuiced transformations.

Severus now stood in a stairwell entryway that neither portrait in this section of the corridor could see, partially hidden by the statue of Paracelsus clutching vials of opium and mercury in his chubby fists.

The bell tolled, and he could hear the classroom doors open, the sounds echoing throughout the castle. Hermione would be coming by on her way to the library. He waited, smirking in anticipation. He spotted her as she approached and used a slightly ambiguous charm on her to make her walk along the wall so she'd pass right by him.

No sooner did she step around the statue than Severus grabbed her arm and pulled her into a hug and whirled her into the entryway, quickly casting the Dissimulata Charm. "I couldn't resist," he growled and kissed her.

"Severus!" she gasped against his lips and relaxed a fraction, her hands still pressed against his chest. That was all he needed to deepen the kiss, hungrily tasting her mouth as if starved. Slowly he eased back, his demanding kiss lessening into a sensual dance of tongue on tongue. He cupped her face, kissing her cheek and pulling her tight. "I missed you last night."

"I had prefect duties, and you were in a meeting with the Heads of Houses," she replied, her hands sliding around to his back as she embraced him.

He looked into her eyes, his fingers caressing her jaw with the gentlest touch. She shivered, took an uneven breath and closed her eyes for a brief second. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers with small soft, playful caresses. "We'll be caught," she mewed with her eyes closed.

He shook his head slightly, never breaking contact with her supple lips. "Today the stairs end at the seventh step into a wall of solid rock, so no students will be coming this way. Besides, I've added a Repelling Charm on the entry, to dissuade the younger years who won't remember. Don't you trust me, Hermione?"

Her robe now hung open, and he toyed with the buttons on her blouse, flicking them open at random, as he kissed her. What he wanted was to rip open her blouse and yank her knickers down so he could bury himself in her, an idea that spurred him to more ardent attention on her mouth. She moaned, sending a shiver through him to his groin. "Have you any idea the effect you have on me?"

"I yes," she groaned, her bag falling to the floor at their feet.

He pressed himself against her, unintentionally rubbing himself on her, the friction even through his robes and trousers driving him nearly mad. Hermione shifted, her back pressed against the wall, her arms around his neck as she kissed him back. He slowly maneuvered himself downward, trailing kisses on her flesh as he leaned down to taste the skin of her breast. Her bra didn't open in the front this time, so he pulled it up and sucked on a nipple, releasing it with a pop. "Gods, you're so beautiful," he murmured, taking pleasure with her perfect breast, suckling while his other hand played with her other nipple. He marked her, knowing no one else would see it but her.

Her head rested on the wall, and her fingers toyed with his hair as she allowed him to savor her breasts. He straightened, his hands still clutching her, thumbs circling her nipples and looked at her face. He lay his cheek on hers and pleaded softly, "Please, stop denying me," in her ear in his silkiest voice. "I want you."

"Tell me you love me," she pleaded in return.

The words stuck. He kissed her instead, pouring all his desire for her into the kiss. She responded in kind, as if her desire matched his. Surely she knew, even if he couldn't yet bring himself to say it.

She pulled back and looked into his eyes, and he stared at the sadness in them. "I have to go, Severus. I'll come by tonight, but I have revision to do."

He gritted his teeth to fight back the remark that came unbidden to him, knowing that she'd not keep her promise if he spoke it *You always refuse me*. He watched her adjust her clothing and then finger her hair to assure it wasn't too badly mussed. "Go, do your revision. I'll expect you at seven-thirty."

He released the charms as she turned to leave. "I'll come up an hour after dinner. I need to get a few books from the library for Charms and Herbology."

He watched her go with a sense of frustration. He knew what she was studying in Charms and Herbology. He'd go to the Malfoy library and borrow some books from Lucius. He swore softly; she'd left before he'd been able to tell her about the pair of plastic bottles he'd asked Mispy to place on her bed: one labeled a shampoo and the other conditioner. He hoped she liked the horse chestnut, lavender, and light, woody scent. He knew he would.

~9~

Hermione and Alestra were on the fourth floor, doing their prefect rounds for the night. Alestra checked the door and shook her head. Hermione checked the one across the corridor. It opened. She peered inside with her wand illuminated, then backed out, locking the door. "Nothing."

"So, how was dinner? You never told me how it went," Alestra said when Hermione caught up to her.

"It was lovely," she replied and then turned toward the nearest tapestry. *Apertum respicio*," she said with a twisting flick of her wand to expose anyone hiding behind the heavy drape. "He had a table set for two next to the window in a room on the seventh floor. We could see the lights of Hogsmeade."

"Sounds so romantic," Alestra said with a sigh. "I always wondered about him, you know?"

Hermione turned to look at her, wondering what she meant.

Alestra laughed softly, the melodic sound reverberating off the stone walls. "He's so dark and moody, but have you ever noticed his attention to details how he knew just where we were at in our brewing, who'd need help at the precise time they'd need it? I mean, everyone thought he was inattentive in class but he wasn't. He would be right at the student's side just before the potion exploded or the student made a horrible mistake."

Hermione hadn't really thought about it. In fact, it was something she'd never considered. "I suppose I had always been too busy watching Ron and Harry, or making sure Neville didn't screw up, or that Malfoy, Crabbe, or Goyle didn't drop something into my cauldron or trying to ignore Pansy's and Millicent's malicious comments..."

"I used to watch him all the time," Alestra admitted, before saying, *Lumos*," with a flick of her wand, illuminating a doorway. "We have graffiti," she stated, laughing at the initials and heart carved roughly into the wood.

"This will have to be reported," Hermione stated, making the notation on her parchment pad.

Alestra nodded. "But, then, I've always liked the tall, dark, mysterious type. I just wish Professor Snape had been nicer to us, like he is now."

Hermione shook her head. "It's because he isn't teaching," she replied.

Alestra giggled. "Nope, it's because he's in love," she stated and flicked her wand, adding a firm, *Nox*. Left or right?"

"What do you mean? Right," Hermione said, wondering what her friend knew. "We can cover that way on our way back down. What do you mean he's in love?"

The girls turned the corner and both lit their wands in the dim corridor. "Shh, I hear something," Alestra said, holding her finger to her lips.

A few yards away they found a couple, trying to hide in a recessed doorway to a loo while scrambling to fasten up their disheveled clothes. "Walters and Morgansythe, twenty points each from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Better go before Filch sees you. He's right down there," Hermione warned them. The pair left, grumbling. Hermione turned back to her friend. "Alestra, what did you mean, he's in love?"

The girl was reigniting the wall sconces. "It's the way he stares at you in the Great Hall. How he always wants you with him. The way he's been crossing your path between lessons. How he glares at the boys who look at you I've seen him. He even put Lannister in detention for hugging you the other day."

"He wasn't hugging me we collided, and he was making sure I had my balance before letting go," Hermione explained. She'd wondered why he'd had detention. Even he didn't know, and he wasn't really a troublemaker.

"And Blume he'd been given detention for a month because you were in the hospital from the backlash of the Bedydrian Curse," Alestra stated with a smirk. "Then there is the Rudbeckia flower, the camellias, and the flossing mints, that divine smelling shampoo and conditioner..."

"Severus didn't send me the Rudbeckia flower or the mints; the mints came from Blake as an apology for the curse as a friend." She paused, considering what Alestra was saying. Severus had been very attentive lately. The shampoo and conditioner were incredible. She loved horse chestnut and lavender... It smelled like... Well, green, as if she'd rolled around in an herb garden.

"All right, then who sent you the vial of Remembrance Potion or the Invigorating Draught? And I heard you and Ginny talking about the Felix Felicis," Alestra persisted.

One side of Hermione's mouth quirked, and her forehead creased in annoyance. "For your information/brewed the Remembrance Potion and the Invigorating Draught, as well as the Draught of Peace and a Calming Draught for Sunita. The girl was getting overly anxious about her N.E.W.T.s and was driving me up the wall."

"And the Felix Felicis?" the girl persisted with a wink.

Hermione blushed. A school owl had delivered the small vial pendant of the pearlescent, molten gold liquid in a lovely green velvet pouch yesterday at breakfast. The note simply said, 'For a perfectly lucky day. SS.' "It was a gift."

"Ah-huh." Alestra winked knowingly.

"Oh, let's just finish our rounds, shall we? Tell me about Thornton Bronte. How are things between you two?"

Alestra blushed and began to tell her about their latest tryst. "I think he's going to invite me to his home over Christmas holiday," she admitted. "I'm so excited. Do you think you'll move into Professor Snape's home over Christmas?"

Hermione sighed. She wasn't going to relent about her relationship with Severus, much like Ginny, Wendlynne, Veronica, and Luna.

~10~

Severus had taken Ginny up on her offer of friendship by inviting her up to his office on the pretense of talking about the potions and had asked the girl what forms of evening entertainment Hermione liked. One of the things that Ginevra had told him was that Hermione enjoyed Scrabble and a game called Monopoly. He'd been surprised to learn that Hermione had introduced the Weasleys and Longbottoms to the games, and had played them with her friends at Grimmauld Place. Playing Scrabble was ingenious: a game that tested your intellect with a modicum of chance and one of Hermione's favorites. However, he hadn't wanted to go out into Muggle London and buy a new version of the game, he'd wanted a well worn box as if he'd played it himself.

He'd brewed a batch of Felix Felicis a week ago. He had taken a small portion of the potion before he used his Floo to go to the Ministry of Magic. He personally dropped off a batch of correspondence for Kingsley and used one of the Ministry Floos to go to Diagon Alley to obtain some Muggle currency. When he exited the Leaky Cauldron to go out into the Muggle world, he removed his robe, folded it and shrunk it to fit in the pocket of his Muggle suit coat. He then paused on the pavement to allow the potion to direct his next move.

He relished in the exhilarating sense of tremendous opportunity and confidence the elixir gave him. He thought of his quest and felt a desire to go to Beacon County Park. Not sure if he'd ever been there, he Disapparated anyway and arrived near a large bush a few feet from the street.

Under the heady feeling of the potion, he knew immediately which way he needed to go, although, his first inclination directed him to a craft fair. Severus strolled leisurely through the booths, where he found a gold-flaked, persimmon-colored scarf and hat and a matching pair of mittens that would be lovely on Hermione, and a thick, dark navy blue cravat for himself. At another booth, he had purchased a necklace of Tunisian glass and amber beads that he'd thought would be pretty on Hermione. Not something he'd have normally done, but it felt like the right thing to do.

He then walked about a half-mile, or so, as he enjoyed the landscape and saw a woman arranging things in her carport for a rummage sale. Among her things he found exactly what he'd set out to find: a used version of the Scrabble game, worn but in good condition, with all the pieces, and a leather case that opened into a backgammon board with the chips and dice in convenient depressions. Thanking the woman for selling them to him, he turned and strolled into town. Further down the street he encountered a shop that served him an especially delicious cup of espresso.

He Apparated back to Hogwarts, leisurely strolling up the path, approaching at the greenhouses just as the doors to Greenhouse four opened and the students began to leave. He smiled, thinking, *How fortuitous, just in time to walk Hermione back to the castle from her Herbology lesson*

"Severus!" she exclaimed.

The look of surprise at seeing him approach nearly made him chuckle. "Hermione," he replied with a knowing smirk. "How was your lesson?"

"It was fine," she replied, falling into step beside him. "What brings you out?"

"Business at the Ministry and a personal errand," he replied. "What did you do in class today?"

"We repotted young Mimulus Mimbletonia shoots," she said with a laugh. "Neville had given a pair to Professor Sprout, did you know?"

"Yes." He was aware of it; Pomona had gone on about the gift for days. He hardly knew why the plants were so popular; the smell was wretched. However, Hermione must have been fortunate, or skilled with the young shoots, since she didn't stink. Felix made him say, "They produce Stinksap," as if she wasn't well aware of the fact, but it had just slipped out.

Nevertheless, it must have been the right thing to say because Hermione laughed softly and slipped her hand on the crook of his arm as she replied, "Yes, they do."

Although he'd have preferred to observe proper decorum, his potion-addled mind loved the way she leaned toward him as they walked.

"Neville had shown me his plant in fifth year, so I was acquainted with them," she said, and they walked all the way up to the fourth floor, chatting about the plant and its various uses in potions. He'd felt like an adolescent, but in an odd, pleasant way that seemed right.

"I'll see you tonight after dinner, all right?" she asked, smiling at him.

"I look forward to it," he said as he tipped her face up when they needed to part and gave her a slow, feather-light kiss. He smiled at the way her eyes remained closed and the momentary dreamy expression on her face. "I have something for you."

Her eyes popped open, and her face lit up. "What?"

"You heard me. I'll give it to you when I see you tonight." She opened her mouth to protest, and he kissed her briefly again. "Not until tonight."

She huffed and turned, hurrying off to her next class. Smirking to himself, he walked away in the other direction.

That evening, instead of having the coffee table set up for Hermione's revision, Severus had returned the table to its original size with his new Scrabble game on the surface next to her gifts. As he presented her with each of his gifts, he was delighted by the way her eyes lit up upon opening the wrapper, enjoying her insistence that he help her put on the necklace. They played two rounds of Scrabble: he won once, as did she. Afterwards, he sat with her curled up on the sofa beside him, one arm resting about her shoulders, as he read to her from a book of poems by Thomas Gray. It hadn't been his inclination, it'd been Felix's, but Hermione had been very responsive to his kisses afterwards. Although he'd have preferred to, he didn't try to undress her; the elixir, wearing off at the time, had warned him to be gentle and tender, and not to push things too far.

She left that night with a dreamy look in her eyes, and he went upstairs for a cold shower.

~11~

Unfortunately, Hermione had a heavy workload the rest of the week. He could see the strain in her eyes when she'd come up to his sitting room, and he allowed her to simply revise at the enlarged coffee table. At least she was spending her evenings with him instead of her common room or the library. Of course, his pile of books on loan

from Lucius had delighted her immensely. He'd used their time together to catch up on his reading and search through Master Gruener's journals, hoping to find the clue for the Médousa Potion.

Severus set the journal down and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was eluding him. Reginald and he had discussed every potential seed used as a potions ingredient, positive that they'd solve the problem and find the one that would work and not throw off the balance of the complicated potion. So far, every attempt had failed. Feeling frustrated, he rose and headed for the library. It was late, but he didn't care.

He ignored the speculative looks of the few students revising at the tables and greeted Madam Pince as he passed by her desk for the Restricted Section. He saw Hermione in the Potions section, reading a book. He glanced around slyly, noting that neither the portrait of Ignatia Wildsmith nor Corcoran Maolduin could see him if he was in the aisle near Hermione, and flicked his wand at the two other students, mumbling, "*Muffliato*," as he approached her. He cast his Concealing Charm on her and himself, so they'd go unnoticed should anyone pass by, and added a Misdirection Jinx should anyone want to enter the aisle. Finally, he cast a Dissuading Jinx on the other end of the aisle just in case.

Hermione reached up and placed the large tome on the shelf as he encircled her with his arms from behind. "I've missed you," he purred in her ear.

She jumped, making her collapse against him. "You startled me," she exclaimed, turning her head to see him.

Holding her firmly with one hand on her abdomen, he cupped her face with the other and kissed her. "Quite fortuitous finding you in here," he said silkily.

"Hardly lucky," she said as he kissed the side of her neck. Even though she protested, "Severus, we'll be seen," her head angled to give him better access. She breathed in deeply and leaned against him, one arm reaching around to bury her fingers in his hair.

"When will you learn to trust me," he asked, making his growl soft and smooth. "Unlike these adolescents, I have knowledge of concealment, dissuasion, and evasion spells. We will not be seen." He slid his hand lower on her abdomen as he nipped her ear lobe. Her hiss was pure pleasure to his ears. Remembering the cue from his Felix induced encounter, he kept tight control on his desire to ravage her, but maintained a soft, gentle exploration of her neck, cheek, and mouth. Although his hand on her groin was firm, keeping her pinned against his front, his other roamed over her breasts in light caresses, simply cupping her through her clothes. Hermione was melting like butter, swaying slightly when he shifted his weight.

He turned her around and stepped forward so she moved a step backward and against the ladder. He leaned over her, one hand on the rung over her head, the other brazenly caressing her breast as he kissed her leisurely. Her hands on his waist slipped slightly past his belt, but not exactly to his bum. Her eyes were closed as she kissed him back, her breathing deep and even.

She stiffened when the bell tolled the upper-year's curfew. "Oh, my gods Filch! I have to go!"

He laughed softly. He knew very well that Filch started his rounds in the corridor outside the library. "Walk with me," he said. He bid both Madam Pince and Filch good night as he guided Hermione out of the library.

Out in the corridor, he kissed Hermione chastely, bade her goodnight, and then watched her ascend the stairs. He growled softly and turned, heading for the sixth floor and the battlements to see if he could catch any students misbehaving to vent his frustration on.

~12~

Up in his sitting room, he waited patiently for her to finish the essay. They sat next to each other, his leg touching hers. Occasionally he bounced his foot, more to see her glance at him as he stared intently at the journal and book lying open in front of him.

Hermione tapped her quill as she dotted her 'i'. "Done," she sighed.

"Finally," he growled.

She turned to stare at him. "Pardon?"

"I want you to look at this and tell me what you see," he stated, pushing the journal toward her. She stared, squinting at the messy, linear handwriting and read aloud what he'd read repeatedly over the last few weeks. The writing was obscured in several places by footnotes, scribbles, and comments in the margin of a page and between the text, possibly made by a different writer, or writers, as well as what looked like doodles and childish drawings...

"What is this?" she asked, looking up.

"One of Master Gruener's journals," he stated. The directions of the Médousa Potion had to be in this one. It was the only one that described the testing of the potions and its success, but several pages farther back in the book.

"Does this mean that you're going to let me help you?" she asked, her eyes pleading with him and her expression hopeful.

"I don't want to distract you from your studies," he stated, reaching for the book.

She held it away from him. "It won't. Really."

He was going to regret this. "I may allow your assistance with the research," he relented. "On one condition..."

He never got to explain the condition. Hermione flung herself at him and kissed him soundly. He grasped her waist, since her hands held his face, and pulled her to him. He stroked her lips with his tongue, and she opened them, allowing him to deepen the kiss, her arms going around his neck. He held her tightly, her breasts crushed against his chest as he savored the passionate response from her. He allowed her to guide the kiss, responding to her as she normally did him. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her lips teasingly soft as her tongue danced, stroke for stroke, with his.

He rose slightly, turning as Hermione twisted in his arms, still holding onto him, and he lowered her so she lay beneath him. One of her hands tangled in his hair; the other clasped his shoulder as he savored her mouth, loving the taste of her.

He angled his head, nipping and kissing the soft flesh of her chin, jaw, neck, and the base of her throat. He opened each button on her blouse, gently kissing the skin exposed by his fingers. Her bra did not open at the front like his favorite bra of hers did. Frustrated, he ripped it with a carefully controlled Slicing Hex, amused by her shocked outrage. "I'll replace it," he growled, taking one pert nipple into his mouth. His hand snaked down to her thigh and upwards as he savored her breasts. She reached down to clasp his hand the moment he'd finally touched the cotton covering her crotch. Deny it all she wanted, it was soaked. She was as moist for him as he was hard for her.

"Relax and feel, Hermione," he purred silkily, knowing just how that particular use of his voice made her react. He placed her hand on his crotch, the feel of even that brief contact making his straining penis twitch and his balls ache. However, she didn't remove her hand, tentatively stroking him up and down his length, much to his delight. He kissed her as his fingers slid under her knickers. He teased her with caressing strokes, both with his tongue and fingers, enjoying her moans and whimpers, and ground himself into her touch. He sliced the fabric of her knickers with another carefully controlled, nonverbal Slicing Hex, never breaking his contact with her lips.

Now that she was fully under his ministrations, he stroked and circled her clit with his fingers while alternating his attention between her mouth and breast. She was clawing at him with one hand, grasping and rubbing his penis through his trousers with the other. She came eagerly, loudly, and he ground himself against her, literally coming in his pants like a randy teen. He carefully hid his embarrassment as he excused himself for the loo. When he returned, she was dressed.

She bid him good night and left him for her dorm, kissing him tenderly at the door. He wanted to hex something. He was frustrated to distraction. He took the stairs two at a time to the bedroom and opened up his wardrobe. Reaching into the back, his fingers brushed the fine well-worn leather of *Consigliare ab Hector Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac*. He pulled out the book. "Magnanimous," he said, touching his wand to the cover. The small magical book opened to the page where he'd placed Hermione's shrunken knickers.

His first thought was, *What am I doing wrong?* but he banished the idea as words on the page started to become readable, then faded away before the suggestions were completed and disappeared.

*Kiss her firmly, but press her not*

*Let her respond to you, want you*

*Fair maidens need...*

*Compliment her mind...*

*Maidens need to know how you...*

*Compliment her...*

"How do I woo this witch into my bed?" he asked the book.

The words changed.

*Be tender but passionate, be consuming but not demanding*

*Be ardent but not forceful, be sensual but not grasping...*

*Lower your voice and say soft poetic endearments sexily, silkily...*

*Chose carefully your words as you confess your love...*

He scoffed at the suggestions, making sentences forming on the page vanish again. *Poetic endearments? What else?*

*Tell her what she means to you, how important she is in your life*

*Acknowledge not that you want her, that you need her ...*

*Tell her not that you desire her, but that you love her...*

He closed the book with a snap before the last lines of suggestions fully appeared. *What in the bloody hell did the book think he was doing?* He put the book back, carefully hiding it under his Muggle jumpers. He'd return the bloody thing to Narcissa in the morning.

~\*~

Two days later, a pretty barn owl swooped down toward Hermione at the Gryffindor table and placed a pink and silver package delicately beside her plate. Hermione gave the owl a piece of bacon, and she flew away. Immediately after, a school owl landed, carrying a note for her in its beak. Severus' spiky writing on the envelope made her brow crease in confusion. The note simply read:

*Hermione,*

*I'd really prefer if you did not open the package in front of your housemates.*

Hermione shoved the package into her bag, ignoring the comments from her friends. Apparently, the pink and silver packaging of Persephone's Secrets was well known by the girls at the table. By the end of lessons, Ginny, Alestra, Wendlynne, and Veronica were itching to know what Severus had sent her. Even Sunita and Luna had inquired as well as Nadine and Deborah, her other dorm mates who hardly ever spoke to her otherwise. Caving in, she led her friends into their dorm room and opened her present.

Inside the box lay four bras in her size: one an iridescent shell pink, another black with black lace, one a creamy peach with tiny seed pearls and a bow, and a green one with black lace, all with matching knickers. Hermione stifled a laugh at the gift. All four bras had front clasps.

"Please tell me you finally believe he loves you," Ginny said as Alestra exclaimed, "Oh, my gosh you're so lucky!"

"Lucky?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

"Persephone's underwires never poke, and her knickers never ride up uncomfortably," WendyInne stated. "They're the very best."

"And cost a few good Sickles, too," Veronica said. She wrapped her hands around the bedpost. "Mum always gets gifts from Persephone's Secrets when Dad has to go away somewhere. It's cute that he sent you green ones."

"So, are you going to wear one for him tonight?" Ginny asked with a knowing glint in her eyes.

"Gin!" Hermione exclaimed then blushed. "He bought me these because, er..."

Ginny and Alestra started laughing as WendyInne said, "Oh, yeah,er! Ah-huh, that pesky littleer problem," with a huge grin.

Flustered, Hermione forcefully closed the lid of the box. "It's not what you think!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, of course not," Alestra said, shaking her head with a huge, shite-eating grin.

"No, I completely understand," Veronica said, trying so hard to control her smile she looked like she was going to burst.

Ginny paused laughing long enough to add, "Who do you think you're fooling?" She leaned in closer to Hermione as she sat on the bed. "He ripped them didn't he? And I blamed Crookshanks when I saw your knickers on the floor."

"No! Crookshanks wouldn't! Severus did but it wasn't but it's..." Hermione said as her shoulders sagged, and she sat one of the chairs. "I didn't want you to think he was abusive."

"It's okay," Ginny whispered. "Harry did it once; it was such a turn on."

Veronica, who looked rather perplex said, "He ripped I thought it was just a romantic..."

"It's very romantic," Ginny said, touching Hermione's back. "Besides, he at least thought to send you the very best when he replaced them."

Hermione smiled and bumped her shoulder into Ginny's. "They are pretty."

"Merlin's stars, yes! They are pretty!" Wendynne exclaimed as Alestra rolled her eyes, saying, "Duh. The best silks and satins, French and Italian lace, real pearls and crystals... It's the best!"

"Who cares why he sent them, well, I care, but really, as long as you are you know happy, then it's all good, right?" Veronica said, tilting her head to look at Hermione.

Hermione looked up at her. "Yeah, it's good." She smiled. "It's actually more than good."

"It's about time!" Alestra said as Ginny nudged Hermione's shoulder.

"So, tell us," Ginny prompted her, with a hopeful expression. "Things are better?"

Blushing, Hermione admitted, "Much better."

~13~

Severus tried using Felix Felicis once more, dipping only a thin toothpick into the vial and swirling it in his tea. It was just enough to give him the luck he'd need for twenty minutes. Minerva was becoming suspicious, accusing him of bending the rules of the school charter and his promise to refrain from illicit pursuits in the corridors. Not that he'd admit it to her, of all people. She was a stickler for the rules.

He intended to sweep Hermione off into a small classroom on the third floor between her lessons without being seen. The problem was not only the number of portraits on that particular floor but that the corridor would be quite crowded that time of day, so being sly wouldn't be enough; he needed all the luck he could get.

He walked casually down the corridor, stealthily casting the Misdirection Jinx on the intended doorway should anyone want to enter the room, as he hurried down to the second floor to leave a copy of the roster changes with Professor McGonagall. As luck would have it, she was standing at the back of the class, watching the progress of one of the third-years, when he entered the room. He was in and out in only two minutes.

Smirking, he turned and strolled casually back along the third floor corridor, casting the Concealment and Disillusionment Charms for good measure on the small classroom doorway.

"Did you forget something, Headmaster?" the image of Hegrella Wevernott asked as he walked by her frame.

"No," he sneered and slyly added the Dissuading Hex on the door of the intended room as well, knowing that Hegrella Wevernott's attention was diverted by a shout down the corridor. *Now not even that mangy cat of Filch's would disturb them* he thought as he walked away.

He arrived, as luck would have it, just at the same time Filius was dismissing his students.

Hermione looked up from packing up her belongings and smiled at him as he walked by her desk. "Professor, the changes to the roster," he said smoothly, handing the diminutive wizard the folded parchment.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Filius stated, opening the parchment and smiling.

"I shall see you at lunch. If you have any concerns or conflicts with the changes, you can let me know at the meeting tonight," Severus said politely.

Filius, still reading, waved him off. "No, no, this looks fine." He looked up. "Thank you for bringing this to me."

Severus nodded and turned, pleased, but not surprised, to see Hermione waiting for him. He asked her about her lesson as they walked down the corridor. He cast the Dissimulata Charm on her and then himself as they turned a corner, nearing his planned destination. Smirking, he grasped her by the waist, pulled her quickly into the small room and locked the door.

"Severus!" she exclaimed as he pinned her to the wall.

"Yes?" he asked with a smirk. "Who else were you expecting?" He leaned over her. "I've been thinking about you all day. I didn't want to wait until tomorrow to do this." He caught her mouth with his, not roughly, only enough to tip her head back against the wall. Her bag fell to the floor, and her arms wrapped around him. He kissed her, savoring the moment and the excitement of having her alone.

Her response was fervent and yielding, exactly what he'd wanted. The effects of the potion were waning, the tiny voice in his head was gone and the sense of exhilaration was giving over to his lust for the witch before him. Knowing he only had five to eight minutes at best, he opened her robe, but decided to forgo the pleasure of suckling her breasts, fondling her gently through her blouse as he kissed her neck and the sensitive spot behind her ear. She groaned, her fingers splayed out on his back, the tips digging into his muscles like a cat. Recklessly, but knowing that she was feeling her own desires for him, he reached down and raked his fingers up her thigh and along the fabric of her knickers, smirking inwardly at the feel of satin not cotton. She hissed at the contact, and her fingernails raked down his back.

Grateful for his knowledge of nonverbal spells to easily undo clothing, he slipped her knickers down, sliding his fingers between her legs, seeking the moist center. She gasped and gripped his arms. "Tell me, yes," he said silkily, flicking her clitoris and sliding his fingers inside her.

She shook her head, "No time..." she said breathlessly as he flicked her clit, making her inhale sharply.

He slid two fingers inside her, still rubbing her clit with this thumb. Her fingernails dug into his arms, and she inhaled deeply and tensed up. In the most lovely sound to his ears, she whimpered as her knees gave, her vaginal channel clenching around his fingers. He held onto her until her shaking stopped and she was able to stand. "I want to taste you," he purred, licking his fingers as he looked down at her.

"I think you just did," she said cheekily, although still slightly breathless.

"I want you, Hermione; I want you like I've never wanted a witch before," he said, feeling the effects of the potion wearing off and the full clarity of his mind returning. If being in a daze of lust was being clear headed.

"Do you love me, Severus?" she asked.

"Blimey girl, what do I have to do to prove it to you? I'm falling in love with you," he growled and captured her mouth again.

Her responding hug and kiss was confirmation enough that he'd said the right things. "I am too," she replied when he ended the kiss so she could go to her class.

\*

Hermione was amazed at the complexity of Severus' spell work. They'd left the small classroom completely unnoticed, even though the corridor was still occupied by students rushing to their lessons on the fourth floor. Severus had walked her to her next class, and when she'd stopped to greet her friends at the door, Ginny, Luna, and Wendynne had all jumped as if she'd appeared out of nowhere.



The funny thing was she had heard the sounds of Severus' dragon hide boots as he'd walked away, but hadn't been able to see him.

At lunch, Severus had caught her gaze as he'd licked something off his fingertips, and the look in his eyes had sent shivers down her spine.

Even Ginny had noticed. Unfortunately.

~14~

Hermione met Severus at the gargoyle, dressed in a warm cardigan over her blouse, comfortable shoes and her traveling cloak, as he'd requested. They Apparated from the school gates to the beautiful and tranquil countryside in Tintagel, had a late lunch at the Cornishman Inn and strolled through some of the shops as they walked through the town to the island peninsula. The views from the coastal footpath to the inner walls of Tintagel Castle were breathtaking.

"The locals say that the castle is on an island, but as you can see, the peninsula is subject to erosion by the sea, creating a gorge that separates the island from the town," Severus said as they stood by the inner walls.

"I read that the castle is linked to the legends of King Arthur and Camelot," Hermione said, staring out at the coastal view.

Severus smirked and urged her to follow him. "The site may have also been a Roman settlement," he said, holding her hand so she wouldn't slip. "The ruins date back to the thirteenth century."

They climbed the steep steps to the castle's main gateway and gazed out at the ocean in silence. They walked to the cliffs and stared out at the ocean.

"Am I allowed to kiss you?"

She bit her lip as she tilted her face up. "Of course..." she said as he claimed her mouth in a demanding kiss while casting the Dissimulata and Sound-Deadening Charms.

If nothing else, he knew how to make her swoon and her knees weaken. With very little effort, a few roaming kisses on her neck, she was clinging onto him. Her hands grabbed onto him, slowly sliding on his frockcoat under his cloak as he deepened the kiss. He took her hand and led her back to the shelter of the castle ruins, pressing her up against an old stone wall. He kissed her mouth as his hand stroked her hair, and he moved to kiss the spot just below her ear, giving the soft lobe a lick before pulling on it gently with his teeth. Her knees buckled, and he supported her weight. He kissed her mouth and then the skin under her ear again, holding her firmly. The effect had her melting in his arms. After casting warming spells on their cloaks, he shifted, positioning himself over her while keeping his cloak around them like a blanket. He used his nonverbal spell to open the buttons of his frockcoat, smiling as her hands slowly slid on his shirt under his frockcoat and cloak as he deepened the kiss. He wandlessly undid her buttons as his fingers sought out her breasts, eliciting an exclamation of shock from her.

Her eyes opened wide. "W-what are you doing? We're in public..."

He chuckled against her throat. "I'm kissing my wife. No one is around for miles, and even if they were, we're still under the Dissimulata and Sound-Deadening Charms and would be unnoticed. I'm not an exhibitionist, Hermione. I could cast the Disillusion Charm as well, if you'd like, but, as you well know," he said. "I love watching you." He kissed her to silence her complaint as he unlatched her bra and gently flicked his fingers over her hardened nipples.

"We can't," she stammered.

"We can," he said smoothly, continuing his sensual manipulations on her body, relishing her responsiveness to his touch. Through her jeans, the only way he could tell if he was on the right spot was by her moans and sharp inhalations. "Tell me, yes. I need you," he said as he opened her jeans to put his hand inside them. "Let me." *Circe, she's wet.* His fingers slid along her warm flesh and through her tight curls. "I need you so much," he said silkily, flicking her clitoris and sliding his fingers inside her.

Her eyes widened in shock, and she quickly looked away, then back at him, her pupils dilated with desire, but her expression concerned. "Out in the open? We can't!"

"No one will notice nor care." He sucked on her nipple, sliding his hand back to her groin.

"Let me make love to you." He moved up to capture her mouth as he flicked his wrist, using a nonverbal charm to push her jeans and knickers to her knees. Smiling inwardly, he slid his hand up between her legs.

"I want to lick you, suckle you until you scream, and make love to you right here, right now," he said with a desirous drawl in her ear before kissing her, swallowing her muffled reply, his fingers deftly stroking her below. He fingered her, all the while kissing her neck and mouth. He withdrew his hand and licked his fingers as he stared into her eyes. "You are like ambrosia," he purred, "Simply delicious."

She tried to protest, but he silenced her by ravaging her mouth with his as his fingers sought her clitoris. The moisture he felt made him smile. "I love you, please stop denying me."

"I love you too." She moaned in pleasure and arched her back. "I can't believe we're doing this."

He took that as a yes. He flicked his fingers, and with a well-controlled, nonverbal spell, he rid her of her jeans and knickers, then opened his trousers. Her knees buckled, and he supported her weight, one of his hands holding her thigh as he rubbed himself against her moist lips, his other hand in her hair, holding her mouth firmly to his.

She strained against him. "This is insane," she mumbled, and he smiled, lowering his hand from her head to her bum.

"You drive me to such insanity," he admitted as he lifted her easily enough, pressing himself between her thighs, and her legs immediately wrapped around his waist. He ground himself into her heat, rubbing her entrance with his penis, stroking his length along her clit.

She started to squirm, her fingers sliding into his hair, moaning with pleasure. As she grew even moister, she began to buck her hips against his ministrations, saying, "Yes, oh yes!" repeatedly as he satisfied her, bringing her to orgasm with just the tip of his penis and his fingers.

Eager to feel himself inside her, he entered her in one stroke, smirking with satisfaction when she cried out loudly, "Ohmygods, Severusss!"

He rode out her orgasm with strong thrusts, trying to make his movements as long as possible to savor the feeling of plunging into her on each stroke. Gods, she was so tight, so wet, and warm, the softness of her nearly his undoing. She undulated under him, trying to match his movements as he ravished her mouth and neck until his balls tightened, and he knew he was close to coming. He felt her tighten around him, her nails digging into his arms as she tried to literally pull him into her with each of his thrusts, and he looked in her eyes. Her head rolled back, her mouth gaped open as she screamed his name again. Hearing her say his name again in ecstasy was his undoing.

He plunged into her deeply as his orgasm exploded through him, feeling himself empty into her, and he closed his eyes, barely able to breathe. As the feeling ebbed, he looked down at her, smirking with satisfaction at her labored breathing, flushed face and surprised expression. He braced himself above her as his euphoric bliss waned and rested his forehead against hers.

He smirked when she kissed his nose.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, thedoughmatron, vonHardenberg, and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*For those who forgot from chapter 19: Dissimulata is Latin meaning: concealing, to ignore, leave unnoticed.*

*If my description doesn't fit Beacon County Park or Tintagel Castle, please remember that I live in the US. I sometimes use Google Earth and the internet to choose my locations.*

## A Magical Pact

Chapter 42 of 63

Hermione and Professor Reynolds enter into a magical pact that ensures that Hermione gets what she wanted. But at what cost? And why is Severus so angry about it?



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### A Magical Pact

Hermione was sitting crossed-legged on her bed, reading from one of the books Severus had borrowed for her from the Malfoy library, when Ginny came back to the room from her morning shower. She plopped down on the foot of Hermione's bed and started to comb out her hair. "So, tell me, how was your evening?"

"It was fine," Hermione stated, knowing that Ginny would never accept that as an answer to her question. She wasn't disappointed.

"Oh, no you don't! I want details," she said, brandishing her comb at her. "I know you left the castle. So where did you go? What did you do? How did it go?"

Hermione looked up and smiled as she lowered the book to her lap. "We had dinner at the Cornishman Inn in Tintagel and then walked to Tintagel Castle. After that, Severus Apparated us to Merlin's Cave. Well, that's what the Muggles call it, Merlin's Cave."

"Oh c'mon, I want details," Ginny prompted, picking up one of the books by Hermione's knee.

"The North Cornwall coast was absolutely gorgeous, Gin. The ocean views were beautiful, and the ruins were fascinating, but then I've always loved castles. The stairs up to the castle gates were steep, but it was worth it. Did you know that the castle is the same one that Muggles associate with the tale of Tristan and Isolde? I didn't know that Severus was familiar with the tale, or that he knew so much about the area. He told me that the Romans inhabited the site in the thirteenth century."

The story of Tristan and Isolde was one of Hermione's personal favorites, and she'd been thrilled that he knew the legend as well. "Anyway, we stayed on the peninsula until well after sunset," Hermione elaborated, unable to hide the smile as she reminisced about the evening and the fact that they'd made love against a wall of the castle ruins as the sun disappeared over the horizon.

"Okay, thank you for the mythological and historical information, but that only covers dinner and a stroll until dusk. You weren't here when I fell asleep, so I know there was more to it. Besides, you're positively glowing. So tell me did you do anything else?" Ginny asked with a conspiratorial grin. Hermione felt her cheeks heat up, and Ginny squealed softly, "You did, didn't you?!"

"It was a very romantic evening," Hermione said, now certain that she was blushing a deep red.

Ginny scooted closer and crossed her legs. "So things are going better?"

Hermione nodded, unable to meet the redhead's eyes. "Yes, much better."

"About bloody time!" Ginny exclaimed softly. "George was about to have me slip you a love potion."

Hermione looked at her aghast. "You wouldn't!"

"Didn't. But if you were going to keep being so stubborn about things, it was likely the only way to get you two together," the redhead replied with a devilish grin. "So, does this mean I'm losing a dorm mate?"

"Not yet," Hermione said with a sigh, adding, "I want to finish school before I move in with him," at Ginny's incredulous stare. "I mean, I don't really want to move into the Headmaster's tower."

"Why ever not?" Ginny asked, her smile disappearing to a look of concern.

"And give up evenings revising with you?" Hermione asked with a devilish grin and then became serious. "Say, the Polyjuice Potion is nearly done. We have to add the boomslang skin this morning and let it simmer, and of course, we have to add the hairs. And the Verso-Quixotically Potion is near complete we only have to add the yohimbe bark and cowitch." She reached over and picked up her bag. "We have nine potions to choose from for our next project... What?"

"You're not changing the subject that quickly," Ginny stated. "So give. Was I right? Was it anything like in the dreams?"

Hermione pulled out her revision guide. "No, in a way it was different, but yes, it was very nice."

"Nice?!" Ginny exclaimed, her eyebrows rising and her mouth gaping open in disbelief.

Hermione knew she was blushing again, and from the way her cheeks burned, she was beet red again. "All right, it was amazing."

Ginny squealed, and Hermione shook her head as she picked up her book.

"So?"

Hermione dropped her book back on her lap and looked up. "So what?"

"Which potion did you want to do next?" Ginny asked, making Hermione laugh. "We could ask Professor Reynolds when we go down to the lab today?"

"We'll do it tomorrow when we hand in the potion samples," Hermione suggested. There were only a few of the advanced potions that she hadn't already tried, but personally, she would've preferred working with Severus on the Médousa Potion instead of any of the potions in their book.

After finishing the Polyjuice Potion, lowering the flame to have it simmer until the next morning, and nearly completing the Verso-Quixotically Potion, Ginny dragged Hermione outside to the Quidditch pitch to watch the house team practice. She enjoyed watching her friend fly, but she wished she'd had her books, which Ginny had insisted she leave in the dorm room. Afterwards, Ginny wanted to take a stroll by the lake, but Hermione insisted that she wanted to spend the rest of the day catching up on her assignments. So, Ginny went to go visit with Hagrid after lunch and then joined Hermione in the library until dinner.

The next morning before breakfast, they checked on their potions. Hermione added the shredded boomslang skins to the three cauldrons of Polyjuice Potion, pleased by the sludge-like appearance and mud-like consistency in each cauldron, as Ginny added the yohimbe bark to the three cauldrons of Verso-Quixotically Potion. Each batch of the Verso-Quixotically Potion turned the perfect shade of carnelian. The potions, with Severus' variations, came out exactly like the versions in the book said they should.

Hermione pulled out her Potions journal and wrote down her documentation for the validation process. "All right, sign," she said to Ginny, pushing the journal over to her. "Unless you have something to add."

Ginny, after she'd checked over what Hermione had written, added her own notes to the page and signed her name. "Just to be thorough," she said with a grin as she handed the journal to Hermione.

"Right then. Let's wait until after breakfast to talk to Professor Reynolds about which potion we get to do next," Hermione suggested as she stoppered the last vial. Ginny agreed.

Finding him after breakfast, however, proved to be a bit problematic. Professor Reynolds wasn't in his office or his classroom or the N.E.W.T. lab. They went back to Professor Reynolds' office to leave a note.

"Okay, so we have nine options," Ginny said, standing in front of the blackboard. "The Invisibilis Draught or Fearlessness Elixir might be fun and could definitely come in handy. Or the Anamnesis Potion, except that if our professors find out we're brewing that one, they'll watch us closely to see if we're under its influence."

"Especially if we make a mistake and have hallucinations that we can fly off the Bell Tower or something," Hermione said with a smirk, jotting down a note to their professor. "Fearlessness Elixir I don't really want to brew Liquid Courage."

"Too bad Wolfsbane isn't on the list that's one I'd really like to..." Ginny jumped back from the black board as the board faded to black and changed. "Whoa! What is all this?"

Hermione looked up. She knew that the blackboards in the school had layers that the professors could change with each lesson, but this was definitely not directions for a Potion class. Hermione walked closer for a better look. The surface was literally covered in both Severus' and Professor Reynolds' handwriting with circles, sections or words crossed out or underlined, and with various arrows going in all directions. She read the ingredients, and her eyes grew large in recognition. "The Médousa Potion. Gin, I think this is the potion that Professor Reynolds and Severus are working on the one I told you about!"

"Very good, Mrs. Snape," the cool tone of Professor Reynolds made both girls turn around and stare at him.

"We were here to talk to you about our next project," Ginny stated.

Hermione had turned back to the blackboard. It looked like one version of the potion's directions was written on the board as if with a bright green marker. There were numerous ingredients listed on the sides in white chalk and between the potions original directions, most crossed out. Some of the ingredients were circled with arrows indicating where Professor Reynolds and Severus had considered inserting them. Alchemic and Arithmancy calculations covered a good section of the board on the right, showing the latest of probabilities of their current hypothesis.

"Well, what potion did you girls want to brew next?" Professor Reynolds asked, coming up beside Hermione. He waved his hand and the seventh-year list reappeared.

"I want to try the Wolfsbane Potion," Ginny stated as Hermione said, "I want to help you and Severus with the Médousa Potion."

"So, you two don't find my selections challenging enough?" he asked, crossing his arms and leaning against his desk. "Why should I allow it?"

Hermione turned to face him. "As you already know, I made the Polyjuice Potion in my second year, and I made the Hair-Alternation Draught and the Draught of Fame my sixth year and I made the Invisibilis Draught and the Fearlessness Potion last year. The Anamnesis Potion or Astuteness Draught is complex enough as is the Amortentia Potion, Felix Felicis, or Veritaserum... But I really want to work on the Médousa Potion. Severus already said I could help you and Severus with the research..."

"Mrs. Snape, while you are an accomplished brewer when you're not distracted, you lack the natural intrinsic instincts of the art to be involved with experimentations on such a level as our project involves," he stated, although not unkindly, but still his statement stung her pride.

"How do you know I..." she started to say in protest before he cut her off.

"As your professor, I have watched your performance in class. While you are an accomplished brewer, I do not believe you have an affinity for how the ingredients interact with each other, nor have you demonstrated the ability to see beyond the directions and improve upon what you're brewing. I'm sorry."

She hung her head, remembering how well Harry had done in Potions following Severus' suggestions in his *Advanced Potions* text. She'd been angry then at his experimenting with the Half-Blood Prince's directions, but she'd never tried experimenting on her own.

"But that's not to say that any of these others wouldn't challenge you."

Hermione looked up. "And if Ginny and I can finish five of them, the Anamnesis Potion, Astuteness Draught, Veritaserum, Felix Felicis, and Fearlessness Elixir," she said and Ginny gasped, "may we at least help you and Severus with the research for the Médousa Potion?"

"I don't see why not, but add the Invisibilis Draught to your list," Professor Reynolds relented with a smirk. "And you'll have to make an improved version of at least two of them: the Anamnesis Potion, Invisibilis Draught, Astuteness Draught or Fearlessness Elixir. Your choice."

Hermione stuck out her hand. "It's a deal."

"Hermione!" Ginny gasped, but she ignored her.

"However, I want to copy down what you've got on the board," Hermione added as he clasped her hand. She tightened her grip so he couldn't pull away. "And I would like to see your notes on the potion to date."

His fingers tightened on hers. "Then I expect you to make improved versions of all four potions: Anamnesis Potion, Astuteness Draught, Amortentia Potion, and Invisibilis Draught," he said coolly, "as well as brew an acceptable batch of Felix Felicis or Veritaserum."

"Agreed," Hermione said and noticed a slight glow emanate from between their hands.

"*What have you done?!*" Ginny screeched, but Hermione only smirked at Professor Reynolds.

"If you'd please exchange the blackboards, Professor," she said with a smile, pointing at the board. She pulled out her Potions notebook, quill and ink out of her bag as Professor Reynolds flicked his hand, making the board change back. She sat down at the nearest desk, opened her notebook and her color-changeable ink, and meticulously copied everything down as Ginny sat next to her, glaring at her with her arms crossed.

By the time she'd finished, including changing the ink to match the colors of the writing on the blackboard, the timer in Ginny's pocket went off. "It's time to add the cowitch to the Verso-Quixotically Potions," Ginny stated, getting up to leave, apparently still miffed about the arrangement.

"Very well, girls, bottle your samples and bring them here," Professor Reynolds said, taking his seat behind the desk.

Hermione followed Ginny out the classroom. "Why on earth? Mother of Merlin, why?" Ginny stammered, trying to get Hermione to stop.

"Do you remember the *Advanced Potions* book Harry has?" Hermione asked, motioning for Ginny to follow her.

"Yes," Ginny said with a nod as she hurried to keep up.

"All four are in that book the one that Severus wrote in. All we have to do is get..."

"Harry to lend me that book!" Ginny finished for her, grinning mischievously.

"When are you seeing him next?" Hermione asked.

"Tomorrow," Ginny replied. "And I'll send him a letter right after we demonstrate the Polyjuice Potion for Professor Reynolds. So, we brew two at a time, and then we get to help Professor Reynolds and Severus with the Médousa Potion not only getting credit for assisting them in the discovery of the missing ingredients and creating a viable potion, but credited for validating it as well, and you get to spend some real quality time with him you're bloody brilliant!"

"It also helps that I remembered that Severus had written on the pages of the Anamnesis Potion, Astuteness Draught and Invisibilis Draught. I think the Fearlessness Elixir had annotations as well well, I'm fairly certain it was written on. Let's hope that the suggestions of the Half-Blood Prince work," Hermione stated. "We're lucky he said 'make an improved versions' instead of discover an improvement or create an improvement. It's only semantics but an important one."

By the time they finished the potions and bottled their samples, Hermione was feeling a bit nervous. What if she'd been wrong? Walking back to the classroom, Hermione heard voices coming from the room, and she grasped Ginny's arm to make her stop just outside the door.

"... her help with the potion. What will it hurt to have her look at the materials?" she heard Professor Reynolds ask someone, most likely Severus. "It will give you more time in her company, even if she can't be of any real assistance."

Hermione clenched her hands, inadvertently gripping Ginny's arm tightly.

"I only asked her to look at the directions out of curiosity. I do not want to have her experimenting with volatile ingredients." The tone in Severus' voice sent an angry chill down her spine.

Ginny forced Hermione to let go of her arm, but she was too furious to notice.

"If you and I haven't determined what the missing ingredients are, what makes you think she will? She ~~do~~ follows instructions," Severus was arguing. "She doesn't hypothesize probabilities of variants or experiment with ingredients."

"But she's a capable brewer," Professor Reynolds stated. "Besides, I thought you wanted more time with the witch?"

"I want her living with me, not brewing... You've made a magical pact; she's now in on the project whether I wanted her to be or not. If she comes to any harm ~~will~~ take retribution out on your hide," Severus snarled, "slowly and painfully you will beg me for death. Do you hear me?"

"I have little doubt you would she's right outside. Should we continue this at a later time?"

Ginny nudged her. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Hermione said, holding her head up high. She wasn't going to let them see how much their words had upset her. Taking a deep breath, Hermione entered the classroom, avoiding Severus' dark expression as she and Ginny set down their potion samples on Professor Reynolds' desk and each plucked a hair from their heads.

"Headmaster, *please* don't mistake me for Hermione and kiss me by mistake," Ginny said as she watched her first sample of Polyjuice Potion turn the color of fresh green grass.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Potter, I won't be kissing *either* of you until that potion wears off," Severus said with his arms crossed, still glaring at Professor Reynolds. "All three doses."

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It was the longest day of her young life. Hermione and Ginny sat across from each other in the Revision Hall trying to concentrate on their evaluations and essays. Hermione checked her watch again and sighed, not only at the time, but at the sight of Ginny's tanned, freckled wrist with her wristwatch on it.

"What?" Ginny asked in Hermione's voice. Not only did Severus' version of the Polyjuice Potion take longer to wear off, it changed everything about you, even the vocal chords, so you sounded just like the person you had changed into.

Hermione didn't want to look up. It was disconcerting to look up at her friend only to be staring at herself across the table. "An hour and ten minutes to go," she mumbled in Ginny's voice.

"Well, at least we can say that the potion is working," Ginny stated, making Ginny's typical mischievous grin with Hermione's face.

"Okay, it's just been weird being you all day, that's all," Hermione replied and rolled her eyes as her face across the table stuck her tongue out at her *Oh yes, quite disconcerting.*

The potion worked quite well, too well. It lasted a whole two hours. They were testing the last batch, so Hermione had already been Ginny, and Ginny had been her, for four hours and fifty minutes. Severus insisted that the girls wait at least an hour in between doses, thankfully, which had given her a bit of a reprieve, but so far she was still adjusting to having everyone around them calling her Ginny and Ginny, Hermione. Since they'd both had lessons earlier, Professor Reynolds had given the girls letters for their professors, but in both classes Hermione still felt like she'd been an experiment on display because of all the furtive glances she'd received from her classmates. And going to the loo oh that had been dreadful. It had just felt wrong, and then seeing Ginny's face staring back at her while she'd washed her hands... Ginny's hands. No, Hermione couldn't wait until the testing was finally over. *At least Ginny is a girl. If I'd have to have done this with either Harry or Ron..* She shuddered at the thought.

"Oi, Hermione, there you are!" Hermione turned around surprised to see Blake standing right behind her... Only, of course, he was looking over at Ginny. "Do you think you might have some time later tonight to work on the...?"

"Blake, I'm Hermione," she said, waving her hand to get his attention.

"Wha'?" He looked confused for a moment and then crossed his arms. "Very funny, Weasley, but this is..."

Ginny laughed, cutting him off. "I'm Ginny she's Hermione. We took Polyjuice Potion but it hasn't worn off yet."

"And no, I'm sorry, Blake, I won't have time tonight," Hermione said, wincing at his incredulous stare. "I we have to report back to Professors Reynolds and Snape regarding the results of our Polyjuice Potion and to discuss our evaluation, and then we have to demonstrate the efficacy of our Verso-Quixotically Potion... So, I won't have time."

He looked from her to Ginny and back, and then shrugged his shoulders. "Okay. How about day after tomorrow?"

"At three?" Hermione asked.

"Sounds good." He walked away, and Hermione glanced at her watch again.

"It's only been ten minutes," Ginny stated.

"Eleven," Hermione said with a sigh, writing a notation on her study guide so she wouldn't forget.

Ginny smiled. "Oh, then I stand corrected," she replied as three members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team entered the Revision Hall and headed straight for Hermione.

"Here we go again," Hermione said with a smirk, making her best friend chuckle.

"Yep."

"Ginny, did you hear?" Jimmy Peaks asked excitedly. "Lambert and White are in the hospital..."

"She's Ginny I'm Hermione," she interrupted him as Ginny waved her hand.

"We took Polyjuice Potion for Potions, so she's me and I'm her," Ginny explained as the guys did a double take. "So, what happened to Lambert and White?"

Hermione glanced at her watch and sighed. It was going to be a long fifty-eight minutes. At least tonight's demonstration of the Verso-Quixotically Potion would be quick, although she wasn't looking forward to having Professor Reynolds using the Quixotically Curse on her three consecutive times.

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The next evening, Hermione joined Severus and Professor Reynolds, Reginald when in private, in the Advance Potions lab to discuss their progress, or lack thereof, on the Médousa Potion. Hermione read through all Severus' and Reginald's notes as they brought her up to date on their research. Severus had several books with the description of the potion and two with a version of the directions. However, in each book, the directions had gaps and variances, and this was *after* the men had tried to break the Bedydrian Curse.

On the printed versions, sentences would just stop and start again on the next line as if it simply didn't line up right when printed, except this happened on the handwritten texts in the journals as well and not always on the same sentences. Frequently, the second halves of the sentences, if read together, made some modicum of sense, but not all of them did. However, if you knew the preparation of the ingredients, then it was obvious that the two halves were two different incomplete lines of directions.

Severus' copy from Master Gruener's journals had gaps and unreadable scribbling on the page where he'd documented the directions. Reginald's copy that he said had come from Master Ogden did the same; only the variations were not necessarily in the same places, which confused her. It was as if no one was able to get a proper translation off the original parchments.

Severus' old book, which Hermione had read before, was lying obstinately on the end of the table and refused to cooperate, regardless of how she'd tried to coax it open. She'd even tried stroking the binding while speaking to it, but it just wouldn't budge.

Because of Severus' harsh words about her abilities and Reginald's doubts, Hermione was determined to prove both of them wrong or at the very least, be an asset to their project and earn their respect. Hermione picked up the old journal that Reginald had received from Master Ogden and began to turn the pages. "You said this one has the directions in it?" she asked.

"It's on the index, although it's not in the book. I've checked. However, it does have his notes of the Medullaoblongata Potion, which is the primary base to the Médousa Potion," he said, pausing from his work on some calculations to answer her.

Hermione turned the page in the book and frowned. One side of the page had a slightly coarser quality and feel than the other side. Close in texture, sure, but not exactly the same. "Odd. I think these might be stuck together," she stated, examining the way the ink had bonded to each side of the page. The two sides of the page in the handwritten journal were close, possibly the same ink... or not... *No, they're not!* "I think that the ink has definitely permeated one side of the leaf a bit more than on the other side."

Both men turned to look at her.

It amused her, although she carefully concealed it. It wasn't too hard to see why he hadn't noticed the pages of the journal were made from different weights and qualities of parchment, and a few pages even felt like animal vulum as if Master Ogden had bound the book himself from his loose leafs. "This side has the list of ingredients and directions for Claude Wartenson's version of the Medullaoblongata Potion, but the back of the page has notes comparing Erwing Wiestler's version... but no notes regarding the directions to Claude Wartenson's version and the ingredients and directions are missing from Wiestler's version. 'Unlike Wartenson's, I find that Erwing Wiestler's version should be given more consideration although the potion was unable to be repeated as written....,' so there is something between them, I'm sure."

"Erwing Wiestler went insane, Hermione," Severus stated. "He returned to Austria and lived with his daughter until his death."

"Ah-huh," she mumbled, examining the next page in the journal: it didn't feel right either. "I don't think it's the only one this is another leaf that feels... inconsistent," she said and turned the page. Reginald looked up as she leaned over the table. "This page has some story about a journey to the Egyptian city of Heliopolis which seems out of context to the notes on Medullaoblongata Potion, and this side starts right off with the Qualidentifying Potion. I don't see any ingredient for the Qualidentifying Potion that comes from or has a connection to Egypt..." She flipped the page back. "And it feels too thick and this side has a linen finish while the back of it has a smoother laid surface."

"Really. Let me see," Reginald insisted. Hermione turned the book and slid it across the table toward him, and he examined the pages more closely. "Damn, I hadn't how did you?"

"She loves books," Severus stated. "I wouldn't be surprised if she smelled old books and parchment when inhaling the Amortentia Potion."

"Freshly mowed grass, books and new parchment, and patchouli blended with mint and cedar," Hermione said softly.

Severus cocked his head and raised an eyebrow as Reginald carried the book to a workbench. "Is that so?" Severus asked softly.

Hermione nodded, hoping she wasn't blushing. "Sixth year. In Professor Slughorn's class," she admitted as she watched Reginald pour a clear blue potion into a cauldron and set it to boil.

As the steam grew thicker, he held the book over the cauldron so that its steam permeated one of the pages in question.

When edges began to curl, Severus joined him at the workbench and drew his wand. *Pulveris*," he said, pointing his wand at the book, and a fine white powder coated the wet pages. "*Haustum*," Severus said with a swirl of his wand, and the dust darkened as it absorbed the moisture and clumped together.

Reginald blew the dust off the pages and tapped the book to make the excess fall off. They repeated the process on the other pages Hermione had indicated. Reginald laid the journal on the desk and, Severus and Hermione leaned in to see the pages as well. The pages after Claude Wartenson's version of the Medullaoblongata Potion that had been stuck together revealed a convoluted version of what first appeared to be the Medullaoblongata Potion by Erwing Wiestler, except the directions had been broken and rewritten as if elongating the steps. Between the gaps and breaks there were numerous annotations jumbled together as well as on the margins, and lines with crossed out of directions with unreadable scribbling.

"Is that it's Erwing Wiestler's version of the Médousa Potion!" she exclaimed.

"Very astute," Severus said and pulled out several pieces of parchment. He cast a replication charm on the journal, then made the copies appear on the parchments. He compared the directions to the writing on the board. "Most of these we've considered already," he stated, setting one sheet aside. Hermione continued to examine the journal with Professor Reynolds.

"It is as if he was trying to rework the potion or invent one..." Hermione stated.

Professor Reynolds leaned over Hermione's shoulder as he read the page as well. "And these are Master Ogden's notes," he said pointing to the facing page and then looked up at Severus. "It looks like he tried to sort out Erwing Wiestler's directions..."

Hermione turned the page which revealed Master Ogden's version of the Médousa Potion with a few of his minute annotations on the pages, some so heavily scribbled or scratched out they were undecipherable. Equally confusing, the following page, which would have been Master Ogden's notes on the Médousa Potion, had instead Arithmancy equations, rambling Alchemy notes and numerous scribbled out annotations. In addition, and much to Hermione's dismay, even Master Ogden's copy of the Médousa Potion had the gaps and variances in the directions.

Hermione sighed and sat back on her stool. "So, do you think this is copied from the original notes of Barrett Muldoon?" she asked.

"I know Master Ogden mentioned copying the directions, so this one must be it," Reginald stated as he compared Erwing Wiestler's directions to the one Master Ogden titled as *the Médousa Potion*.

Severus smirked at Reginald. "While I concur that it might be an accurate copy, I still believe that Master Gruener managed to complete his version since he was credited with actually brewing a viable potion."

"And I presume that you've preformed the every known charm to reveal the text hidden by the Bedydrian Curse?" she asked.

"Of course," Reginald drawled out in a deep growl as Severus narrowed his eyes, glaring at her as he exhaled.

"So, that's a yes," she replied, placing her hands on the table with her arms extended. "Sorry to state the obvious, but I had to ask."

Severus rolled his eyes.

"Hermione, we've done several versions to break the curse, but each time the translation comes out differently," Reginald said as if she were dense.

"Each one isn't the same," she pointed out, more to herself than the guys, but added, "I know, again, obviously," when she caught Severus' annoyed expression. She turned to stare at the ingredients cabinet. "Professor Botcher mentioned there were other charms, ones that were too complicated because they required..." She turned to look at Severus. "What wand core do you have?"

"Dragon heartstring," he replied as his eyes narrowed slightly and a crease formed between his brows.

She glanced at Reginald, so he added, "Same. Why?"

"Mine too," she said with a sigh, staring at nothing in particular. *The three strongest wand cores are: Dragon heartstring representative of the primal forces of nature wind element... Unicorn purity, innocence, fearless, great strength and agility earth element. The phoenix healing power, great strength, loyalty, destruction and truth fire element. Earth, wind, and fire...* "Too bad we don't have different wand cores," Hermione said with a sigh, now staring at the books in front of them on the workbench.

"And what does that have to do with the directions being inconsistent?" Severus asked, staring at her as if trying to discern what she was talking about.

She turned around to face the men. "We were always warned not to mix wand cores. What happens if we do?"

Severus scowled at her. "The cores might connect and if they do they create a force most find too powerful to control." He crossed his arms. "Not that any of this is related since I seriously doubt that Barrett Muldoon used multiple wands."

"Barrett Muldoon may not have used multiple wands with different cores, but all the versions of the charm we've tried haven't worked out either. The man was an egocentric person, antisocial, and extremely paranoid," Reginald said, although he had a glassy-eyed look about him. "A triad, a convergence of homogenous yet disparate elements, used to separate the bind it could work! He might have layered the Bedydrian Curse I wouldn't put it past him. That may be why we haven't been able to get a clear copy of the directions," he rambled and then snapped his fingers and pointed at Hermione. "She might be right; using the three strongest wand cores may break the curse."

"We only have two of the three," Severus stated, amending quickly when Reginald and Hermione looked confused, "I have a wand with a phoenix core."

"And Ginny's is unicorn hair," Hermione stated, already running for the door, yelling, "plus she's really good at Charms," over her shoulder, "and she's really strong."

"Hermione," she heard Severus call after her.

But she'd already left the lab and was running down the corridor, heading for the stairs. She'd managed to reach the Entrance Hall by the time Severus caught up to her. "Hermione, no," he shouted, making her stop and turn around.

"No, what?" she asked, although she knew what he'd say even before he growled out, "I'm not having Mrs. Potter involved."

"Why ever not?" she argued, seeing Reginald coming up the stairs from the dungeons.

"Hermione," Severus growled in warning.

"She's a friend," she argued back.

"She's a student," he snapped at her.

"Who is?" Ginny asked, coming through the huge oak doors with her broom in her hand, and her face still flushed from flying.

Severus ignored her. "This is not a N.E.W.T. level spell."

"This is not the place or the time," Reginald said as he approached Severus and Hermione the same time Ginny did.

Turning to Ginny, Hermione asked, "Have you ever tried revealing charms?"

"Of course," the redhead replied. "Sixth year, on all my letters from Dad, Bill, Fred, and George, and Fred and George were really creative on the curses they used on my mail my sixth year to hide their messages from the Carrows. So, I know how to do some really complicated revealing charms. Why?"

"Shall we take this somewhere more appropriate?" Reginald asked, grasping Hermione's arm and hauling her with him toward the antechamber door.

Still scowling, Severus turned to Ginny, but Hermione called out to her. "You better come too; we need you."

"I will not include another student in this..."

"If you recall my pact with Professor Reynolds, if Ginny and I can brew improved version of four potions we may help you and Professor Reynolds with the Médousa Potion," Hermione stated as she stared smugly back at Severus, "and our hands *glowed*. You, yourself, said that we've made a magical pact so she's in. Besides, we need her."

"It's bad enough I have to allow you to risk yourself in this, I will not have another student put at risk," Severus snarled back. "If anything happens to you, I'll..."

"What? Kill Reginald?" Hermione asked, actually raising her voice to Severus and pointing behind her at Reginald. "I heard you."

"This is not just some trivial magic; it's extremely dangerous!" Severus snarled and raked his hand through his hair.

"You'll risk yourself, but not me?" Hermione asked, undaunted.

He dropped his arm and his hands clenched at his sides. "Damn straight."

Reginald moved to stand between them both. "This is not productive..."

"Stay out of this," Severus snarled as Hermione shouted, "It is my choice, and I know the risks..."

"Do you?" Severus snarled, looming over her with his arms rigid and his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

"Guys?" Ginny asked, placing her hand on Severus' arm. He rounded on her, but she asked him boldly, "Just what are the risks?"

"Besides blindness and insanity?" Severus snapped. "Death. And I will not have..."

"We've encountered a few surprise reactions," Professor Reynolds stated, cutting Severus off, and again, Hermione was amazed at his boldness. "Besides the obvious reactions of the Bedydrian Curse..."

"We blew up a classroom," Severus snarled at Reginald.

"And that too," Reginald stated with a shrug. "Mostly we melt cauldrons."

"The fumes from the last two batches were extremely toxic," Severus stated, ignoring the girls.

Reginald shrugged. "I'm sure the girls know how to cast the Bubble-Head Charm."

But Severus continued undaunted, "And the potion three before that erupted," to which Reginald countered by saying, "Which we contained with a simple shield."

"It's not as if you and I don't know when a potion is going to react badly or how to handle it if it does," Reginald stated, smirking at Severus. Hermione wondered briefly how he managed to do that and not get hexed. She'd have ended up in detention or worse, well, before she'd been Bonded to him.

"We've both been teaching students how to brew potions for years and this time we're dealing with only two."

"I'm *not* going to risk her," Severus snarled, holding up his hand to indicate Hermione.

"It's *my* choice," she stated emphatically.

Reginald crossed his arms over his chest. "And she's right, we've made a magical pact," he stated firmly.

"Which can be broken," Severus snapped back, never taking his eyes off Reginald.

"You will not!" Hermione recoiled both in anger and in disbelief that he would could annul the magical pact. "I thought magical pacts were binding!"

Severus finally turned to look at her, although his dark eyes were hard and unrelenting. "Want to bet?"

Ginny said, "*Severus!*" loudly enough to get everyone's attention. "I thought Hermione and I were to help you with research?"

"And brewing," Reginald stated and then smirked as Severus glared at him. "Or not..."

"Ginny, we need your wand to break the curse," Hermione stated.

"Although that's only a theory," Severus stated, to which Reginald immediately added, "That has a lot of merit."

Hermione ignored them both. "I think that with three different wand cores, your unicorn hair, my dragon heartstring, and Severus' phoenix feather, we can break the Bedydrian Curse that is distorting the directions so they can read it; and if the curse was layered, as Reginald thinks may be the case, it might be the *only* way to read it. All other attempts have apparently been unsuccessful. Only, there's a huge risk involved."

"Obviously," Ginny stated as Severus said, "At least you acknowledge that fact," snidely.

It took some persuading, but in the end, it was Ginny who talked Severus into allowing her to help them break the curse so they could translate the potion directions.

"Fine, then you will meet with me each night this week to learn the necessary spell," Severus insisted.

"Fine by me," Ginny said with a shrug of her shoulder. "When do we start?"

Severus' eyes narrowed as he scowled at Ginny. "This is very difficult magic, Ginevra, and your cavalier attitude could get you killed."

"What's life without a bit of risk?" Ginny said with a smile.

Severus' answering scowl would've made even a fourth-year faint; however, Ginny and Hermione were both so happy they were to be included, they simply smiled back at him.

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Hermione left the Potions lab exhausted from the late hours she'd been keeping in order to stay abreast of her schoolwork. When Ginny had returned after seeing Harry in the Shrieking Shack, she had Harry's well, actually, it was Severus' *Advanced Potion Making* textbook. She'd been right: sure enough, the Anamnesis Potion, Invisibilis Draught, Astuteness Draught, and Fearlessness Elixir had all been written on by Severus when he'd been a student. They'd decided on how to best divide the work, working around their class schedules, each took three, with Ginny brewing the Veritaserum and Hermione the Felix Felicis since they were both such tricky potions. Severus hadn't written any variations on the directions in his book, just a few warnings and some rather nasty spells to use 'against enemies' or 'against Dark creatures.'

Ginny had wanted to brew the Invisibilis Draught first, so Hermione had chosen to brew the Anamnesis Potion. The Anamnesis Potion, also called the Remembrance Potion, only had one annotation regarding the ingredients, shredding the fleshy, succulent Pontorinia leaves lengthwise rather than slicing them crosswise. Severus had also specified using a glass stirring rod instead of the wooden one, although she didn't know why. Likewise, although the annotations on the page for the Invisibilis Draught were mostly regarding several hexes his teenage self was interested in, Severus had made two suggestions adding a counter clockwise stir after each fifteenth clockwise ones, and to lower the flame minutely before adding the velvetworm slime secretion.

Ginny and Hermione had considered a third change to the Invisibilis Draught: how to add the Diricawl egg yolks since Severus' change to the directions simply stated, 'Gently add the egg yolks without breaking them.' When the directions in class stated to use only the yolks, they usually broke the shell and used it to separate the yolk, which was difficult to do because the yolk membrane was so thin, so it was hard not break the yolk. Also, just dropping it in, gently or not, most of the time the yolk would break on the surface of the potion anyway, and sticking your hand holding the yolk in the eggshell into or to close to the rim of the cauldron was a definite no-no.

Hermione had suggested trying to use an egg separator to separate the egg yolks, and using a long-handled spoon, bent slightly at an angle, so the egg yolks could be literally laid on the surface of the potion without breaking. Hermione had transfigured their spoons at lunch into a fair facsimile of the cooking utensils, and they'd worked perfectly.

When she entered the Headmaster's suite, Hermione smiled at the welcoming sight. It had been two days since their argument, and she'd sent him a note, hoping that, if he hadn't forgiven her for yelling at him, he would at least let it be bygones and wouldn't hold it against her. From the look of the room, he'd put it behind them.

Severus had moved the sofa and chairs back a little, and the huge Alpine lambskin rug lay on the floor in front of the fireplace again. She surveyed the room as he rose from the sofa to greet her. *Candles, fire, fruit, cheese and crackers, and wine. He certainly has everything ready* she thought as she dropped her bag on the floor by the sofa. It really amused her. However, a nice relaxing evening by the fire seemed extremely inviting. "So does this mean you're going to read poetry to me again?" she asked as she shrugged out of her robe and dumped it on her bag, then toed off her shoes.

"I hadn't planned on it," he replied, taking hold of her waist and pulling her to him so he could wrap his arms around her.

"Oh, darn," she said with a disappointed sigh as she hugged him back, feeling his warmth and lean muscles through his linen shirt. She liked it when he dressed down to his shirt and trousers; he seemed more casual, more reachable this way.

A deep chuckle escaped from him, almost mockingly, as he arched an eyebrow, and his mouth twitched into a smirk. "Well since you put it so eloquently I might. But I want some encouragement first."

She smiled. "Please?" she asked softly as she lifted up on her tip-toes to reach his lips so she could kiss him. Her hands slid down his back as she lowered her heels back to the floor. "Do you realize that you are tall?"

Both of his eyebrows rose. "Tall?"

"Yes," she said, resting her cheek on his upper chest. "Tall." She smirked as his cheek rested on her head.

"You're just short," he stated against her hair.

She leaned back to look him in the eye. "I am not; I'm five feet five, I'll have you know."

"Compared to my slightly over six foot advantage, that makes you short," he retorted with a smirk. "Perhaps you'd like to sit on my lap so then we'd be more evenly matched?"

Hermione moved over to the sitting space, but instead of sitting on the sofa, she grabbed a throw pillow and plopped herself down on the rug. Severus enlarged the other throw pillow and stretched out beside her, reclining against the sofa. She scooted closer to rest her head on his shoulder, and he put one arm around her.

"So what type of encouragement is necessary to have you read Shakespeare to me?" she asked, snuggling into his side.

"Shakespeare? I think not." He smirked and summoned a book from an end table. "How about Broughman's *Tale of the Enchanted City*?"

She looked up at him. "I don't know that one?"

He chuckled softly and opened the book. Hermione was soon enraptured in the historical, spy thriller about a young wizard lost in the city of medieval Venice.

"You're not falling asleep on me are you?" he suddenly asked.

Hermione looked up. "No! Not at all. This is a really good story."

"You've been awfully quiet, even for you," he replied.

"I love the sound of your voice," she admitted.

"Just the sound of my voice?" he asked with a curl of his lip.

She smiled. Alone here in his room, he let his guard down around her, and she really liked his personality. Oh, the sharp wit and sarcasm were still there, as was his snarky humor, but the bite was gone. "You have the most... melodic, silky voice. Sometimes you can send chills through me with just a word."



His signature smirk was back, although there was a glint in his eyes. "Can I?" he asked in a deep drawl.

"Yes," she replied and leaned up to kiss him. His hand slid into her hair to cup her head, and his other hand slid on her waist, helping to support her weight as they kissed. She relished these times when she had control, but it never lasted long.

Severus seemed to draw her closer, and his mouth on hers became... hungry as if the short time apart had left him yearning for her. Well, they had spent time together nearly every night before the argument. Still his desire for her was mindboggling. She melted into his embrace, the light, heady feeling she felt from his kisses erasing all coherent thought. They rolled together so that he leaned over her. Wanting to touch him, she unbuttoned his shirt to his waist.

His hands pushed her jumper up. Hermione sat up and raised her arms, shocked when her blouse was removed with her jumper. "You're so lovely," he said silkily as his fingertips stroked her skin, and he unhooked the clasp of the peach bra he'd given her.

She opened his shirt, and he shrugged it off as they kissed. She loved the hard planes of his body under her hands, and his exploration of her body with his mouth and tongue. Tentatively, she slid her hand down, toyed with his buckle for a moment, and then reached down to feel his hardness against her palm. It was brazen, she knew that, but she wanted him all of him.

His breath caught for a second, and she drew her hand away. He looked up at her and gave her one of his crooked smiles. "It is all right if you touch me, Hermione," he said, cupping her breast as he lifted up to kiss her. She reached down again and gave him a light squeeze, then raked her fingers up his length, pleased by his ragged inhalation at her action, but other than that he didn't stop the sensual caress of his mouth and lips on her breasts.

"Minx," he growled and nipped at her skin. He leaned over her on all fours, his body making her lie back down on the soft fur, but instead of kissing her, he yanked her skirt, knickers, and socks off of her body with one fluid movement without needing her to raise her bum.

"How?!" she exclaimed as his trousers and pants just as quickly joined hers by the sofa.

"Really?" he asked mockingly as he loomed over her, pinning her between his arms and legs. "What part of *I'm a wizard* escaped your notice?" He leaned over her again, and his weight crushed her slightly as his mouth claimed hers in a searing kiss.

She was putty in his hands. When he positioned himself and entered her, she closed her eyes at the blissful feel of him filling her. His strokes inside her were teasingly shallow at first, just his tip rubbing at her entrance, or the head darting in and back repeatedly, nearly driving her mad. "Deeper," she pleaded, straining to feel more of him.

"Come for me," he purred in her ear. She was close, a pressure trapped deep inside her core, but she wanted more of him so desperately it was like an ache. He reached down, flicked her clit, the pleasurable shooting sensations caused by his fingers making her body arch, clench, and stretch all at once, sending her over the edge, and he plunged in, making her scream in euphoric satisfaction. His movements, instead of allowing her to come down, continued to drive her. He knew just how to touch her, where to do exactly what, and just how soft or how hard. She felt herself build even more, tightening and surging...

He pulled her leg up to his waist and moved with ardent thrusts. "Hermione," he growled her name with a lustful drawl as he plunged in and ground himself against her. "Circe, love, I can't... I'm going to..." he gasped, repeating the movement.

It was her undoing; she felt herself explode, her legs extended, and she seemed to even gush as her climax hit.

She laid there, her heart pounding wildly, her breathing ragged and her body limp and exhausted. She hoped she hadn't urinated on him, but the rug felt soaked beneath her bum. He was sweating as he looked down at her, and she pushed his hair back to look at his eyes. His satisfied smirk made her laugh. "Proud of yourself?" she asked.

"Extremely," he said silkily. He lay down and pulled her to him, holding her tightly in post-climactic bliss.

The grandfather clock in his office chimed the hour, and she sat bolt upright. "I have to get back! It's curfew!" she exclaimed.

He sat up and smirked at her. "I can extend your curfew," he stated.

"You shouldn't though; I'm still a student," she said, pulling on her blouse.

He flipped her over so that she was lying beneath him. "You are my wife," he said smoothly as he kissed the sensitive spot under her ear.

"And I have to get back to my dorm," she said, pushing against his chest.

He rolled off her onto his back. He watched her in annoyance as she scrambled to collect her clothes. "My knickers," she said, turning around in circles as she searched the floor.

He kept his face impassive as she checked under the sofa. "If the house-elves find them, they will undoubtedly return them to you."

Sighing, she quickly dressed. "Good night, Severus," she said, leaning over him for one last kiss. He tried to pull her down onto the rug with him, but she scrambled away, laughing. "I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

He let his arm drop with an exaggerated sigh. "Tomorrow. I'll hold you to that."

"Good night," she said again from the doorway.

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He rose to his feet, transfigured the rug back into a coffee table and summoned her knickers to him from where they lay on the floor as he mentally traced her departure by the sounds of her footsteps until he heard the door to his office close. He inhaled her scent on the fabric, thoughtful of the way the evening had unfolded, and stuffed her knickers in his pocket. He was pleased that she'd initiated their love making, but he wasn't going to count this as a victory until she moved into his rooms. He quickly pulled on his robe as he slipped his feet into his boots and left the tower. He stealthily followed her up to the seventh floor to make sure she made it undisturbed to her common room and then returned to his rooms.

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*Author's notes:*

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*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

# Potions and Consequences

Chapter 43 of 63

Hermione receives some interesting invitations and gifts. However, she and Ginny seriously miscalculate when it comes to their Potions assignment.



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## Potions and Consequences

Hermione woke up with a start, feeling like something heavy weighted her down, and started struggling. Suddenly something fell off her bed and landed with a soft th-wump followed by a high-pitched "Ouch!"

She threw open her bed hangings and stared at a tiny house-elf sprawled on the floor, struggling with a large box and what appeared to be yards and yards of fabrics. "Elbee is sorry, mistress," the elf said, scrambling to right herself and collect all the fabric at the same time. "Elbee is a bad house-elf to scares mistress, buts Mariah forgots mistress' box, and miss is to..." The house-elf stood finally, holding the fabrics and the bottom of the box to her naked body, and gazed down in disbelief. "Elbee is missing her towel!"

"Wait! I..." Hermione started to say and then sighed as the elf, the fabric, and box all suddenly vanished at the same time. Shaking her head, she slid out of bed and headed for the loo.

Several owls swooped down on Hermione at breakfast, each carrying various envelopes, some with small baubles or bows holding the ornate envelopes closed. "Oh, wow!" Veronica exclaimed, picking up one from the Burkwalters. "I can't believe you got an invitation to their party!" She looked up as Hermione opened another one, this one from the Ramirez family. "Are you going?"

"I don't know," Hermione replied, picking up the next one a gold embossed envelope with a fancy red seal on the envelope closure. She turned to glance at Ginny. "Did you get one?"

"If I did, it would go to Harry's, not to me," Ginny said with a shrug. "We're an official couple since we signed all the Bonding forms, so all our invitations would be addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Potter. But since I'm still in school I'm still considered a minor. It's how it's done."

Hermione dropped her hands on the table still holding the envelopes. "If that is how it's done why am I getting these and Severus isn't?"

A haughty, imperial looking Eurasian eagle owl with yellowish-orange eyes landed delicately on the table in front of Hermione and lifted a well-manicured foot out to her, which held a letter tied with a green ribbon.

"So, whose owl is that?" Veronica asked. "I mean, who would actually manicure their owl's claws?"

Hermione shrugged. "I've no idea..." she started to say as she untied envelope and stared at the elegant parchment. "Narcissa Malfoy?"

"Mrs. Malfoy?" Ginny asked as Hermione handed the owl a bit of toast.

"She what?" Wendlynne asked in shock. "You're invited to the Malfoys' party?!"

The owl leaned from the proffered toast as if affronted, and Veronica handed it a bit of bacon. "Particular bird," she grumbled as the owl took flight.

Hermione opened the letter and scoffed.

"All right, you've got to let me see it," Ginny said and leaned over to read the letter.

*Mrs. Snape,*

*As I'm sure you are aware, there are many functions and festivities this holiday season. As Severus' Bonded mate, and therefore the new wife of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, you should be properly presented to wizarding society. If you'd grant me the honors, I would like very much to serve as your sponsor for your introduction to society. I realize you're not exactly a debutant, but this is your first winter season and much like a coming out of sorts. Therefore, as it's your first time being introduced for the Winter season, you should wear the colors of Capricorn: brown, gold, dark green, purple, and white preferably in this order, hence the enclosed.*

"Enclosed?" Ginny asked as she looked up at Hermione confused while Hermione looked about her plate to see if she'd dropped anything. "What does she mean, 'enclosed'?"

Veronica shrugged. "I didn't see anything drop, and that letter was all that the owl had with her," she stated helpfully.

Hermione continued to read the letter with Ginny leaning into her so she could see it too.

*The gems of Capricorn are: amethyst, garnet, malachite, tiger eye, and turquoise each of which I am entrusting to you with pieces from my own collection, since I'm unsure if you possess any of these gems stones.*

"Jewelry?" Ginny whispered softly so as not to be overheard.

Hermione shook her head with a shrug. "Maybe Severus has them," she whispered back, never taking her eyes off the letter.

*The eleventh of Dec. is the Ministry of Magic's Holiday Ball.*

*A must attend for Severus. It is on a Friday, as usual, which never gives anyone much time to prepare oneself. However, if you need assistance I'd be more than happy to oblige. I suggest you wear the brown robes with the gold and silver lamé under dress. I've lent you the amethyst set which would be a lovely compliment.*

*The nineteenth of Dec. is the Burke's Christmas party.*

*A lovely affair and Mrs. Burke invites all the right people. I happen to know you and Severus are on the guest list as are the Potters and the Longbottoms. I suggest that you wear the gold brocade, and wear the garnet set I've lent you. You should wear your hair up with these earrings; because they are antique, you might get your hair caught in the prongs, and I'd hate to lose a stone.*

*As you know, Winter Solstice is the twenty-first of December and runs to dawn. During the Winter Solstice the Moncrieffs are holding their Winter Solstice Gala, and it's not one to be missed. It's quite noteworthy, always enjoyable, and we look forward to attending every year. I suggest the dark green for the gala, and I have lent you a lovely malachite choker and earrings to wear that are stunning with the robes.*

*We are, of course, hosting our annual Christmas Ball on the twenty-fifth of December and our New Years Extravaganza on the thirty-first since we will be hosting some honored guests this season. Draco has indicated that you may know them: Viktor Krum, Kazimir Maschke III, and Konrad Vondran, three friends of his from the Triwizard Tournament, and as your sponsor, it is my privilege to invite the Potters, Longbottoms and Mr. Ronald Weasley to attend as well. Should you have any other friends you'd like included to our guest list, please let me know as soon as possible so I may make suitable table arrangements.*

*As much as she'd like to see Viktor and Kazimir, she wasn't certain about all these parties, especially the ones hosted by people she didn't even know. She has my social calendar all listed out and what I should wear! Who does this witch think she is?* Hermione decided that if Severus was going to drag her to their party, she'd request that Alestra, Wendlynne, and Veronica be invited, too, with a plus one each.

*I suggest you wear the purple robes for the Christmas party with the tiger eye jewelry. (No one wears amethyst with formal purple dress robes; it's just not done.) Or you should wear gold jewelry if you have some. The white robes will be most appropriate for New Year's since the event will be a black and white ball. Wear the turquoise or amethyst jewelry with the white robes.*

*The MacDougals' party is on the twelfth of Dec. It's a notable event, worthy of attendance if you're invited.*

*The Crouchs' affair is on the eighteenth of Dec. We never attend.*

*The Bodes, Savages, Plumptions, and Burkwalters also have parties, but they generally conflict with other events and as such we don't attend.*

*Mishelle Greengrass hosts a lovely tea mid week after Christmas. I'm certain that Astoria is intending on inviting you, Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Longbottom.*

*Note that it's proper to spend Christmas Eve and the following morning with your family. You and Severus are more than welcome to spend it with us as we do consider him extended family. We'd be delighted to have you.*

*I do look forward to presenting you to the wizarding society and will be on hand for any concerns or needs that may arise.*

*In your service,*

*Narcissa Malfoy*

Ginny looked up in awe. "Okay, that's just weird," she stated. "So... where are these robes?"

"You know as much as I do, Ginny," Hermione replied with a shrug and put the letter on top of the pile of invitations.

Veronica looked at the letter and her eyes went wide. "Wow!" she exclaimed and looked up at Hermione. "Mrs. Malfoy wants to be your sponsor for the season?" she asked as Hermione untied the silver ribbon on a frosty white envelope. "Odd. If she's sponsoring you for the season you'd think..."

"What?" Hermione asked, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes in suspicion.

"You and the Headmaster, aren't you Bonded? I mean, I know you're not official or anything... and you're technically still a student even though you're a legal adult..." Alestra paused as she turned to look at the staff table most likely at Severus. "I mean, you're getting invitations, but really shouldn't they be sent to your sponsor?" The girl turned back to face Hermione and the creases between her brows deepened slightly. "She then in turn would discuss them with you the two of you would decide only you're not a debutant, *you're a Bonded wife...*"

"Oh right!" Veronica piqued in, "So the Headmaster should be getting them, and then you'd decide with him which ones to attend. Well, with him and Mrs. Malfoy now, I suppose."

Hermione dropped the opened invitation on the table. "If that is how it's done why am I getting these and Severus isn't?" she asked again, snatching up and brandishing three of the invitations in her fist. "Am I does that mean Severus and Mrs. Malfoy are going to decide where I spend my Christmas holiday?"

"I don't know. I was hoping..." Ginny said and turned her head.

Hermione's anger ebbed at Ginny's remorseful tone. "What, Ginny?" she asked and turned in the same direction as Ginny, realizing that she was possibly looking at Severus, too.

Ginny turned her head back to look at Hermione. "Doesn't your letter from Mrs. Malfoy explain it to you? She did send you a list of your *expected* appearances." She glanced away and sighed before looking at Hermione again. "I was hoping you and Headmaster Snape would be staying with us, but then you've accepted the Malfoys' invitation, haven't you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. No! If I had hoped to spend Christmas with you, Harry, and your family. I mean, even Charlie will be coming to spend Christmas with you and Harry, and I was really looking forward to your mum's dark chocolate peppermint mousse." She looked past her friend to quickly glance at Severus and caught his eye. He raised an eyebrow as if to ask her what she wanted. Hermione lowered her gaze to her friend. "But I don't know what Severus will expect. What I want and what he wants... Oh, bugger."

"Yeah, my sentiments exactly. I know Harry is expecting you, but I think you'll have to discuss staying with us with Severus first," Ginny stated and reached for her cup.

"Yeah, I know," Hermione said with a heavy sigh. "Besides, I have a feeling that he'll want me with him at his house over Christmas instead of allowing me to stay at Harry's or the Burrow with your family. Bugger that."

"Hermione, what is it about his house? Why are you so uncomfortable there?" Ginny asked, setting down her cup.

Hermione shrugged. "It's depressing. I know he's made changes, but the place just doesn't feel like... like... a home," she admitted.

"Well, then let's do something about it!" Ginny exclaimed, her expression lightening up. "We have the afternoon free, and don't tell me you're not caught up with your

schoolwork because I know you too well."

"Gin, I can't," Hermione said sternly. "I mean it's not like sneaking down to the Three Broomsticks or Honeydukes to get treats for a party he lives in... er... northern England. Manchester, I think, if I remember it right."

"But you've been there, right? You can Apparate us to his house?" Ginny persisted.

Hermione now knew that there'd be no dissuading her now. Ginny could be downright tenacious if she set her mind to something. "Of course," she finally admitted. "Look, I don't want to be expelled."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Yeah right, like your husband would expel *you*." She turned in her seat. "Why not go. You can show me how horrible it is, and I can give you my honest opinion."

Hermione glanced up at the staff table again and saw Severus watching them. "I can't believe that you are talking me into this," she said and rose to go. "How are we going to possibly get away with it?"

"By using a few drops of Felix Felicis. He did give you a vial of the potion, right? Let's use it, and it will all work out perfectly," Ginny stated softly, getting up as well. They hurried up to the dorm room to change.

As soon as Hermione neared her bed, she stopped short and gaped at the sight; five gorgeous robes hung on her wardrobe doors with dyed-to-match ladies shoes lined up on the floor. She saw four flat wooden boxes sitting on her bed and gasped.

"Well, now we know what '*hence the enclosed*' meant...", Ginny said and gasped as Hermione opened one of the boxes. "Oh, that's pretty."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at the Tudor style necklace and earrings of gold and tiger eye as Ginny reached out to touch it. "Yeah, but a bit much, don't you think?" Hermione said as she handed her the box and opened another. The second box held a Georgian style set, the necklace made up of nineteen beautiful malachite cabochon stones surrounded by gold cannetille, with matching drop earrings and a bracelet.

"Wow, they're gorgeous!" Ginny gasped.

"Extravagant," Hermione stated. She sighed and closed the box as she looked at Ginny. "Why would she do this?"

Ginny sat down on Hermione's bed. "Did you ever think that maybe just maybe they're trying to be nice? I mean, ever since the Bonding, the Malfoys have been acting I dunno nice. You told me about the lunch with Mr. Malfoy, and that dinner we all went to... Maybe they've changed. I know I did after being used by Tom Riddle. Imagine what he put them through. People change even Malfoys can change."

"Oh my where did all the robes come from?" Alestra asked, standing at the foot of Hermione's bed with Veronica and Wendlynne behind her.

Hermione looked up at her. "Apparently, Mrs. Malfoy; she sent me dress robes and shoes," she said with a crinkle of her nose. "I'm not sure why she'd send me her robes. I don't really want to wear her hand-me-downs. Besides, Severus bought me a lovely black robe to wear."

"If she's your sponsor, they're not second hand; that would be unheard of!" Veronica stated, and Alestra nodded in consent, adding, "And for you not to be properly attired would reflect poorly on *her*."

Wendlynne walked up to examine the lovely gold brocade, decorated with thousands of tiny black crystals and hand-tatted black lace, with a look of awe. "Besides, these robes they don't look worn they look new," she stated and sniffed the fabric. "And they smell new no fancy potpourri or the Refreshment Charm."

Alestra laughed softly, examining the strapless, dark green velvet robes. The elaborately embroidered velvet was cut to reveal a triangle of gold silk on the bodice and opened down the front of the skirt to reveal the gold silk underskirt. "Sorry, but I know you don't keep abreast of the latest fashions, Hermione. You're into books not brocades and silks. These are current fashions, I'm sure of it, very expensive ones and good quality."

Hermione sighed and looked at Ginny. "I know. I really should give them the benefit of the doubt. They have tried to be nice to me even Draco asked for a fresh start." She picked up another box and stared at the lovely amethyst pendant and earrings set in a silvery metal that shined like moonlit silver. "I suppose I should send her a thank you letter."

"It's a start," Ginny said as she opened a box revealing the malachite and gold necklace and dangle earrings. "Besides, she went to all this trouble."

Hermione laughed and tucked the boxes in her trunk for safekeeping. "I suppose I should be grateful. I wonder how Severus will take all this?"

Ginny shrugged, stood up, and smiled. "Let's go check our potions, before we go, you know," she said, adding, "out," in a whisper. "They should be ready to bottle this morning."

Feeling apprehensive about leaving school without permission, Hermione pocketed the tiny vial of Liquid Luck and followed Ginny out.

Once down in the potions lab, Hermione leaned over to check the Anamnesis Potion in the second cauldron and smiled. It was the perfect shade of early morning turquoise blue with a soft peach glow emanating from deep within the cauldron. It even smelled right.

She'd been absolutely amazed that very little sap had exuded from the Pontorinia leaves when she'd shredded them instead of cutting them, although why she had to use a glass stirring rod instead of the standard wooden one still eluded her. Nevertheless, all three batches had turned out perfectly.

"Let me see," Ginny asked, peering into the cauldron and then checking the book. "Oh, it even has the sunrise glow, doesn't it? That means it's perfect!" she exclaimed as she peered into the third cauldron. "All three of them have it!"

"Yes," Hermione agreed, walking over to look at Ginny's cauldrons. "Severus really had a talent for potions, even back then." Ginny's Invisibilis Draught had the look of a fathomless black void, or the darkest night, as if it was absorbing all the color from everything rather than casting even the slightest hint of reflection. Even the light from the glow orbs above them didn't reflect on the surface of the potion but seemed to disappear into the potion's depths.

"What did you expect?" Ginny turned and cocked her head slightly.

"I know he got Outstandings on his Potions O.W.L. and N.E.W.T." Hermione said as she leaned over to check the second potion on Ginny's worktable. Her second potion was perfect. "I know that Harry's mom used to experiment in class Harry told me. But Severus told me that whenever he'd tried to experiment, Professor Slughorn would admonish him for it."

"That may be, but still," Ginny stated, watching her intently. "I mean look at what the man has done all the potions he brewed for the school, for Dumbledore for my Dad!"

"For your Dad?" Hermione asked, turning away from the third cauldron. "What do you mean, for your dad?"

Ginny scoffed. "Who do you think saved my father when he was dying from that snakebite from Riddle's familiar that crazy Healer who tried to sew my dad back together?"

"I thought but he it was Severus?" Hermione stammered. She'd just assumed it was the Healers at St Mungo's.

"Yes, *Severus*. He brewed the potions that saved my dad's life, and the time Ron was scratched by the Acromantula fang his second year, and when you were a huge cat," Ginny stated. "He's also the one who healed Draco when Harry cut him with that curse, and when Seamus blew his nose off his face in Charms, and when Neville changed his feet into rabbits trying to make his slippers warmer... and when Percy was cursed his fifth year... Oh, and when Fred and George poisoned themselves all those times during their fourth, fifth and sixth years, inventing stuff, and..."

"Okay, I get the point," Hermione stated. "He also brewed the potions to try and save Dumbledore's hand from that curse on Voldemort's ring the one that was eating him alive... and identified the curse on the necklace that almost killed Katie Bell."

"And you're surprised that he improved a few potions?" Ginny scoffed as she checked the last cauldron.

"Ginny, *he was our age!*" Hermione exclaimed, and Ginny shot her an incredulous glare. She tried to find the words to explain what she meant. She gently touched Severus' old Potions book. "Libatius Borage wrote this book over ninety years ago, and it's *still* the standard of N.E.W.T. level potion making today. But it's only a redraft from the original *Advanced Potions, Draughts and Elixirs* by Nicoletta Antoinette Quinn written in 1728," she said and looked up at Ginny. "And Borage only made *four* changes in the book, only four preparation changes in the directions of *four* potions. That's it one hundred and eighty years and only four changes."

"Okay?" Ginny replied with a shrug.

Hermione shook her head. "You don't get it. Before that, according to *Hogwarts: A History*, the Potions textbook at Hogwarts was *The Codex of Advanced Magick Potions: the Ancient and the Modern* by Avery Bowen of Groton which was written in the early 1600's. Other than modernizing the language from the previous text *Complētus Encyclopaideia of Potions Britanniae* edited by Mariano Vellez de Conceicao, which had been published in the 1400's, there isn't much of a difference. A few of the potions had been modified by Potions masters over the course of *two centuries* and there were some new potions added to the text, but mostly Avery Bowen standardized the use of the common pewter cauldron and implemented the use of the standard measures of weight that are still preferred today."

She let out a sigh. "All I'm saying is that major Potion achievements are exceptionally noteworthy because it's very rare for a Potions master to make such improvements to existing potions as to *be* noteworthy."

She picked up Severus' book off the workbench. "And almost *every* potion in this book has annotations for making the potion easier or improving the efficacy or strength of the potion *almost every single one* I checked, there are three he didn't make changes on: the antidote for Draught of Living Death, Felix Felicis, and Veritas serum!"

"Exactly." Ginny said leaning against Hermione's workbench with her arms crossed. "Yeah, and look at all the things we've done at our age?"

Hermione hung her head. She'd read through the book over the last week, and his work in the book was amazing. And the spells! He'd invented dozens of protective and defensive spells even if a few were rather dark and their intent grotesque. He was truly brilliant, and it scared her. "Nothing in comparison to this," she said, laying her hand on the cover.

Ginny laughed. "Don't sell yourself short like that. You're really smart, Hermione, bloody scary sometimes. There isn't a spell you can't do or a potion you can't brew. You even figured out how to reverse the Inferius Curse on a living person to save Severus' life, and you don't think you're exceptional?"

"Yeah, books and cleverness," she said with a sigh, then whispered, "There are more important things."

Ginny walked over and touched Hermione's arm. "You're so modest about everything you do. It's what makes you so easy to be around; it balances your bossiness," she said with a smirk, and then her expression became thoughtful. "But really, you're always trying everything you read, pushing yourself to be the best as if you have to prove yourself to prove to everyone else that you belong. You're a witch, Hermione. No one can take that away from you. No one is going to kick you out and tell you it's a mistake. You have the right to be here and the right to be who you are."

"Thanks, Gin," Hermione said as she hugged her friend. "That means a lot." Twin hot tears slid out from under her lashes.

"Now, let's bottle our samples and take them to Professor Reynolds," Ginny suggested when Hermione stepped back and wiped her eyes.

Professor Reynolds looked up as they entered his office. His eyes narrowed as they approached. "What is this?" he asked as they set down their samples.

"The Invisibilis Draught and the Anamnesis Potion," Ginny stated, pointing to the vials in question.

He set down his quill and crossed his arms. "Okay, how are they different from the directions in the book?" he asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Hermione explained the variations they'd used on each potion. "Well, Ginny primarily brewed the Invisibilis Draught, and I did the Anamnesis Potion."

"And just how many times have you brewed these potions," he asked coolly.

"We each made three," Hermione stated, thinking that three samples each of both potions should be certainly obvious.

"You experiment on both of these potions, came up with the variations you just mentioned, and brewed these six samples, all in under a week?" he asked, leaning back slightly as he locked his gaze first on Hermione, then Ginny, and back.

Ginny nodded, but she was clenching her hands together in front of her. "It took a week to brew them, yes. We did all three cauldrons at once," she replied, and his expression hardened.

Hermione cringed. He suspected them of cheating; she could see it in his eyes. He knew that they'd finished too quickly to have actually made the findings themselves *Tell him it's Severus' variations...*

"Mrs. Potter, Mrs. Snape, neither of you girls have demonstrated the instinctive knowledge of how ingredients combine and interact within the cauldron in your class work to have me believe that you came up with the changes so quickly on your own, so I have to ask how did you two solve this so quickly?" he asked.

"We found them in an old Potions book," Ginny stated before Hermione could say anything.

Hermione cringed. She couldn't lie, not about this. It was Severus' discovery, and she couldn't take credit for his work. "We used an old copy of *Advance Potion Making* that belonged to Severus. Slughorn gave it to Harry by mistake his sixth year, and, well, we have it," she confessed, then quickly amended, "It still met the conditions of our pact. Although they are technically Severus' experiments they work. The potions are improved versions, both of them." She knew she was right, even if they'd not actually taken the potions yet.

Professor Reynolds' eyes narrowed. "Very cunning of you," he said, in a less than scathing tone. "However, since it's *not your* work but Severus' by your own admission, you will brew both potions again thrice! Mrs. Snape, you will brew the Invisibilis Draught; and, Mrs. Potter, you will brew the Anamnesis Potion. You will both do a *proper* validation of his work and thus credit him as is his due."

"Not a problem," Hermione agreed. It was the least they could do.

Professor Reynolds rose to his feet, his hands pressed down on his desk as he leaned forward, asserting his authority. "And you will not be included in our discussions of the Médousa Potion until you do."

Hermione recoiled in shock, fighting back her feeling of indignation. "That's not fair!"

"Those are the terms of our pact if you recall; your own words." He looked at her thoughtfully and then amended his statement. "An~~g~~*you* will have to tell Severus that you're using his variations of these potions."

"Yes, sir," Hermione and Ginny said in unison. Instead of breaking any more school rules, they opted to spend their break by starting the next round of potions and documenting what they'd done so far on the potions they'd just turned in.

\*

More invitations began to arrive at lunch. Hermione now had over a dozen. However, her attention was drawn to the staff table where Professor Reynolds sat deep in discussion with Severus. Unable to put it off any longer, Hermione skipped her revision time that afternoon and went to Severus' office to tell him about the potions.

When she entered his office, he was seated at his desk, although he didn't seem to be working on anything. Worse, he had the air of someone who'd been waiting for her. She swallowed the nervous lump in her throat and ignored the Bludger-like feeling in her stomach. Her gaze stopped at the box where he generally placed his outgoing mail and was amazed at the number of invitations in it. "Have the Malfoy's sent you one?"

"It arrived yesterday, and I've already replied," he said smoothly.

Her gaze snapped to his. "Without asking me?"

"I was under the impression that you already knew of her intents," he said softly. "Narcissa's letter indicated she'd lent you jewelry? Where is it?"

"Locked in my trunk," she replied, realizing that it might be a bit risky to keep them there.*Merlin! They're old and valuable, aren't they? I should've used protection charms...* "She said that she wants to sponsor me for the season."

"I'm aware of that as well," he said and called for Mispy. The house-elf appeared immediately. "My wife has some valuable jewelry on loan to her in her trunk, retrieve it for me."

"Four boxes," Hermione corrected him, wincing when he turned his head sharply, and his eyes focused on hers. She fidgeted slightly but held his gaze. "There are four of them; she sent me... four..." She turned her attention to the house-elf to clarify what the elf should look for. "In flat, wooden boxes."

"I want all four of them," he said with firm authority.

It made her feel better knowing that he'd hold onto them for her, but his demeanor was unsettling. He was upset, and she wondered if it was because Reginald had already told him that she and Ginny had used his improvements on their potions. Hermione waited in silence, trying not to fidget under his cool gaze, and tried to consider the best way to approach the subject of using his potions variations.

The house-elf returned and handed Severus the four wooden boxes. "I'll hold on to them," he stated and set them on the corner of his desk. "Knowing Lucius they will be quite expensive." He opened the top box and smirked at the Tudor style necklace of gold and tiger eye. He snapped the lid closed.

"Where did you want to spend Christmas?" she asked, mentally kicking herself for her cowardice.

"Either here or at our home. Narcissa will be very busy preparing the Manor for her parties, and she already has guests from out of town," he stated, looking up at her curiously. "Where did you expect to spend Christmas?"

"At Harry's, of course," she stated.

He let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Of course you did. Out of the question."

"According to Mrs. Malfoy, it's traditional to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas day with your family," Hermione stated. "Maybe we could visit Mr. Prince, if you'd like."

"He hasn't invited us." His lips twitched, but the next instant his expression was blank. "Besides, I'm Headmaster. There will be students in the castle that will need supervision."

"He's family," she stated, surprised by his cool indifference. "Don't you want to spend Christmas with your great-grandfather?"

He narrowed his eyes into a scowl. "I won't impose..."

"Oh, for crying out loud! You'll drop by to annoy his Healer and exchange potions, but not suggest to him we'd like to visit for the holiday?" She couldn't understand why he was refusing. "What if we only suggest spending Christmas Eve with him?"

Severus raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "We?"

"Yes, *we*. Send a letter to him saying we'd like to visit." She felt her face flush with embarrassment. She'd yelled at him; but then she couldn't believe he was being so obtuse. "It's either him or Harry's although I do believe that everyone is arriving at his place on the eighteenth."

Severus' face twisted into a sneer. "Everyone?"

"The Weasleys," she said as if he should have known that. "If you don't want to impose on Mr. Prince, then I'll simply send Harry our acceptance..."

"No, you will not," he said and a tick showed in his cheek.

"All right, then I propose this," she snapped at him. "You want me to play nice and let Mrs. Malfoy parade me around like a porcelain doll, then we're spending Christmas Eve with Mr. Prince and Christmas day with my friends. Harry is like a brother to me, and the Weasleys have accepted me into their home they're like my magical family, since my real parents are in Australia and don't even remember me. You want a relationship with me then get used to being around them. They are part of the package, Severus, whether you like it or not."

Severus nodded. "Fine, this year we will spend Christmas Eve with Mr. Prince and Christmas day with your friends. That's ~~if~~ Mr. Prince is up to having company. But he will decide what time and for how long. In addition, you will reside with me at Malfoy Manor, in my rooms, Christmas night through New Years day."

"I'll attend her parties, and possibly consent to stay in your rooms at the Manor on Christmas night and New Years Eve but not during the week," she bargained hoping he'd consent. "What about all the other parties?"

"We will select three of the events," he stated. "I hate parties."

"Hardly surprising," she grumbled.

"And you'll stay with me either here or at our home for the rest of the holiday," he stated, crossing his arms.

"*If* that includes spending Christmas Eve at Harry's," she said defiantly. "Mr. Prince may not be up to having us all day Christmas Eve, so I suggest spending the afternoon

with him, and dinner. That should be enough time, don't you think? Old people like to eat early, so after dinner we go to Harry's, and stay there until the Malfoy's party. Besides, she said that Harry and Ginny were invited, we can all go together."

A deep chuckle escaped his throat. "Assuming my great-grandfather even wants us all afternoon or will invite us for an early dinner. Until recently we weren't even close," he stated, smirking at her. "Or that Potter will want me at his house for more than two minutes. You're assuming quite a lot there."

"Fine," she agreed. "Maybe I should write Mr. Prince and request that we visit?"

Severus raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "You do that, *wife*." He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk with his fingers laced together. "Now wasn't there something you wanted to tell me, or was this the only purpose for your visit?"

She purposefully avoided looking at any of the portraits. "Ginny and I followed the directions for an improved version of the Invisibilis Draught and Anamnesis Potion we found," she confessed, her mouth suddenly dry and her tongue failing her as his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"And where exactly did you get the directions for these *improved* potions, dare I ask?" he asked coolly.

"In a book that," Hermione started to say, then inhaled to brace herself for the outburst her confession would bring.

But he cut her off, his eyes narrowed into a scowl as he growled, "Which book?" before she could finish her sentence of *that Professor Slughorn gave Harry.*

She took a breath to try again. "*Advanced Potion Making*, by..."

"I see." Severus interrupted her again. He stood up and looked down at her, his expression blank, but his dark eyes were furious. "I'm quite familiar *with that* particular book, Hermione. How did you know the changes would be viable and not extremely dangerous?" He crossed his arms, obviously expecting an answer or for her to lie to him.

She couldn't look away from his dark eyes. "They were from Harry's Potions book, well, they're actually your improvements; Ginny and I..."

"*You* were going to try and pass off *my* experimentations as your own?" Severus snarled as he leaned forward, his hands pressed down firmly on the desk and his cold, angry eyes glaring at her.

She recoiled slightly at the venom in his voice and the anger that literally radiated off of him. "No! Of course not! I was only told produce an improved version of the Anamnesis Potion, Invisibilis Draught, Astuteness Draught, and Fearlessness Elixir, and we did. Well on two of them at any rate; I never said where the improvements would come from."

His face twisted into a sneer. "That's a clever twist of your own words, very cunning of you," he said softly in a less than scathing tone.

"I thought we could validate them like we did the Polyjuice Potion," she stammered.

"Without my permission!" He sneered and pointed at the door, his other hand still in a fist on his desk. "Go get my book."

"I don't have it," she stated only to be interrupted again.

"Then get it from Mr. Potter," Severus snarled, his impatience making his tone sharp.

"I can't," she stated, about to add '*He doesn't have it Ginny does*,' but Severus had leaned forward so he that he was glaring her in the eye and interrupted her again.

"So we go see Potter and get. My. Book. Back."

"We can't," she snapped and instantly regretted her tone. His face became a mask of indifference, so like the look he used to give her when she'd been his student. "It won't do any good to go see Harry about the book..."

"*You* are testing my patience." Severus snapped at her, his dark eyes narrowed in anger. "Where is my book right now?"

"Because Ginny has it," she finally managed to say.

Severus' face relaxed and he snorted. "Then we will go see Ginevra."

She gasped and she automatically said, "No!"

"No?" he asked, his nares flaring slightly as he inhaled sharply.

"No. I need that book," she managed to squeak.

"It's my book!" he snarled.

Her feelings of indignation got the best of her good senses and she snapped, "Yes, and the annotations in that book are bloody brilliant! Do you know that? Absolutely bloody brilliant..."

"Thank you, but I..." he growled, only this time she cut him off.

"You're welcome brilliant! Why on earth didn't you ever validate your findings?"

"Li I never got around to it." His eyes had a haunted look for a mere second before they hardened again. "I was too busy saving your, Potter's and Dumbledore's worthless hides, and the rest of the magical world, from the Dark Lord!"

"Oh, sod off it!" she snarled at him. "You had thirteen years to publish your work before all that started well, okay actually ten before Harry and I even arrived at Hogwarts! That's ten years of working under Dumbledore where you could've easily had your work validated."

"Being a teacher took up all my time seven years of students, that's twenty-four lessons to teach each week: first through fifth years, I had ten one-hour Potions lessons, and ten Double Potions lessons, plus two one-hour advanced Potions lessons with two advanced Double Potions lessons to teach, plus three hundred eighty papers to grade every week, seven hundred and sixty potions to evaluate from three hundred and eighty inept students, lesson plans to prepare, ingredients to stock and maintain, detentions to supervise, assisting Madam Pomfrey with her potion requirements for those occasional student mishaps, Head of House duties, letters to parents for the dunderheads who defied the school rules or who became hurt, quarterly reports regarding student progress for the School Governors and the Department of Education, not to mention Dumbledore's little projects, and staff meetings."

"And yet you still found time to be a spy," she snapped back at him.

"Don't get cheeky with me! My spying started when I heard that thrice-damned prophecy and the Dark Lord chose to go after the Potters, and then ended when Lily died," he stated, "one whole bloody year, seven months, and eighteen days!"

She was surprised he hadn't counted the hours. "And resumed when Voldemort came back the end of our fourth year," she said sadly.

"Don't say his name!" he snapped automatically.

"Fine. But I'm not afraid to say his name!" she snapped back. "Maybe you'd prefer I call him Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord, or You-Know-Who. Is that better?" He scowled darkly at her, but she was beyond caring. "It still doesn't negate the fact that you had time to validate your work before You-Know-Who Riddle returned. So you had to spy again for what? Only three more years?"

"Yes, three more years," he stated coolly. "After that night in the graveyard, I was required to make reports to both Dumbledore, about the Death Eater activities, and to the Dark Lord regarding Potter and Dumbledore's activities a conniving, manipulative old bastard and a narcissistic, megalomaniac dictator."

She ignored his sarcasm and the shocked outcries from some of the portraits. "So wouldn't you like to have all your experiments finally validated?" she asked, hoping to get him to relent. "To get the credit for your brilliance?"

"You should've asked me," he growled.

Hermione took a deep breath to calm down. "You're absolutely right, I should have. I didn't and I'm sorry. It was thoughtless of me. However, I never intended to take credit for your work; I only intended to use your improvements so I could work with you on the Médousa Potion."

"Why is it so important for you to do this?" he asked softly.

"Because I want to do something significant," she said with an exasperated sigh, not caring if she sounded pathetic or not. "And I want to do *with* you! Something *we* can do *together*! I want you to..." She choked on her words, unable to say it, and closed her eyes for a moment. It was just too desperate a need.

"To what, Hermione?" he asked, his expression completely unreadable to her. His dark eyes searched her face as if he really wanted to know.

*Damn him. He should know; I've been trying to get it for years now, ever since my first Potions lesson!* "To respect me!" she exclaimed, fed up and not caring anymore. "I know you don't. I know you don't think I can help because I know that you and Professor Reynolds think I'm not capable, or intuitive, or smart enough, but I am. I *can* be of help to you." She turned to walk away. "Oh, forget it, it's useless." *I'm just a know-it-all to you a silly little bookworm.* When she reached for the door latch, he slapped his hand on the wood to prevent her from opening it. "Let me go," she said with a defeated sigh.

"No."

She hung her head. "Please." She refused to cry. She was not going to cry.

"No," he said softly. "Look at me."

She shook her head. If she did she'd cry. She wasn't going to cry. "You've won, all right? I'll..."

"You can help us with the potion," he said softly.

She turned around to look at him, ignoring the tear that escaped and ran down her face.

"But with the research. You will not experiment with it do you understand? Research and validation of the potion only and only once Reginald and I ~~okay~~*we* figure it out," he said firmly. He cupped her face with his free hand and wiped away another tear as he leaned on the hand still pressed against the door. "I won't risk you over a potion." He leaned over her, making her press her back to the door. "I can't put you in danger."

"I know," she whispered, looking at the buttons of his frockcoat. "My black knight protector."

"I'm I want to be more than that to you."

She looked up at him through her fringe, and his lips curled back into a semblance of a smile. "Living with you is going to be a challenge, isn't it?" he asked with a slight smirk to his lips

"You're no picnic either, you know," she said, smirking back at him.

"And you'll never be boring," he said, shaking his head.

"What about the other potions?"

"You and Ginevra may validate my improvements. Same arrangement as before," he said, using his authoritative tone. "Reginald will notify the School Governors, the Department of Education, the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers, and the Academe of Potion Masters and Brewers, just like before."

"And what if I want to validate all of them?" she asked, looking up at him intently. "You've got annotations for ways to improve most of the potions on the seventh-year list. What if Ginny and I used your book for them?"

He smirked and made a soft snort. "A bit of overkill, don't you think?"

"You deserve credit for them," she replied earnestly. "Besides, as you so eloquently put it, I'm very good at following directions even yours."

"That remains to be seen," he said with a scowl that had no harshness behind it. He stood straighter. "Very well, you and Ginevra are to meet with me tonight to discuss this. If you are to validate my potions, Reginald *and* I will supervise you. And you will have to be diligent in your records."

"Like I wasn't before," she grumbled.

"Hermione," he growled softly. "Most of those who would approve or disprove your validation of my work know that I was a Death Eater. Few would accept my work except that the witches validating it are very well known, respected in their own right as heroes of the war and have all the right connections." She looked up at him aghast, and he chuckled. "Did you really think that I hadn't wanted to have my work validated? But my past associations and reputation preceded me and still haunts me today."

She nodded as she considered what he'd said. "So it's because it's Ginny and me doing the validation..." She looked up and her lips quirked into a smirk. "That's why you let us use your variations on the Polyjuice Potion! Because I am Harry's friend?"

"And one of the youngest to receive an Order of Merlin First Class as well as other honors and awards from the Ministry of Magic for your defense of the wizarding world. You helped defeat the Dark Lord and saved life as we know it, received special awards for services to the school thrice, not to mention you're known to be the brightest witch of your age..." He reached out and stroked a strand of her hair. "And you've already been published for your own achievement regarding the reversal of the Inferius Curse..."

She knew she was blushing at his words. Even her face and neck felt like they were burning.

He wrapped a curl around the tip of his finger. "You and Ginevra have both earned recognition for your scholastic aptitude, even if Ginevra isn't quite the bookworm you



are. *You* were top student of your year for six years running all six years, and Ginevra has repeatedly been in the top ten percent of her year, every year. She, too, is a recognized war heroine, recipient of the Order of Merlin Second Class, received special awards for services to the school twice as well as other honors and awards from the Ministry of Magic... Need I go on?"

She didn't know what to say. She simply stared at his buttons again.

He assumed his authoritative-teacher's pose: holding the edge of his robes as he crossed his arms with his feet set slightly apart and his back rigid. "If you and Ginevra decide to validate my work, I will ask Reginald to have you excused from the normal curriculum and put in independent study. You'll brew the potions, as many as you like, and record your findings. Reginald will monitor your work and validate your research so he can give you accreditation... as your superior respondent academia. I will supervise and monitor your brewing, and, as I did before, I will submit a paper of my discovery to the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers and the Academe of Potion Masters and Brewers."

"So, you get credit for the discoveries, and Ginny and I get credited for the validations," she said with a nod.

"Precisely," he stated. "Now, we only have to get Ginevra to agree to the terms and accept the proposal."

Hermione chuckled. "Oh, I'm quite certain that she'll agree. In fact, I can guarantee that she'll accept."

"All right then," he said, relaxing his pose. "I will meet with Reginald this afternoon and make the arrangements with him regarding your independent study." He glanced at the clock. "You have a lesson to attend, don't you? Your revision break is nearly over, I believe."

She stepped forward and hugged him, and he wrapped his arms around her. "I think it was time well spent," she stated, adding, "Well, most of it, at least. We did sort out a lot," when he frowned at her.

He tipped her face up with his fingertips. "And I intend to hold you to it all of it," he said with a grin just before he kissed her.

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*Author's notes:*

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*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Breaking the Curse

Chapter 44 of 63

Hermione and Ginny attempt to help Severus and Reginald break the Bedydrian Curse.



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Breaking the Curse

"So, what did he say?" Ginny asked as soon as Hermione returned to the dorm room after her last lesson.

"He was angry at first about us using his improvements on the potions, but he eventually came around. If you and I want to, we can validate any of his other improvements of the potions in his book," Hermione said, walking over to her friend.

"You have got to be kidding me! He said any of them? Smashing! Bloody smashing!" Ginny said, grasping Hermione's hands.

"Yeah, he said that you and I could choose any of the revisions of the potions out of his *Advanced Potion Making*, and validate them. We are to be excused from the normal curriculum and put in independent study," Hermione stated. Ginny was so elated, her smile so large that it made Hermione laugh. "I'm supposed to see if you'll accept his conditions and terms."

"Oh yeah, I will! That's bloody brilliant! I'd agree to it even if he were to ask me to brew them naked!" Ginny exclaimed and then blushed. "Well, maybe not naked, but I will definitely agree to his terms!"

"I'll let Severus know you agree," Hermione said, smirking as she got up and walked over to her own bed. "We are to meet with him tonight, I assume after dinner."

"So now that we've taken care for that, what have the two of you decided about Christmas?" Ginny asked, following her.

Hermione plopped down on her bed. "I suggested that we spend half of Christmas Eve with his great-grandfather, and then come over to Grimmauld Place and spend Christmas with you and Harry, that's if Harry will agree to have Severus in his house."

"Oh, I can talk Harry into that," Ginny said, sitting down next to her. "Besides, Harry wants to find out more about his mum."

"Oh, I think I can talk Severus into that," Hermione parroted with a smirk. "If it's all right, I'd like us to spend the night Christmas Eve. That way you and I can get ready for the Malfoys' party together, and then we can all go together... well, that's if Harry agrees."

Ginny chuckled. "You know it's fine with me and I'm sure I can convince him. What about the rest of the week?" she asked hopefully. "Where are you going to stay?"

Hermione huffed and scooted back on her bed as she said, "He wants me to stay with him at his place or here at the castle," and crossed her legs.

"Oh, okay. So, when did you want to go to his place and make it *livable*?" Ginny asked, smirking at her. "We can go tomorrow? You did say that it needed a Weasley's touch, didn't you?"

"You're not going to let this go, are you?" Hermione asked, sighing when Ginny said no. Hermione reached for her revision guide off her bedside table to check her schedule. "Well, I can't tomorrow; I have revision with Lawrence... my essay assignments..." She looked up and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm really behind with all the added work on the potions... Not to mention we agreed to spend our evenings with Severus and Professor Reynolds for the rest of this week. How about if we go on Saturday?"

"That sounds good to me."

Hermione jotted it down and set her revision guide aside. She pulled out a piece of paper and a quill to draft a letter to Mr. Prince to suggest that she and Severus come spend Christmas Eve with him. She read her letter and then promptly crumpled it up. It seemed too impudent somehow. She did the same with the second attempt. No matter how she worded the letter, it read like an imposition imposing on a man she hardly knew and had only met once.

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For the next three days, Ginny and Hermione spent their revision breaks with Severus in the NE.W.T. Potions lab, working on the potions, and they met with Reginald and Severus each night, learning the revealing spell to break through the Bedydrian Curse. The actual charm they wanted to use wasn't terribly hard to do as far as revealing charms went, and both Ginny and Hermione managed to learn it rather quickly it was simply very difficult to control. Reginald was quite impressed with the girls' strength and ability, but Severus remained skeptical. Individually the girls could perform the charm, but once the three wand cores merged, he wasn't sure they could handle the added strain that would be necessary.

Two days later, Reginald and Severus actually had an argument over Severus' reluctance to allow the girls to try the charm on the cursed directions. "This version of the curse is much stronger than any the students will face in class," he insisted, ignoring both girl's expressions as he faced off with Reginald.

"Even Professor Weasley says that the girls are now as adept with the charm as any Curse Breaker at Gringotts," Reginald argued, "and Professor Botcheard and Professor Flitwick *both* say that both girls are well past N.E.W.T. level standard with the spell."

Hermione could tell that Severus was hardly convinced.

"And once the wand cores merge, the strength of the spell could increase by tenfold," Severus snapped. He turned toward the girls as he crossed his arms and looked down his nose at them, just as he used to do in his classroom when about to reprimand them. As he stared at each of them, Hermione held her ground, looking at him with as much self-assuredness and determination as she possessed, as did Ginny. "Hermione, Ginevra, you'll have to maintain the spell and your concentration be completely determined and steadfast. The magical conversion will dramatically magnify the magical energy almost to the point of breaking you and your wand."

Hermione opened her mouth to say that they were sufficiently determined, as did Ginny, but he cut them off before either could respond to him. "Just because you can do the charm on an object I've cursed doesn't mean you can do it successfully on these directions. Reginald can shield us, but the backlash of this curse can kill you if you terminate the charm too quickly."

"Yes, Severus, I know. We've gone over this every night. Ease off the spell by relaxing our intent so it is released slowly," Ginny said. "We've done this numerous times in Charms."

"They can do this, Severus."

Severus stared at each girl in turn, and both returned his gaze with confidence. He finally relaxed his stance. "All right."

Hermione could hardly believe they were actually going to do this, but he motioned for them to stand around the square table Severus had transfigured from a desk. Reginald stood facing Master Gruener's journal with a magical quill and parchment by his side. Severus faced him, with Hermione on his right and Ginny on his left. All four pointed their wands. Severus, Ginny, and Hermione cast the revealing charm, allowing their spells to connect just as Reginald cast the shield to protect them.

A bright light glowed on the page and bounced back to each wand tip, turning an ice blue as the cores created a three-sided inverted pyramid connecting them. Hermione held her concentration on the page, breathing evenly and ignoring everything around her, including Reginald murmuring the translation as the quill wrote down his every word.

Sweat beaded on Hermione's brow and dripped down her back as she held onto the spell. The light seemed to intensify, not so much as to blind her, but she could feel the immense power of the convergence from the three cores surging through her wand, and she forced her hand to remain steady.

"Now, pull back," Reginald said finally, breaking through her intense concentration. "I've got it, pull back."

Hermione began to relax her determination, allowing her intent on the spell to lax and fade, and, as the shield charm intensified, she let go, releasing the charm. Unfortunately, a flare of bright light leapt upward, and the glare of the light left a huge white spot blinding her vision. As if in a dream, she saw Severus swing his wand arm toward the wall, and the window and part of the wall exploded, and she smelled smoke, heard Ginny cry out... Visions of the battles she fought in the castle during the war flashed in her mind.

Hermione felt exhausted, completely drained, her heart pounding in her ears and a dull throbbing behind her eyes. She swayed on her feet and felt strong hands grab her arms, preventing her from swooning altogether. Nevertheless, she felt like she was falling as Severus gently pushed her to step backwards, making her legs bump into the edge of a seat.

"Sit, Hermione," Severus said, his voice stern with concern.

She complied, collapsing onto the seat. She felt Severus' presence beside her as she rested her head on what she assumed was the back of a sofa as she breathed deeply, willing her headache to go away so she could think.

"Mrs. Potter, sit," she heard Reginald say to her left. "You girls are sleeping in the hospital tonight," was the last thing Hermione heard before her body relaxed into oblivion.

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It was quiet. Too quiet.

And dark.

As if she was alone in a huge space all to herself. Or dead.

No, she wasn't dead because she was breathing, and moving, and she could smell the intoxicating scent of lavender, patchouli, citrus, and mint.

She was on a mattress a bed. A large, dark, comfortable bed.

Her sleep-addled mind slowly realized it wasn't her bed. This bed was extremely comfortable, and the bedding covering her body was plush, the sheets soft and warm. Her naked body...

She inhaled in surprise. *I don't sleep naked!*

The bed moved as something beside her shifted, lifting the covers away from her.

*Ohmygods!* She wasn't alone. *Who?*

Hermione opened her eyes slowly when her mind registered that there was now a hand on her forehead. Even in the darkness she could see that the bed she was lying on was huge and the heavy bed hangings were drawn closed. Yet, very little light passed through the heavy bed hangings, hardly enough to let her see anything. She turned her head to see if it was Severus lying beside her. She could just make out the outline of his body and was surprised to see him propped up on his elbow, watching her. It was unsettling. She could barely make out his head; it was like he was headless. *Black hair*, she reminded herself. *He always lets his hair obscure his face.*

*I'm in his bed*, she rationalized, and then was startled when she realized, *In the Headmaster's bed!*

"Good morning," he said softly, his smooth voice even more velvety in the silence. Even with the covers now tented due to his position, her shoulders and chest felt warm.

"Morning," she answered. She shifted, turning slightly to see him better, and realized that she still had on her knickers. "How? I mean, I can guess how, but... Why am I *here*? The last thing I remember was something about the sleeping in the hospital wing..."

"You let go of the charm too quickly, Hermione," he said as his hand crept up her middle. "You and Ginevra were hit with the backlash. Not too badly, Reginald is a strong wizard. He shielded most of it off you and Ginevra, but you broke it off too soon. Ginevra is fine; she didn't get quite as much of the backlash as you did. She's in the hospital, but I chose to take care of you myself." His fingers slid leisurely up her cleavage and around one breast.

"How?" she asked and inhaled sharply when his fingers brushed across her nipple before he started another circle on her flesh.

"A solution in the eyes, a potion and a spell to draw off the curse," he said smoothly, watching the movement of his fingers as if her breasts fascinated him. "Not necessarily in that order. You've been asleep for few days so you could fully recover." He moved away suddenly, and she felt bereft of the warmth from his touch. He turned back toward her, holding his wand over her. "Tell me if this hurts. *Candere aliquantulus*." His wand started to glow softly. "Pain?"

"No," Hermione said.

"*Lustro candere*," he said, and the tip of his wand grew slightly brighter, making her squint.

"*Lumos*," he said softly. "Now?"

She tried to open them again, only managing to squint because the light had become brighter still and closed her eyes. "Yes, well, not painful but it's too bright," she stated. The glow lessened, and she opened her eyes, noticing that the light had become only a small pinpoint. He leaned over her to watch her eyes, checking the pupil reaction as he moved his wand side to side.

"*Nox*. You'll need to be in filtered light today," he stated, turning to set his wand down. "I'll shroud the windows, but you're staying here."

She heard the scrape of something on wood. "Here? As in your bed?" she asked, feeling uncomfortable because the covers now exposed her to her navel, and she tried to pull them up more. She was being silly and knew it. She'd seen him nude, but this was uncomfortable for her.

"Here, as in my room, but yes, here." He rolled back, making the covers slide down again, now pooling at his waist, as he held a cup for her. "Drink. It's the potion for your eyes." She drank the potion and handed back the cup.

He rolled away again, pulling the covers with him, and she resisted the urge to pull them up again.

"But my eyes...?"

He rolled back to face her. "Your eyes will be fine. There is no permanent damage from the curse, thankfully, but you're still too sensitive to light. You only need a bit more time to heal fully or I wouldn't do this..." He cupped her face and leaned forward, his lips barely brushing hers. She tilted her face up, and his lips caressed hers with more ardor.

"Should we be doing this?" she asked.

He laughed softly. "Except for your sensitivity to light, there is nothing wrong with you." His arm wrapped around her, drawing her closer to his body, his chest hairs tickling her nipples in a delicious way. He stretched his body out beside hers, and she now knew that he was, indeed, nude. His fingers stroked her cheek tenderly. "Do you honestly think I'd do anything to harm you? That if there was even the slightest possible risk to your health that I'd take advantage of the circumstances and push myself on you for my personal needs?"

She shook her head. "No. No, you wouldn't."

"No, I would not," he said and kissed her tenderly again. His lips made light, sensual motions over hers in the most tantalizing way, and she responded back to him, semi-consciously craving more.

Her hands landed on his chest, and she inadvertently rubbed her thumb across his nipple, making him hiss in pleasure from the touch. Curious, she did it again, smiling as he growled softly, the sound sending shivers through her. His tongue sought entrance to her mouth, so she let him deepen the kiss. His hand roamed freely on her skin as they kissed, caressing and kneading the flesh on her hip and back up to her breasts.

Emboldened, she explored his body with her fingertips, tracing his pectorals, the taut flesh over his ribs, the firm abdominals. She ran her fingernails through his chest hairs and followed the line of hairs down to where his leg lay over hers.

She felt a bit of moisture on her skin, and reached down to touch it. He inhaled against her mouth as her fingers brushed the top of his penis, which stuck out from beneath his leg.

"Don't do that," he said, nipping on her bottom lip, "or I'll..." as she slid her hand down his thigh and back up, sliding her fingertips on the small head again. "Merlin, woman." He shifted his leg off her, saying, "Go head and touch," silkily, which made her hand slide from his thigh to his penis that now lay heavily, fully engorged against her.

She stroked his length, feeling the foreskin move with her hand, pleased to hear him moan with pleasure from her touch. She entangled her fingertips in his pubic hair, then stroked him softly back up his length, and back down. His pubic hair was much courser to the touch, such a contrast to the velvety soft skin on his rigid cock.

"Minx, continue to do that and I won't restrain myself," he growled lustily in her ear and licked the edge of her ear with the tip of his tongue. She angled her head, still stroking him, aroused by the feel of his lips below her ear and neck and the caress of his hand on her breast. He moved, bending away from her, and she strained to keep her fingers on his soft velvety skin on his rigid organ.

He rose again and reached for his wand. '*Globus illuminate*,' he murmured, and a tiny orb floated from his wand, emitting a pale peach glow that barely illuminated the small space but thankfully didn't bother her eyes. "Better," he said with a smirk and lowered his mouth to her breast, suckling her nipple as his hand continued to knead her flesh.

His position only allowed her to touch the top half of his penis. She closed her eyes, her hands roaming idly on his shoulders, arms, and stroking his hair, enjoying the sensations as his mouth trailed warm kisses in a straight path down her front, smoothed by his nose, and the tickle of his hair.

"I have to stop," he said with a heavy sigh, almost panting as she reached up to kiss his lips, pleading, "Why did you stop?"

"Because I want," he struggled to say. "Gods, I want you," he growled, moving away, holding himself up on all fours above her.

"You said it won't hurt me, didn't you?" she asked, surprising herself at how much she hated the fact he was pulling away.

"Yes. I don't know..." He rested his forehead on hers. "Are you sure? I won't if you..."

"If it hurts, you'd stop, right?" she asked as she gently slid her hands down his front, staring into his lust-filled eyes. The fire in them sent a pleasing thrum through her. Her heart was pounding, she felt needy, and she wanted to continue.

"Of course," he said with an incredulous smirk. "I told you that I would never..."

She cut him off by placing a finger on his lips to silence him. "I know. I don't want to. I liked it. Please, if it hurts, I'll say so."

"You're sure?" he asked, and she nodded, smiling as his look changed from disbelief to pure unadulterated desire. He lowered his head and kissed her. His kiss intensified as he caressed her body, seeking her core. With no time at all, he had her writhing under him with just his hand and his mouth, pleading with him to actually touch her.

He urged her to move her legs, and she opened up for him, shifting so his legs were between hers. He eased into her slowly and drew back out, making her hiss at the loss when he withdrew. "Am I hurting you?" he asked tenderly.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Good," he replied, entering her again, making his movements slow and sensual. His fingers stimulated her as he moved, his kisses firm but not forceful.

Hermione stroked his skin, feeling the muscles of his body contract and relax as he moved. "Hmmm yes," she murmured as the tension deep inside her built. He responded by increasing his tempo slightly, kissing her more ardently, and her body responded in kind. The first wave of her orgasm built up gradually, rolling through her, then increasing again, straining to release again and then came crashing through her being. Severus plunged into her repeatedly as he watched her face. He slammed into her finally as her climax ebbed, his arms locked straight as he leaned over her with his eyes closed and his teeth clenched. She watched fascinated at the look of euphoric bliss until his eyes opened and he stared down at her.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, concern replacing the content look that had only been there for a second.

"No," she replied, wincing as he withdrew. He looked at her, regarding her intently. "It hurt when you pulled out."

He laughed softly and said, "Well, I can't stay inside you forever," as he moved to lie down next to her.

"Don't you have to get up?" she asked, not knowing what time it was.

"I'm not leaving this bed as long as you're in it," he growled contentedly, hugging her tighter. "I'll call for Mispay to bring food when you're hungry."

"I'm hungry well, thirsty actually," she replied softly. "I'd also like to take a bath."

He kissed her temple. "Not a bad idea, a bath." He lifted his head and called out, "Mispay," then lay back down.

A soft pop broke the silence, and the curtains opened just enough to allow a tray with a tea service to float in and settle on the end of the bed.

"Your breakfast," Severus said as he sat up and pointed his wand upward. Another tiny orb floated from his wand to hover at the top of the canopy, increasing the amount of light in a soft illumination, but still not enough to bother her eyes. Hermione sat up and smiled at the plate of deviled eggs with tiny stuffed pastries in the centers, sliced fruit, and crumpets with jam the house-elf had prepared for them.

~S~

Hermione spent the day with him. The bath had been nice. Severus had shrouded the windows and created two pale glow orbs like the ones in the bedroom so she'd been able to see. She'd become bored about noon, even though they'd made love again after lunch. He'd dosed her with a mild sleeping potion when he'd given her the second dose of her Visio-Videre Potion for her sight.

While Hermione slept, he went to check on Ginevra, and then he'd gone down to see Reginald about the translation. Reginald of course, wanted to repeat the charms on Master Kirkwell Ogden's journal and Severus' old book. Severus knew that the old tome might not abide the onslaught of the spells, and he didn't want to repeat the spells anyway because the risk of permanently harming the girls, especially Hermione, was too great.

The two wizards' discussion had become coolly heated, and each had dug in their heels. Reginald wanted to teach the girls how to control the strength of their magic so they could try again. Severus didn't want to take the risk, but although he knew that Reginald was right, so was he. Neither Hermione nor Ginny knew how to control the strength of their magic when slowly releasing the spell. If they were to repeat the charms on another source, possibly two or three, he'd have to teach them how to control their magic. Which he knew he was going to have to do anyway. Reginald's argument was logical; it wasn't that they couldn't do the spell, they were just inexperienced, and needed more training.

There was no evading the reality; they needed the girls' help, or he'd have to bring someone else in on the project actually two more and that wasn't an option. There wasn't anyone else Severus knew that he trusted enough or wanted to have involved. Severus hated having to rely on others, and he was loath to risk someone he loved just over a potion. If, and only if he agreed to let the girls try the spells again which was really the only solution and if the girls learned how to moderate their strength, would he allow them to try the spell again.

But he refused to do the spells on his old book. Three days ago it had been obstinate when Hermione tried to open it to show the version of the potion to Reginald. It had clamped itself shut, and lay stubbornly on the enlarged coffee table, even though it had allowed Hermione to touch it without repercussions. The book was temperamental, and Severus knew for certain that it would definitely defend itself against Ginevra. However, when he'd suggested using Malfoy's copy instead of his old Potions book, Reginald had scoffed at him, pointing out that neither could pay the amount Lucius would want for compensation.

By the evening Hermione had felt better, enough to allow soft glow orbs to emit enough light for her read by, which both pleased and saddened Severus. However, she'd insisted on reading the translation of the Médousa Potion Reginald had made, which had only spurred an argument between them. She'd even suggested repeating the spell on two or more translations for comparative reasons, which had made him even angrier.

He'd hated to admit it, she'd made very good arguments for doing the other texts, many of the same logical arguments that Reginald had used. However, this was the second time she'd been hurt by the Bedydrian Curse and both times she'd been lucky.

He knew that he'd have to teach her. But he'd wait a week. And Merlin help Reginald if he thought to try coaching her before he thought she was ready.

By morning, Poppy had declared that Hermione was well enough to return to her lessons, which meant she'd be leaving him for the Gryffindor tower.

Severus was in a bad mood at breakfast and his temper was short. He needed to find an outlet for his anger or he'd really say something he'd regret and alienate Hermione, which, considering how well things were going, finally, he couldn't risk happening...

He needed to hex something.

~S~

Severus led the group down Bulbarrow Hill, away from the antenna tower toward Fifehead Stoke and stopped. He pointed down the lane on the right to a break in a stone wall. He could see the old farmhouse where it stood in the overgrown field. "Adjacent to the side of the house are what had once been the property's small animal stables. Now they are used as kennels for horned horehounds." Severus smirked. To the men beside him, it would look like a field, surrounded by a low rock wall with scattered brush and a few sparse trees. "Believe me or not that's the house."

"Great," Ron exhaled. "It's like Ilkley Moor."

Auror Blume shook his head. "Nope this time we don't have the advantage we had at Ilkley Moor we knew what the house looked like from the inside. This one is fully protected by the Fidelius," he stated, and turned to face Ron. "Well, Weasley?"

Ron turned to face the group. "Right. We can't see it, but we know it's there. So, we're going in blind, well, except for Snape. Our best bet is to force out any occupants. From what Snape has informed us, there could be Dark artifacts and foe glasses on the premises, not to mention the dogs." Ron knelt down and drew a square in the dirt. "Thanks to Snape, we have a vague idea of what the layout is, so if we cast the Manifesto Charm on the house and kennels from all four sides," he stated, drawing four arrows, "that should help. We won't be able to see the house, but we'll see the distortion of the spells in our peripheral vision and where the spells intersect and overlap. Fairley and Hobday, I suggest setting a fire on the field here and directing the smoke directly at the house." He drew a line indicating what he thought could be the back of the house. "I would also suggest Anti-Apparation Charms and a containment spell around the perimeter so the fire stays inside the walls. No need to burn down the village."

Ron turned to look up at Severus. "Since you can see the windows, Plumesmoke might be effective to force them out if not, it might blind them." Ron got to his feet and looked at the men. "Also, we have to use Heat-Sensing and Locating Charms with our concealment charms so as not to hit each other in the fight. Don't forget Silencing Charm on your boots, but once we're close, they'll know we're here, so look alive."

Blume smiled. "Well, you heard the plan. Bodes, you go with Potter and silence those dogs, Duncan, with Weasley. Headmaster, you're with me. Fairley and Hobday, you're covering the back."

Severus smirked as he disillusioned himself, adding the Heat-Sensing and Locating Charms so the others could see his magical signature. His boots already had the stealth charms. Knowing that the residual of his Dark Mark would allow him to get close to the house before he was detected, he moved swiftly, placing himself near the front of the house, ready to send Plumesmoke into the windows. As soon as the smoke from Fairley's and Hobday's fire could be seen in the sky above the roof, he blasted the glass panes with a flick of his wand and fired the Plumesmoke spell with a quick back swish at each window, dodging the spells fired at him from the now empty window frames.

~MoM~

The Potters' file and the Snape-Granger file, as she'd designated it, now had their own seemingly permanent place on Maggie's desk; in the first slot of her vertical file folder that held all her marriage and magical unions files which were pending confirmation. Even though the file folder was magically enhanced to hold any folder she placed in it, the Potters' and Snape-Granger files took up a whole section all on their own. In fact, they barely fit in the one section anymore.

Usually her five-slot vertical holder was more than adequate to hold all the necessary folders. However, thanks to the reluctance of the Potters to set a wedding date and get married, and that insufferable couple, the Snape-Grangers', persistent disregard of her requests to at least confirm their Bonding, Maggie had been forced to requisition a six-slot holder. If the Potters' supposed engagement continued to linger indefinitely, or the Snape-Granger couple didn't consent to confirm their Bondings, Maggie would soon be forced to request an eight-slot holder. Never had two simple Bonding files grown so thick, although truthfully, the Granger-Snape file was twice the size as the Potter file.

Worse, there were now labels with red seals on both files, the Minister's seal. One label on the Snape-Granger file read: 'indefinite extension for the request of annulment by order of the Minister of Magic.' *As if those two are going to get an annulment at this point* she scoffed. *Why not just sign my confirmation forms and be done with it. It's not like that wizard will ever marry the girl, or he'd have proposed to her by now.*

Beneath the first label was another that read: 'indefinite extension granted for due date of confirmation by order of the Minister of Magic. *Indefinite! As in I will never get this resolved and the bloody folder will be on my desk indefinitely! Six months, three weeks, and six days and still the couple refuse to acknowledge the Bonding!*

Even the Marriage and Magical Unions ledger still had the Snape-Grangers listed as 'pending.'

The huge label on the Potter file simply read: 'sealed until further notice of the Minister of Magic.' *Sealed.* Maggie was forced to have a second file on the Potters for her weekly memos and her reports. Not that her reports ever had much information on the couple. Potter refused to talk to Maggie when she passed him in the corridors, and Miss Hartshorn in the Aurors' office refused to make her an appointment with Mr. Potter, claiming that Mr. Potter declined Maggie's request because he was too busy to take a personal meeting. All Maggie wanted was to confirm the rumor that Harry Potter and his Bonded mate, Ginevra Potter, nee Weasley, would, in fact, be getting engaged or if they ever intended on actually getting married at all in the near future. Or the distant future for that matter. Or if ever.

Maggie hated loose ends.

Still, Rita had let slip over tea at the Lotus Rose Room that Mr. Potter was seen shopping in Hatton Garden Jewellers and Hirschfields, as well as the wizarding jewelers, Bridge and Rundell and infamous Boehmer and Bassenge on Hatton Garden London's Jewellery Quarter. So it was certainly possible that the couple would be engaged soon. If not, Mrs. Potter nee Weasley would be getting a lovely Christmas gift.

Maggie decided that she'd just have to watch the entries on the Marriage and Magical Unions ledger very carefully over the next few weeks, especially over the upcoming Christmas holiday.

And if Mr. Potter did in fact propose over the Christmas holiday, the ledger would note the day, place and time of the engagement. She'd be sure to send a discreet letter to her dear friend, Rita.

~H~

"All I'm sayin', Hermione, is that yer not givin' the bloke much of a chance," Hagrid stated, popping a crumb cake into his mouth.

Hermione had gladly accepted his invitation for tea, although she'd brought a basket of finger sandwiches and cakes from the kitchens with her. She closed her eyes for a second as she exhaled slowly, and then looked up into his beetle-black eyes. "It's not that I'm not giving this Bonding a chance; I want to finish school before I'm a married woman. Is it really wrong of me to want to have all my focus on my N.E.W.T.s?"

"Bu' he's your husband, well, Bonded mate, bu' that's the same in most people's book," Hagrid insisted. "He's not your boyfriend, and he shouldn' have ter wait until you finish yer classes."

"I don't see why it's a problem." She supposed this subject was inevitable. They'd covered the latest news on Ron and Harry, Hermione's parents and when she'd go retrieve them from Australia, Hagrid's new pets in the Hogwarts animal pens and the animal exchange with The Edentagart Magical Creatures Zoo. Now that the conversation had turned to her relationship with Severus, she wished that she'd taken Ginny's offer to practice Charms with her and Luna instead. "Besides, I'm now spending most of my evenings before curfew with him in his sitting room." So far, only Professors McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick backed her decision to remain in the Gryffindor tower. Professor Reynolds, of course, thought she should live with Severus. Not that he'd mentioned anything to her; she'd overheard him speaking to Severus about it in the Potions lab.

Fang stood up, facing the door and let out a worried bark. "Wha' is it, Fang?" Hagrid asked, rising to his feet and walking over to the window. Fang scurried for the door and whined.

Hermione jumped down off her chair and followed him as Fang barked again. Hagrid took his crossbow down off its hook. "Yeh wait here, Hermione. I'll go see wha's botherin' Fang."

Hermione drew her wand and peered around Hagrid as he stepped outside. Out on the path, a black-cloaked figure was trudging stooped-shouldered up the hill. "Oh my gods!" Hermione push passed Hagrid and started running with Fang at her heels. Stopping right in front of Severus, gasping at the blood on his face and chest, she asked, "What happened?" and flicked her wand to remove the purplish ash from his robes and hair. "You're bleeding."

"Very astute, my dear," he sneered warily without any venom behind his words as Hermione dug in her pocket for one of his handkerchiefs. "Two more of my old associates and one of the Dark Lord's supporters are behind bars. Rosier, Mulciber and Kolsson are locked up."

"Yeh all righ', Headmaster?" Hagrid asked.

Severus nodded as she handed him a handkerchief, pointing at his cut above his eye. "I'm fine. Sore and bruised mostly. I'll see Madam Pomfrey and turn in," he replied, patting Fang on the head. Hermione pulled on the dog's collar so he wouldn't knock Severus over.

"I'll let Professor McGonagall know yer here," Hagrid replied and turned to run up to the castle. Fang stayed by Severus' side, whining his concern.

"You'd think that beast liked me," he scoffed as he dabbed gently at the cut.

When he lowered his hand to look at the white cloth, Hermione was pleased to see that there wasn't much blood on the handkerchief, which meant that the bleeding was stopping.

"Off with you, dog," he admonished Fang with a half-hearted wave of his arm and winced at the pain. Fang looked confused for a moment, turning first to the hut, then back to Severus, whining as if he wanted to stay. "Oh, you bloody mutt, go home."

"I think he's concerned for you," Hermione said as she wrapped his arm across her shoulder and tried to help support his weight.

He rested his arm across her shoulders, but didn't lean on her. She tightened her arm about him slightly when he stumbled, hoping that she wasn't hurting him. If she was, he made no indication. "You do know that the suffering in silence routine..."

"I'm fine, Hermione, only sore," he reiterated. Beside him, Fang woofed. "Who asked you, you drooling flea bag?" He paused at the foot of the stairs. "Fang, go home now," Severus ordered the dog kindly but firmly. Fang looked up at Severus with huge sad eyes and then reluctantly went back to the hut with his tail between his legs.

"So, I suppose you're a cat person?" Hermione asked, feeling sorry for Fang. The dog was only showing concern after all.

"No," Severus said, leaning on her as he stepped up onto the first step. He looked up and grimaced.

"No?" she asked, lending him support for the next step. "Well, you obviously don't like dogs. Except didn't you once have a puppy?"

He looked down at her upturned face. "Yes, for all of three days," he said and frowned when she tilted her head slightly. "I told you about him; my father found him and demanded that I get rid of him. When I wouldn't, he put him in a burlap sack and tossed him into the river. When I cried, he hit me."

"No!" she exclaimed, her mouth gaping open as she came to an abrupt halt, almost making him stumble. She'd forgotten about that part and couldn't believe the inhumane act he described so coldly. "He didn't?"

"Which, drown my dog or hit me?" Severus stated blandly, limping up the next step. "I assure you he did both."

"What about later?" she asked, bearing his weight as he made the last step to the oak doors. "After your father died... Didn't you ever get another pet?"

He sighed heavily as he looked at the marble staircase. "Nope, always too busy." He drew his wand and made a series of movements with barely muttered incantations. The pulse of his magic seemed to ripple outward throughout the castle. "Hold on," he said and Apparated them to the seventh floor by the stone gargoyle. He cast a similar series of spells, which rippled outward throughout the corridor and seep into the stones.

"I thought you were going to see Madam Pomfrey?" she asked alarmed as he turned to face the gargoyle.

"It's only superficial cuts, Hermione. Most of the injuries are bruises and mended fractures," he said.

"You should be checked out," she persisted.

"I was at St. Mungo's. I just want to lie down," he said, barking his password at the gargoyle to let him in.

Once they were up in his room, she was at a loss as what to do for him. "I'll draw you a bath," she said as she deposited him on his bed. "Maybe add healing salts to the water."

"Sure whatever," he said softly as he shrugged out of his robes.

Through the open door Hermione could hear the water running in the tub. When Hermione peered in through the doorway, she saw Mispy adding healing salts to the tub full of hot water.

She turned to see him lying on the bed with his knees hanging over the side, still in his bloody clothes. "Let's get you out of these clothes," she said, starting on his buttons. He simply watched her as she undid each one. There were so many. Finally she pushed open his frock coat and shirt. "Up you go," she said, pushing his clothes off his shoulders as he sat up. He obligingly pulled his arms free of the sleeves and unfastened his trousers as she pulled off his boots. When he was only in his pants, he followed her to the bathroom.

"Join me?" he said, more a question than a statement.

"No, you're hurt. Get in," she said, indicating the tub.

"Join me," he repeated, sliding his pants to his ankles and kicking them off.

Other than the blood that looked like it came from his nose and some bruises, he looked all right, but she wasn't sure. "Do you want me to get something from Madam Pomfrey?" she asked.

He stepped forward and encircled his arms around her. "No. I want you to join me in the bath."

She said no; he persisted.

Hermione used a Dittany ointment on his cuts, pleased to see them heal up nicely as he tried using his kisses to persuade her to join him in the tub. However, she hated the taste and smell of blood on him and refused, not wanting to hurt him any more than he was.

He grew irritated, so she relented.

She washed him off carefully and even washed his hair. Her tender administrations made him laugh, but he relaxed and patiently allowed her to bathe him. Then he washed her, his administrations more sensual and teasing than hers had been, trying to arouse her. It worked. She pulled him from the tub, dried him off with her wand first, then herself, and led him to the bedroom.

He pulled her to the bed and pushed her playfully to lie down. "You're hurt, you should be the one lying down," she protested.

"Do as you're told," he growled silkily, widening her legs further apart as his tongue licked her lower lips.

"You don't have to oh gods!" Hermione bucked upward into his face when his tongue hit her clitoris. He pinned her down, a vibrating chuckle making the act even more stimulating. Her nails dug into his shoulders as the sensations deep inside her intensified. "Please, Severus..."

"Please what?" he purred against her clit, sending deliriously incredible shocks through her nether regions.

"Oh. Gods. Severus..." she pleaded incoherently as the first waves of her orgasm hit. "Oh, please..." He chuckled again, unrelenting on his delicious torture, making her body shiver and tighten as another wave crashed through her. "No, please..."

He looked up, his thumb making rolling circles on her overly sensitive nub. "You want me to stop?" he asked silkily.

"No, not really, just give me a minute," she pleaded.

"No. I have a better idea," he said, rising so his face hovered over hers. He clasped her thigh with one hand, bent her knee against his abdomen and buried himself in her in one forceful stroke as his mouth claimed hers.

She tasted herself on his lips, and his coarse pubic hairs were both ticklish and abrasive on her sensitive nub as he moved within her. Her nails dug into his skin when she grasped his arms and pleaded, "Oh, no, oh, please," over and over as the intensity deep within her surged, tightened, ebbed to the pit of her core and then expanded. His thrusts changed from long even strokes to hard pounding ones, and the assault sent Hermione reeling into oblivion, tears falling from the corner of her eyes as she cried out his name.

He thrust into her hard several times, a feral grunt escaping though his clenched teeth as he buried himself fully and held her in place.

He finally relaxed, let go of her leg as he stretched out beside her and pulled her to him.

They missed dinner altogether, and neither minded.

\*

Hermione leaned over the large desk, her palms flat on either side of the Médousa Potion Reginald had given her an exact copy of the directions he'd made from their attempt at breaking the curse. Beside her lay the parchment with the copies she had from Master Gruener's and Master Ogden's journals. The only difference was that only three lines were off on the new copy, as opposed to the five in Master Gruener's copy or Master Ogden's.

One line, which, now that it was lined up properly, told them the full preparation of the ingredient but not the ingredient itself. There was something that was crossed out and smudged. The second and third lines simply had gaps, spaces where words were missing and the sentence continued on the next line... like a misprint. She checked the version in Severus' old book that lay peacefully on the desk in front of her. The copy in the book matched the version the four of them had created but without the smudges and scribbles the journals had.

She'd used the old blackboard in the unused classroom to write down the potions directions. She'd already had Severus' version from Master Gruener's journal copied on the blackboard in green, and Master Ogden's copy in blue. She'd turned the parts that matched to yellow and used a charm to move the parts that varied to the sides so that which was still written in blue was on the left side of the board and the green on the right.

The version from Severus' old book was then added in orange. Because of her charm, the parts that matched the yellow glowed and stayed yellow. The parts that matched Master Gruener's journal in green turned brown, and the parts that matched Master Ogden's copy turned purple. Hermione then compared the new version to the one on her board; most of it matched up with the version in Severus' book almost all of it except for three lines. Where the book had gaps on those three lines, the new version had scribbles and smudges...

She could well understand the men's frustrations. Spread out on the desk was her notes, the copies from the blackboard in Reginald's office, and copies of Severus' notes. But she knew that somehow, Master Gruener had figured it out, and it was there, right under their noses. She wasn't as certain about Master Ogden's copy, however; except that Reginald was absolutely certain that Master Ogden had solved the mystery of the missing potion ingredients.

She picked up the two parchments and accidentally gave herself a paper cut. "Damn," she swore, dropping the parchments as she stuck her finger in her mouth. She checked her finger. She was lucky; the cut didn't look that deep. She picked up the Master Gruener's version of the Médousa Potion as she compared it to their new one and the one in Severus' old book.

"Why didn't the missing parts show up?" she asked, her gaze flicking from the parchment to the colored writing on the board. Sighing in frustration, she traced one of the partial lines on the page of the book with her finger. She stopped and tapped on the missing part. She gasped as tiny splotches of her blood marred the parchment, only to disappear as the number *1,000* appeared along with the words *seeds* and then faded. Gasping Hermione stared at the page. *You have to be kidding me! Blood?!*

She milked her finger, making a small bit of blood seep from her paper cut. She held her bloody finger on the parchment over another partial line, and asked, "Please, show me another?" as she gently stroked the missing part on the page. Like before her blood stayed only a second before the words, *six drops of*, with a space, then *tears* appeared and faded. She milked her finger again, making a large drop form and tried again, this time the parchment read: *six drops of Aquila's tears*.

She stared at the blackboard, amazed at what might be a tremendous breakthrough, although she had no idea who or what Aquila was. She tried to get her finger to bleed again, but only managed a teeny bit of blood. Sighing, she rubbed it into the third missing part. The blood soaked in and *uepike roe*, appeared then faded.

She wrote the words on the board in pink where the old book had shown them to her and stood back. It was still incomplete, and it still didn't make any sense, but her eyes were starting to strain. She quickly jotted down the addition in the margins of her copy.

She checked her watch and decided to give up for the night. She collected her things, being especially careful with the old tome, and headed for her dorm room. She still had reading to do, and she wanted to finish her Transfiguration essay before bed. She also had a letter to write to Mr. Prince, one she'd found to be terribly difficult,

suggesting she and Severus be invited to his house Christmas Eve. Sighing, she realized that she couldn't put it off too much longer.

\*

Severus had gone to see Reginald and was on his way back to his office when he saw Hermione pause to carefully close the door to an old classroom. He checked his watch and noted that it was four minutes until the upper-years' curfew... *What is she doing here at this time of night when she should be in her common room or her dorm room?*

Curiosity as to what she'd been doing in the room, and with whom, made him aim his wand at the space in the corridor. He whispered *Humanus manifestare*, frowning when only her form revealed itself. He aimed the spell down the Corridor in the opposite direction, revealing nothing. *She's alone. This isn't a liaison.*

He watched Hermione trudge up the stairs to the seventh floor. She looked fatigued. There was chalk dust on her robe sleeves in blue, yellow and green not the usual colors used by the professors.

Now fully intrigued, he approached the door and tried the latch, smirking when he'd found it locked. He cast a simple nonverbal *Alohomora*, then the stronger, *'Unlocked'*, to open the door. He lifted his wand and said, "*Lumos*," as he entered the room. It was empty. The desks and chairs were pushed to the wall with the exception of the larger professor's desk that sat in the middle of the room. But it was the blackboard that caught his attention.

The addition of 'one thousand seeds', that she'd written in pink fit one line well enough, but the 'six drops of Aquila's tears' on the next line made no sense at all as did the two partial words, 'uepike roe.' However, it was definitely intriguing... But not exactly correct.

He ran through a mental list of all the seeds used as ingredients in potions that fit with the preparation indicated and came up empty. He and Reginald had tried them all, although not in such quantity. One thousand seeds was a fairly high number for some seeds, and usually seeds were measured by weight if they were small such as poppy or mustard seeds. *Reginald and I have already exhausted this...*

He also had no idea who or what Aquila was. "Where did you come up with that?" he asked softly, shaking his head. Besides, six tears from any creature were hardly enough.

With research, Hermione was commendable. Not so with speculation and experimental theory. Still, he admired her persistence.

He turned to leave, locking the door behind him, and walked back to the dungeons.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, WriterMerrin, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*The Latin used to make up the spells in this chapter come from the Norte Dame online English to Latin translation site. My favorite English to Latin translator guide. Any mistakes in my choice of word is my own.*

*Aliquantulus means: little, small, a little.*

*Lumen means: light, a light*

*Globus means: a ball, globe, sphere*

*Candere means: to begin to shine or glow*

*Lustro means: to brighten, illumine*

## Phoenix Tears

*Chapter 45 of 63*

More of the potions' directions are revealed, Severus awakes a new friend, and Hermione and Severus endure a night at the Ministry of Magic's Winter Ball.



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Phoenix Tears

The addition of 'uepike roe' on Hermione's blackboard had bothered Severus all night. 'Uepike was only a partial word, but there were only two options as to what she could



mean: blue pikeperch or, more likely considering how she wrote it, she meant Bluepike crab roe. He'd wondered briefly if she'd maybe gotten the idea from their date to Duncansby Head, then mentally shook his head before he lingered too long on the memories of the date.

After spending long hours working through the calculations for the addition of Bluepike crab roe in the potion, he realized she might be right *Holy Mother of Merlin!* he thought as he stared at the conclusion. *The suggestion is brilliant. But how... never mind. I still have plenty of the roe in my personal stores.*

He wanted to ask Hermione about the addition, but when he'd entered the Great Hall that morning, she wasn't there. When Severus spotted Reginald entering the Hall, he motioned him over to him. "I have something to show you," he said as his friend approached. "Follow me."

Reginald nodded and turned to follow Severus up to the small classroom on the seventh floor, taking the stairs two at a time to keep up. "What is so important that we're missing breakfast?" he asked, lagging a few steps behind Severus.

Severus didn't turn around but kept going, ignoring the students that dove out of his way. "You'll see," was all he replied.

Reginald scowled at him but managed to keep pace.

Severus quickly unlocked the door and ushered Reginald in. Once all the candles in the room were lit, he crossed his arms as Reginald stared at the blackboard. "Did you do this?"

"No. Hermione did," Severus said with a smirk.

"Why the colors?" Reginald asked as he moved his finger from one line to another, trying to decipher the complex writing on the blackboard. "This makes little sense; the Cajanus is listed in two different places, the bicorn horn is both after and before the Leguminosae roots... fly agaric... and arsenic – for the same line? We already solved this variable..." He turned to look at Severus. "So why did you think this was so important for me to see?"

Severus smirked. "You've been her professor for almost four months, and you don't know how her mind works? It's layered in colors. She's comparing Gruener's version of the Médousa Potion in the green to Master Ogden's in the blue with the new version we created in orange and highlighted where the directions overlap – but that's not what intrigued me. Look at the words in pink."

Reginald stared at the blackboard again. "One thousand seeds, six drops of Aquila's tears, and... uepike roe?"

"Bluepike crab roe," Severus stated, half smiling. "I've done some preliminary calculations, and I think it might work."

"It works?! You're kidding me? You're actually considering that she might be right?" Reginald asked as he turned his back to the blackboard to face him. "These are most likely guesswork on her part! One thousand seeds is an exorbitant quantity, rather preposterous considering... and six drops of tears – anyone's or anything's tears are hardly enough..."

"She probably found the ideas in a book," Severus stated. "Besides, we've been calculating for every type of seed known."

Reginald turned back to the board. "With unsuccessful results. You know as well as I do that most seeds used in a large quantity are measured by weight volume – not counted." He cocked his head ever so lightly. "You're actually taking this seriously?"

"I'm intrigued," Severus admitted.

"You actually think she's uncovered something, some vague reference that neither of us knows about?" Reginald asked with a smirk.

"Barrett Muldoon was neurotic eccentric," Severus said with a shrug. "He could have very well taken a weight measurement of the seed in question and then counted them, writing down a precise number. Other brewers have done similar oddities. There are basic calculations for the number of seeds per gram. For example, a yellow mustard seed is about one point ninety-seven grams and three point forty-two grams for black. One gram would have about five hundred and seven seeds in it. Celery seeds are approximately two thousand to twenty-five hundred seeds per gram, and thyme is about six thousand seeds per gram."

"Approximately, but each of those are weighed when use in potions due to slight inconstancies; variations can exist between different cultivars, natural conditions such as climates, rainfall, and soil composition can change the size and weight of the seeds as well," Reginald stated, shaking his head. He looked at the board again. "Okay, assuming Muldoon counted the seeds or used a standard 'approximate volume by weight table'—"

"Except in soup – which eliminates all the legumes on the list," Severus interrupted with a shrug.

But Reginald hadn't paid attention to the barb. "—which, by the way, is insane – it still doesn't indicate which one – or what variety. I will review all the known seeds used in potions, again, and try working on the calculations," he said as he turned for the door. "I wonder why she wrote down one thousand."

~H~

Hermione sent off her letter first thing in the morning and skipped breakfast in order to go straight to the library, hoping to find any reference to validate her discovery of the bluepike roe and came up short. Severus' book had shown her only *uepike*, but she surmised it to be either blue pikeperch or Bluepike crabs, but she was leaning toward Bluepike crabs because she couldn't find any reference at all for blue pikeperch as a potions ingredient, let alone its roe. When the bell tolled the hour, she put the book she'd been scanning through back in place and hurried off for her Charms lesson.

"Where were you? You missed breakfast," Ginny asked Hermione as soon as she stood next to her in Charms. The students were milling around in the center of the room because the classroom was full of large furniture pieces along one wall instead of rows of desks.

Hermione looked at her and smiled. "I woke up early to send a letter to Mr. Prince about Christmas, and then I went to the library to try working something out on the Médousa Potion. Why? What did you need?"

"I wondered if maybe you were with Severus," Ginny whispered, wiggling her eyebrows at her. "I mean you missed dinner last night altogether."

"Severus was hurt, but he wouldn't tell me where he'd been except to tell me that four more Death Eaters had been caught. Apparently he enjoys assisting the Aurors in his free time," Hermione said with a frown. "He was a mess last night, Gin: cuts, bruises, mended fractures..."

"I suppose I'll have loads of that with Harry," Ginny said with a sigh. "Why I chose an Auror for a husband, I'll never know."

"Love at first sight, fate, and that bloody Moon Song Curse – you never had a chance," Hermione stated, smiling when Ginny stuck her tongue out at her.

"Thank Merlin Mum was always having me help her patch up the twins. But I suppose I'll have to learn all the basic Healing Charms," Ginny said with a sigh.

"From what I've seen you may have to learn to be a Healer," Hermione said with a smirk. "Care to take on that project with me as well?"

Before Ginny could answer, Professor Flitwick announced that they would be working on nonverbal relocation of heavy objects, which made Hermione grin. She was pretty good at relocating furniture, having had loads of practice at Harry's during the summer before her fifth year when they'd cleaned Grimmauld Place from top to bottom, and again more recently during the remodel this last summer. "Points will be taken if you damage the furniture or break the glass. Bonus points will be given if you keep the pieces upright."

"Besides, I wasn't with Severus all night – I just came back late," Hermione said as she placed down a particularly large wardrobe.

"And you chide me for sneaking in after curfew," Ginny said as Hermione tried moving a wardrobe across the room nonverbally. "We still on for Saturday?"

Hermione struggled to keep the wardrobe from tilting. The charm was definitely easier to control verbally and when not distracted by other things, like chatter or ducking the glass front armoire Dresden Penwalter dropped next to her foot. "I suppose so. I guess we'd better, considering I'm going to be staying there over the holiday."

"So, did you solve anything on the potion?" Ginny asked, finally getting her wardrobe to float upright.

"Yeah, thanks to a paper cut," Hermione stated, adding, "I'll explain after class," when Ginny looked confused, nearly dropping her wardrobe.

Hermione focused her thoughts on her wardrobe again, making it glide over to the far wall and set down upright.

"Excellent, Mrs. Snape!" Professor Flitwick said and rewarded her with house points, then turned to face Penwalter. "Mr. Penwalter, keep your wrist firm and your wand pointed up."

Hermione walked to the back of the room. Ginny soon joined her. "Another five points! That was so much easier when we were cleaning up Grimmauld Place, wasn't it?" she asked with a smirk. "So, how did a paper cut help you with the potion – you didn't get blood in the Fearlessness Potion, did you?"

"No, I didn't bleed in the potion!" Hermione told her what happened.

Ginny scrunched her nose. "Ew, yuck. But then you solved the missing ingredients, right?"

"I only got bits and pieces, but I think I've solved one ingredient, well, possibly. I'll try again tonight," Hermione said, turning in surprise as the two pieces of furniture Carothers and Hargett were moving banged into each other with a loud crash. Surprisingly, the mirror on the front of Hargett's wardrobe remained intact.

"I thought we had a ball to go to tonight?" Ginny said with a chuckle.

Hermione groaned. "Yes, we do. At least you're coming with me."

"Nope, I'm meeting Harry at the school gate before dinner," she said with a smile. "He wants to show me something before we go – my Christmas present. Some secret – but we'll see you there."

Hermione looked at her, wondering why he was showing her his gift so soon. According to his last letter, he wasn't proposing until Christmas morning. Unless this surprise Harry was showing Ginny had something to do with the property acquisition of his grandparent's house in Glasbury or possibly the house Sirius had been given from his Uncle Alphard Black. She'd been delighted when he'd told her that he'd unearthed the address on some documents in Sirius', now his vault. He also told her, in the strictest confidence, that the Fidelius on both properties had been reversed and reset at some expense. She'd have to write Harry and find out.

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When Ginny and Hermione entered Professor Reginald's lab during their revision time that afternoon, she was surprised to see her blackboard standing next to his. Severus and Reginald were both deep in discussion, staring at the directions Hermione had drawn on the blackboard. "What – why did you move it?" she asked.

The men both turned around. "Where did you get the idea for the words you added in pink?" Severus asked, ignoring her question.

Hermione set her bag on Reginald's desk carefully and withdrew her notes and Severus' old book, setting the old book down gently. "From this," she replied, indicating the book.

Severus stared at the book then looked up at her with narrowed eyes and a scowl. "Why did you take my book?" he growled.

"Last night, after you fell asleep, when I was leaving... I – the book was on the table, and it was open to the Médousa Potion," she tried to explain. "I was – I checked it against the copy we made by combining the wand cores, and I noticed that it seemed the same, sort of... so I took it up to the room where I'd been working to compare... You were sound asleep. I didn't have the heart to wake you." Severus was watching her so intently that she felt like a first-year. "I'm sorry. I should've asked."

"Yes, you should have asked," he said coolly, obviously reigning in his anger. "You said the directions matched?"

Hermione nodded. She turned to the book, gently stroking the binder as she pleaded with the book, "Please open up." It shivered but remained clamped shut as she tried to lift the cover. "Please, let me see. I will not harm you, I promise." She could feel the book relax under her fingertips. She opened the book to the Médousa Potion then looked up at the men who'd walked over to her. "See, it's the same – well, close. There are the gaps—"

"But no scribbles – only small smudges in the gaps," Ginny said, looking at the book from the chair at Reginald's desk.

"It's blood," Hermione admitted, feeling her face flush. She quickly looked up at Severus, catching his questioning glare. "It was an accident – I didn't know my finger was bleeding until—"

"Blood?"

"Blood, from a paper cut," Hermione admitted. "I didn't think it was that deep; it didn't bleed right away. But then when I was following one of the lines in the book with my finger it bled – on the space – and some words appeared." She pointed to the blackboard. "Those words."

Severus' eyes narrowed, and Reginald turned to look at the blackboard and back. "Blood – words appeared when you touched the book with blood?" Reginald asked.

Hermione nodded, still staring at Severus for any sign that he might be furious with her for taking his book without permission.

"These words appeared when you used blood." Severus' expression slowly changed from stony to introspective as he turned to the blackboard. "I can't believe I never made the connection. Corcoran Maolduin's portrait hangs in the library, in the Restricted Section."

"Wasn't he famous for inventing Dark Art blood curses to conceal objects?" Ginny asked. "Alecto had us write an essay on blood curses last year."

"Yes, and from what I know, Barrett Muldoon is Corcoran Maolduin's great-great-grandson," Severus stated. "So it figures the paranoid git would use his twice-great-grandfather's curses to hide his work – just so his work wouldn't be stolen or copied."

"So that's where you came up with one thousand seeds, Bluepike roe, and the six tears?" Reginald asked.

"Well, yes, and no. The book only showed me uepike, but it seemed logical," Hermione replied and turned to face Severus. "Bluepike crabs – you took me to collect some on our second date, Severus, remember? Didn't you mention that you collected the roe for potions?"

"Very romantic," Reginald said with a chuckle.

"It was fun," Hermione said a bit defensively, which made Severus smirk.

"Yes, I do, every summer, and the membranes of the roe would burst on contact, which would allow them to blend in well," Severus stated as he stared at the blackboard.

"The directions stipulate only stirring the potion five times – that would be adequate – and the calculations work. We've yet to apply the theory in a practical application." He drew his knife and jabbed his finger, gently swiping his blood on one of the gaps in the directions. The words, *six drops of Aquila's tears*, appeared in the space. He tried the next gap in the directions, but once again the words, *one thousand seeds*, appeared in the space before, *crush to remove the husk and press with a linen*, the same as it had apparently for Hermione. He healed his cut and walked over to the blackboard.

Ginny put her elbow on the desk and leaned her head against her palm. "So we know one ingredient is Bluepike crab roe. That leaves the question of which seeds and whose tears..." She looked up at Severus who was now facing the blackboard, reading the line as well.

Severus turned and crossed his arms, his expression blank and his eyes unfocused as Reginald and Hermione searched through their notes for any annotation about tears.

"The only references I know to an Aquila is from Greek mythology... and a constellation which is just north of the celestial equator and is part of the Summer Triangle asterism, according to what I remember from Astronomy," Ginny stated with an exasperated sigh and dropped her hands holding the parchments she'd been reading to the desk. "In classical Greek mythology, Aquila was the eagle that carried the thunderbolts of Zeus, although the Romans called the constellation of Aquila the Vultur volans or the flying vulture."

"Zeus also used the bird to abduct people and to perform errands for him... He sent Aquila to bring a shepherd boy, Ganymede, to Mount Olympus to be Zeus' cup-bearer," Hermione stated without looking up so she missed Severus' scowl.

"Figures you both would be well versed in Greek and Roman mythology," Severus said drolly.

"I loved it as a kid," Hermione stated, setting down a handful of parchments with a sigh. He picked up Master Gruener's journal, contemplating the blacked out scribbles.

"I doubt it's a vulture," Reginald agreed. "And neither eagle nor vulture parts are used in potions."

Hermione was still staring at the scribbled out annotations on Master Gruener's journal. They were the same – just like the versions in Master Ogden's journal, only this time it looked different. As if all she needed to do was... Suddenly, some of the ink seemed to separate slightly as if a transparency lifted up. "It's layered writing!"

Both men turned to face her as Ginny dropped her hand and sat up straight. "What are you on about?" Severus asked sharply.

"The scribble – it's layered writing," Hermione repeated, looking up at him. "I will write things down that I want to remember as a way of memorization. I know I have a photographic memory when it comes to general reading, but to memorize things, I write them down, sometimes repetitively. And if I write over what I've written, I can always lift the layers later if I want to. I found a charm in the library my third year that did the same thing, but I've become so adept at the magical technique, even before I'd realized the reason I could do so was because of my magic, that I'd never bothered to learn the charm."

Severus stared at her, his expression thoughtful as Reginald rubbed his lip in thought.

"What if this Barrett Muldoon did use a blood curse on these three parts of the directions and then layered the Bedydrian Curse over it?" Hermione asked, looking at the smudges again. "What if by using a replicating charm instead of a Replication quill like we did, you only get blanks or smudges and the direction lines misalign. But using a Replication quill instead, the spell could have copied the missing parts, but jumbled them up, writing words on top of each other! The Bedydrian Curse might've concealed them so they look like scribbles!"

Hermione showed Severus and Reginald one of the unreadable scribbling in Master Ogden's journal. "See, all his other annotations on every other page except the ones on the Médousa Potion are legible – either crossed out or underlined, but not scribbled out. Master Gruener scribbled out his annotations sometimes in his journal, but Master Ogden didn't. But look at the scribbles on the Médousa Potion in both journals – compare them." She laid the journals side-by-side. "Don't you see the difference?" Hermione asked him, pointing to Master Gruener's journal. "When we combined the wand cores, couldn't it have also fixed the problem with the annotations on the page?" She tried to lift the layers of writing.

"Master Ogden frequently used whatever parchment or paper was handy to work out his..." Reginald started to say, before Hermione made some words begin literally to float above the rest of the scribble. "and then only kept his final draft..." Then another lifted, and a third, making each one readable. "Bloody hell!"

Hermione was examining what looked like a childish drawing that lay underneath the writing. She looked up at Severus beaming with delight. "It's a drollery!"

"I can see it's a drawing," Severus stated dryly as Ginny rose up and leaned over the desk to look at it too.

Hermione didn't care if he was annoyed. Using a replicating charm, Hermione copied the bottom layer onto a piece of parchment. "What does that look like to you?"

Severus looked at the drawing and frowned. "It's a chicken."

Reginald shook his head. "It could be a peacock, or a bird on water..."

Ginny palmed her forehead as she exclaimed, "A phoenix!?" She dropped her hand and looked up. "What if this Muldoon meant six tears from a phoenix named Aquila after Zeus' eagle?" she asked. "The Greeks often depicted phoenixes like a peacock or an eagle... and on a jewelry box Bill sent me from Turkey it shows a phoenix that looks like a swan with a long tail..."

"Wizards know what a phoenix looks like, Ginevra," Severus stated.

Ginny laughed. "Not all wizards do, and some drawing of them are far from accurate. Besides, phoenixes are very rare, and very few wizards in history have ever had one as a familiar. I remember the first time I saw Fawkes; I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was the most amazingly beautiful creature I'd ever seen – well, second to unicorns, that is."

"Severus, this could be a phoenix!" Hermione stated enthusiastically.

Reginald uncrossed his arms as he leaned down to examine the journal. "Phoenix tears," he stated, looking up at the blackboard. "You know, it could be... but only six drops of tears – it's a small amount... But there is no record of Muldoon owning a phoenix."

"Master Gruener did! Well, he had access to one – he was friends with Dumbledore." Hermione was certain now. "Phoenix tears have healing powers."

"I'm well aware of that, Hermione, having been healed by Fawkes numerous times myself," Severus stated. "One drop from a Pasteur pipette actually equals three to five tears depending on the size of the Pasteur... eighteen, twenty-four, or thirty. That would certainly be enough if it were correct. I'll do the calculations."

Reginald wrote six drops of phoenix tears from a Pasteur on the blackboard. "Add six drops of phoenix tears slowly and stir... or while stirring... They would have to be added between stirs because of the toxic nature of the potion at this point. Which just leaves us the problem of obtaining the phoenix tears; they are not easy to come by."

"Which I may have a solution for," Severus stated and walked out of the room.

Hermione turned to face Reginald, who was correcting the directions on the blackboard with the new additions. "Where is he going?"

"Oh, he does that – leaves. I've worked with him for years – I'm used to it. When he needs something and knows where to get it – he simply leaves. At least this time he said so," Reginald said with a chuckle as he started writing the Arithmancy equation on the blackboard to work out the calculations. "He'll be back – or at least he will let me – us know when he's gotten the phoenix tears."

Hermione was torn, wanting to follow Severus and desiring to know the formula equations Reginald was using. Both girls watched in amazement as he worked on his calculations. Hermione shook her head, thinking that he'd made a mistake in the fifth line that threw off the formula, possibly because of transference of two numerals in the third line... Pulling out a piece of parchment, she quickly copied down the formula equations. She could try them later after she found Severus.

"So who's going to get the Bluepike crabs?" Ginny asked, just as confused as Hermione by Reginald's nonchalant attitude.

"Maybe Severus will take Hermione on another date," Reginald said, smirking as Hermione left to go and try to find Severus.

~S~

Severus reached into his trunk and tapped on the side panel with his wand. Like many wizarding trunks, a secret compartment opened, revealing a miniaturized brass bird stand, a large bowl sitting on folded robes of midnight blue dotted with sparkling stars and moons, and a thick letter sent to him from Aberforth two months after Dumbledore died. He shoved the letter into his pocket and then picked up the bowl, smiling at the woven design in the brass resembling a bird's nest. He carried it reverently to the bed. Within the bowl lay a nest of oak, Boswellia, and Commiphora myrrha twigs, woven together with grasses and strands of unicorn hairs, and lined with a deep layer of ashes. The bark of the Boswellia and Commiphora had been severely slashed, which had allowed the branches to bleed out the resins that had hardened into tears of frankincense and myrrh within the nest.

Taking out the bird stand, he returned it to its original size, placed it by the open window, and gently placed the bowl with the nest on the stand. He picked up a small vial and uncorked it. There were tears already in the vial, a small amount of natural saline, almost two teaspoonfuls, although certainly not nearly enough for what he needed. Dumbledore's letter had specified at least two to three teaspoonfuls were needed, and the more the better. He couldn't use any spells or potions to make himself cry; they had to be natural tears – tears of his soul, Dumbledore had told him.

Severus paced his room, trying to dredge up any memory that would produce more tears.

He sat on the bed, remembering the anguish he'd felt over Lily's death and the guilt he'd carried for years.

That didn't work. Just as it hadn't worked the last time he'd tried this.

Severus recalled the night he'd gone to Grimmauld Place to search Sirius' room for the last time; he'd cried then as he held the half of the photograph with Lily in it to his chest. He still felt a deep sense of remorse, the tightening in his chest, but no longer the same anguish over her death.

He tried to remember the night he'd found his mother's body, her limp form and the way her dead eyes stared back at him – the number of times he'd seen those eyes staring back at him in his dreams afterwards from the guilt and anguish of not being there to protect her, but only a few tears escaped, which he captured with a simple Collection Charm. He remembered the arguments, his mother's bruises, and that he hadn't been there when she'd needed him the most. His eyes watered, his throat restricted, the feeling in his chest seemed to restrict and more tears fell, magically collecting in his vial from the charm. He focused all his thoughts, concentrated on how much he missed her, and captured a few more tears, but still not enough.

This was harder than he'd thought. Dumbledore's portrait was right; he'd closed off his emotions well.

He thought about the night he'd killed Dumbledore. After he'd fled the castle and dumped a frightened Draco at Narcissa's feet, the tears had flown freely then, but now the memory only made his eyes well with tears that he had to squeeze his eyes shut to let fall. He used the same charm to catch each one in the glass vial. He allowed his remorse of the death to fill his mind, as if saying a final farewell to the old man.

It helped; his grief over his actions made him feel the weight of his guilt, and his eyes welled up and more tears slid down his cheek. He gave in to his feelings of loss and regret, crying openly for a wizard who'd trusted him, stood by him, was his friend... respected him. The Collection Charm magically transferred each tear to his vial.

He thought of the people he'd Imperiused or killed, and the people who'd he turned over to the Dark Lord or the ones he'd simply stood by and watched die. He was a bloody monster, a murderer, and worse...

How Hermione could forgive him of everything so easily, so readily, amazed him. The charm caught the tears that rolled down his cheek, and he sniffed.

He thought back to all the numerous times he'd abused her, belittled her, called her names, used her – to punish her for his own selfish reasons. He'd nearly succeeded in driving her away. More tears fell as he recalled the night in Azkaban after Hermione had come to see him the first time and the despair he'd felt after she'd left – believing in the finality of his imprisonment and the reality that he was there for life. He'd pushed her away so he wouldn't have to face what he couldn't allow himself to believe – to hope... Tears ran unbidden down his cheek, and the Collection Charm caught each one.

He concentrated on the feelings he had when she was lying in the hospital after the backlash from the Bedydrian Curse, so pale and fragile... and how easily he could have lost her... the only woman to love him – *him* – unconditionally... and how hard he'd tried to push her away from him, denying to himself that she could actually love him. He was such a fool.

Finally, the feelings overwhelmed him and heavy tears began to flow. He wallowed in despair, catching his tears in the small vial as he imagined life without Hermione in it and the soulless wreck he'd be without her.

After a long, hard cry, feeling completely emotionally drained and weak, he mentally resolved himself and forced his emotions back into control. He checked the vial, satisfied that there was more liquid than before, but just enough to dampen a little bit of the ash.

He lit the ashes wandlessly. He waited, watched as the flames grew and spread as both the nest and ashes burned fiercely. The white-yellow color range of the flames with a blue hue at its base indicated a magically strong phoenix. He tilted the vial over the flames and let his tears pour out, which made the flames flicker and hiss. The typical balsamic-spicy, slightly lemony fragrance of the frankincense mixed headily with the heavily bitter and somewhat vanilla sweetness of the myrrh as the smoke rose, swirled, and was drawn out of the open window. The myrrh expanded, resembling blossoming blooms in the fire instead of melting like most other aromatic resins would and began to congeal with some of the ash into a lump in the center of the bowl. The fire died down quickly after only a few minutes as if absorbed into the ash.

Severus watched as the twigs turned to golden-orange embers, which emitted a soft subtle reddish hue *Female then*. When the embers began to darken, the new phoenix chick lifted its head out from the ash and gazed upon Severus. "Hello, Aideon," he said softly, the name he'd picked out years ago, and the tiny chick cooed.

In the center of the ashes, the new phoenix embalmed the ashes of its sire in the myrrh, forming an egg and then curled around it. Once the bird reached maturity, it would carry the egg to the Egyptian City of Heliopolis. If the vial had held enough of Severus' tears, Aideon would return. Severus hoped that he'd added enough tears.

There was a timid knock on the door before it opened slightly. "Severus?" Hermione asked, pushing the door wider. "Are you in here?"

He kept his back to her and wiped his face on his sleeve to hide the fact he'd been crying. "Yes," he said, not trusting his voice to say more.

She entered and walked over to him. "Are you all right?" she asked, and his heart swelled at the concern in her voice.

After every thing he'd done, every horrible thing, she still cared. He fought back the tears that filled his eyes and threatened to fall. "Yes."

"You've been crying?" she asked, her small hand sliding on his back.

He inhaled deeply but continued to face the phoenix stand with the newly risen chick.

Hermione moved slowly so that she was now beside him. "Oh, is that Fawkes?" she asked when she saw the newborn phoenix.

"No, it's Aideen, a newly risen chick. She was born from Fawkes' final ashes," he stated, hating the way his voice sounded, thick and laden with grief.

Aideen let out a soft cooing sound that helped ease his emotional turmoil.

"Hello, Aideen," she said to the small featherless head and then turned to face Severus, wrapping her arms about him in a hug.

Severus engulfed her in his arms and buried his face in her hair, holding her to him tightly. He was never going to let go. She was his. Hopefully, she was finally starting to accept that fact. At least he hoped she did.

Aideen made one more cooing sound then settled into her warm nest and fell asleep.

~oOo~

Wendlynne and Sunita were delighted for the opportunity to help Hermione and Ginny with their hair and makeup for the Ministry of Magic's Christmas Ball. Sunita, who usually only wore her long, dark hair in a braid, had a huge assortment of pins and clips to use, and Wendlynne was a marvel with curling charms. The girls helped Ginny first, since she had to leave early to meet Harry at the school gate. Hermione sat in her dressing robe and undergarments, marveling at the transformation of her friend. When she was finally dressed, Ginny looked lovely in her Christmas green dress robes and the silver heart pendant she wore was just the right length for the scooped-neck of the gown.

Ginny thanked Wendlynne and Sunita, hugging each in turn, then hugged Hermione. "Well, I have to go," she said with a huge smile and her eyes brimming with happiness. "I have to meet Hagrid at the Entrance Hall so he can escort me to the gates. I'll see you at the ball."

"All right, your turn," Wendlynne said cheerfully, holding her wand carelessly in her hand.

Hermione cringed, but took the seat Ginny had vacated. She did as she was told: closed her eyes, tipped her chin up – then down, looked up – then down, and blotted her lips as Wendlynne said to do, and then sat still as Sunita arranged her hair. Hermione stood on cue, and Sunita had her step into petticoats and the silver and gold lamiae under dress. The long-sleeved, brown velvet dress robes had a wide, deep plunging neckline and opened all the way down the front, held closed by a single magical clasp at her waist. The voluminous skirt was surprisingly light for the heaviness of the fabric. When she finally looked at herself in the mirror, Hermione gasped. She looked like a princess. "Thank you," she said in awe, turning her head so the light caught the multitude of crystal pins holding up her hair.

"Don't worry about the hairpins, they're charmed," Sunita said. "If they come loose, they won't fall off, so you won't lose any of them. Just release them before you go to bed and give them to me in the morning."

Hermione thanked both of her friends for helping her and left. The noise in the common room died down as she exited the stairs, a few of the guys whistled, and many of the students stared as Hermione walked across the room. When she reached the stone gargoyle, he leapt aside immediately, and she rode the stairs up to Severus' office. Severus rose from his chair behind the desk as soon as she stepped into the room, and she laid her cloak on the nearest chair. He was silent, his eyes sweeping over her appearance. "It's from Mrs. Malfoy," she said lamely, hoping he approved.

He nodded, moving slowly around the desk, his gaze still roaming over her. He looked nice; he had on his black dress robes with his hair caught back in a tie, although some of his hair escaped and framed his face. "You look..." he said and paused, "lovely." He turned suddenly and picked up one of the wooden boxes, pulling out an ornate necklace of amethyst set in a silvery metal that shined like moonlit silver. "Turn around so I can do this," he said softly. His fingers barely brushed her skin as he put on the necklace. He handed her the earrings and stood back, waiting until she was finished. "Shall we?" he asked, picking up her cloak.

"Won't we be early?" she asked, knowing that Ginny and Harry wouldn't be there yet.

"Would you rather make an entrance?" he asked with a slight smirk.

Hermione shook her head. They walked in silence to the Entrance Hall and out the huge doors. One of the school carriages awaited them. She gazed remorsefully at the sight of the Thestral standing patiently in the harness, feeling a heavy pang of sadness as she tried not to name those she'd seen die in the final battle of the war.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head and accepted his hand to climb into the carriage. When they disembarked from the carriage at the gates, he Apparated them to a lush garden landscape where other couples in their finery were appearing or mingling to talk to friends. Severus led Hermione through a huge gazebo, covered in night jasmine and angel trumpet flowers, and they stepped out onto a white stone bridge. Beside them, a waterfall cascaded down between hundreds of flowering orchids, lit with fairy lights, into a slow running stream with swans swimming lazily under the bridge. Ahead of them stood a huge crystal building that reminded Hermione of the description of Rivendell from Lord of the Rings.

"This way, Miss... Granger – er – Snape!" a wizard with an old-fashioned camera stammered.

"Smile," Severus said softly, placing his hand on her lower back and moving to stand close to her. The flash nearly blinded her.

The wizard took another picture and then lowered his camera. "Thank you. Your copies will be delivered to your table," the wizard said, turning his head. "Next."

"Severus, where are we?" Hermione asked as they crossed the bridge.

"Cassiopeia and Pierre Corneille's botanical gardens and ballroom; they host the ball every year," he said, pausing to allow a group to pass though the doors ahead of them.

The sight before her was amazing. The huge room was full of tables, set with sparkling silver place settings on shimmering white linens, surrounding a dance floor, which looked like a frozen lake. Thousands of crystal orbs floated overhead in what looked like a starlit sky, giving the room a starlight glow. White flowers were used everywhere, and tall silver fountains stood in the corners.

A willowy woman handed Severus a card. "You're at table one-twenty-three," she said and made a notation on her clipboard.

Severus took Hermione's hand, placing it in the crook of his arm, and led her to their table. She was introduced to two Aurors, Lorraine Matsuno and Maurice Duncan and their spouses, and a witch, Catherine Stewart, from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and her husband, Kenneth, who worked in the Improper Use of Magic office. Dinner was surprisingly enjoyable, if not a tad dry compared to the meals served at Hogwarts. Catherine and Kenneth Stewart were delightful company, as were Auror Loraine Matsuno and her husband, Burt, who dealt with magical artifacts from wizarding estates.

Following dinner, Narcissa Malfoy, resplendent in ice blue and silver dress robes, led Hermione around the room to introduce her to several people she thought of importance. Severus stayed by her side, a stoic protector, as they made their way around the room. Hermione smiled politely and shook hands with each person she was introduced to, and kept her answers to their questions vague.

When the music started, Severus kept a protective hand on Hermione's back, yet he encouraged her to dance with any of her friends who approached them as well as a few of his friends from the Aurory. Severus only danced with her during the slow songs, but that suited her just fine. Hermione had spotted Rita Skeeter a few times, and Maggie Whitmire, but neither witch ever seemed to get close enough to bother her. Once, when leaving the dance floor with Ron, Maggie had tried to swoop in, only to be asked to dance by Burt Matsuno. Hermione had been thankful for the man's sacrifice.

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Severus sighed impatiently as Harry lingered next to Ginevra in order to kiss her goodnight. "Hermione, take a walk with me," he suggested in order to avoid the inevitable scene which was about to unfold.

Hermione looked up at him inquisitively. "Shouldn't we wait for Ginny?"

"I'm certain that she can fend off Fang by herself," he said with a smirk. Some of the pins, which had held up Hermione's coiffure, had come loose throughout the evening, and several strands of her hair wafted in the breeze. He looked over to where the other couple stood. "Mr. Potter, if you'll see your wife to the castle, I'd like to take my leave."

"Of course, Headmaster," the impertinent boy replied with a huge grin, and Ginevra snickered.

Severus flicked his wand, resetting the magical protective barrier, and, taking Hermione's hand, he led her off toward the lake. Hermione looked lovely tonight in her brown dress robes and her hair a loose mass of curls. He had to admit, Narcissa had good taste in clothes, even if her jewelry was a bit ostentatious for his taste.

The Ministry of Magic's Christmas Ball had been intolerable, as it had been both years he'd been forced to attend. It was oppressively overcrowded, people he hardly knew prostrating or wanting to shake his hand or pose for pictures, hoping to make the society page of the wizarding publications. At least this year there was more gaiety than previously and plenty of booze. Although, there certainly were more people snogging in drawing rooms and corners this year. In addition, the music had been deplorable; some band called the Dream Dragons, who played that jarring contemporary music the young people preferred, but at least they had included some of the older songs in their playlist.

"Wasn't the party lovely? The ball room was so beautiful..." Hermione said, breaking the silence as she gazed at the picture that had been taken of them upon arrival.

He glanced at the image again and winced. He hated having his picture taken. He was almost always scowling in wizarding photographs, although in this one his expression was considerably less dour – if not slightly... sappy. Still at least he wasn't grinning like an idiot. "It's the same every year – only the color scheme changes," he said, pausing to enjoy the solitude and the lights of the castle reflecting on the surface of the lake.

"I loved how they made the dance floor look like a frozen lake," she said dreamily.

"It was charmed to do so," he said and pulled her to him. "I don't want to talk about the party."

"Oh? Why not? Didn't you have a good time?" she asked, wrapping her arms about his waist.

"I don't particularly like that type of party," he said truthfully. "I hope that you enjoyed yourself, though." He'd truly hoped she had. He'd encouraged her to dance with all her friends, making sure he had all the slow numbers with her, and that the nosy-busbodies of the Ministry didn't bother her too much. His previous arrangement with Lorraine Matsuno and Maurice Duncan had worked out perfectly; Maggie Whitmire, Brilhilda Meddleton, nor that insufferable Rita Skeeter had gotten within six feet of Hermione all evening.

"Yes, I did. It was fun as office parties go," she admitted.

He leaned down and kissed her, slightly self-conscious that they might be seen from the castle. "Come up to my rooms," he asked softly as he brushed away a curl that had caught on her lashes.

"All right," she replied.

He smiled. The evening suddenly looked far more promising. When they entered his sitting room, Severus removed his frockcoat and dropped it on the nearest chair. "Come up with me," he said as he took her hand and pulled gently.

"I'm not sure..." she said shyly.

He kissed her tenderly before saying, "I want to do this properly, Hermione," urging her to go with him to his bedroom. She resisted but finally followed him upstairs. The light of the half moon and the single candle on the bedside table barely illuminated the room, but there was enough light to see by. He let her undo the buttons of his shirt, then took his time undoing the fastenings on her robes and under dress, kissing her neck and shoulders as both layers opened up to him. With a flick of his fingers, her bra hooks gave, the elastic of her petticoats loosened, and her clothes fell to the floor.

Her creamy skin glowed in the candlelight as she turned to face him, wearing only a tiny bit of lace for knickers, dark hose, and Narcissa's jewelry. "You are so beautiful," he said softly as he trailed his fingers down her chest, over her breasts, and cupped her waist.

"Thank you," she said with her eyes downcast demurely.

"No, Hermione, you are. You're truly beautiful," he said as he carefully removed the necklace.

She blushed as she took off the earrings, placing them on the bedside table, smiling slightly, still unable to look him in the eye. He tipped her head up, gazed at her for a heartbeat, and then kissed her tenderly as he backed her to the bed. She sat down and reached for his belt buckle as he toed off his boots.

He waited as she unfastened his trousers and kicked out of his clothes. He urged her to scoot back on the bed and climbed up next to her. He ran his finger down her chest, around one breast and lowered his mouth to her nipple. He stroked her skin as he trailed kisses down her stomach and back up, and finally kissed her mouth. She responded to him, her tongue seeking his eagerly. She arched her back as his hand moved to her abdomen and sighed when he moved it upward instead and cupped her breast. He kissed her jaw but avoided the sensitive spot under her ear as his fingers explored every inch of her skin. He moved slowly, his touch light and his kisses sensual, even though he ached to be inside her.

"No, up," she said when his fingers changed course on her thigh, moving slowly to her hip. She tried to squirm in such a way as to get what she wanted.

He knew that he was teasing her, but he wanted to hear her beg him. Her hand slid into his pants and cupped him, stroking his length. "Patience," he purred silkily, "all in due time."

He moved away and picked up one of her legs, slowly kissing his way down to her thigh. "Oh no, Severus, please," she moaned in frustration when he stopped and changed direction, slowly rolling the hose off her leg.

"No? Are you sure?" he replied as he shifted position so he could remove her other hose the same way, pleased as she squirmed under him.

"No, more," she pleaded as his nose rubbed across her knickers. She was warm, and her knickers moist.

"How much more?" he asked as he removed her hose slowly, kissing her from the inside of her thigh to the arch of her foot in the process.

"That tickles!" she exclaimed, pulling her foot from his grasp.

"Hmm," he purred as he scooted back up. "What about this?" He nipped at the skin of her inner thigh as he toyed with her knickers. He slid his finger along the elastic as he nibbled on her skin, making her buck up at him.

"Stop teasing me!" she gasped, lifting her head so she could look down at him.

"If that's what you want, sure," he replied, smirking before pulling her knickers away. The crotch of her knickers was damp, making him smile predatorily. He pulled his own pants down as he kneeled over her and licked between her lips, eliciting a gasp from her.

Her head fell back onto the bed. "Oh yes," she said as she bucked into his face and he smiled. He found her clitoris easily enough and grasped her hips firmly. It didn't take him long to have her moaning, her head tossing as she came.

He was so painfully engorged now, so hard; he needed to be inside her heat or he'd burst. He moved up, pulling her legs up to his waist and positioning himself, entering her easily, watching her face as he moved within her. He had her pinned under him, her hands grasping his forearms as he undulated, loving the feel of their coupling. He wasn't going to last much longer; his testicles were already restricting, the pressure building. "Touch yourself, Hermione. Make it feel good," he urged her, trying to delay the inevitable explosion within himself.

Her fingers stroked his penis before she found her clit. "That's it," he said, watching her. She was an amazing sight, her face flushed, her hair spread out on his pillow, her breasts bouncing in rhythm to their lovemaking. But if she didn't come soon, he would, and without satisfying her. He reached down and laid one hand on hers, stroking her, and feeling himself at the same time, trying to push her over the edge. She gasped, her lip quivered, and she clenched down around him. *Good, she's close. C'mon baby, come.* "That's it, come for me," he purred in his most silky voice.

It worked. Her head rolled back as she came, the sound of her panting cry, the arch of her back was his undoing, and he followed her into bliss. He stayed locked in her for a few seconds as he caught his breath, then lowered her legs and stretched out beside her. He turned her face to his and kissed her. He had twenty minutes before he could go again. He kissed her, fully intending to keep her engaged with him until he was ready. Her skin tasted salty and was warm even in the cool room. She touched him, her fingers exploring him as much as his explored her.

As soon as he felt himself twitch and stiffen again, he lifted her leg and held it on his hip, entering her from behind, all the while stimulating her with his fingers. She spooned into him, rolling her hips to meet each thrust, groaning in pleasure. He loved how responsive she was, how tight. After a while, he placed one of his pillows under her abdomen and pushed her gently to roll her onto her stomach onto the pillow.

He pulled her back into him and braced himself so he'd have better control as he entered her again from behind. It was one of his preferred positions, but one she'd not experienced with him. Pinned under him this way, he rode her with long sure strokes. "Gods you're tight," he growled softly, leaning over her, feeling her sweat dampened skin against his.

She moaned, mumbled something, the sounds muffled by the covers. He braced himself with one hand by her side and plunged into her, drawing out as far as he dared on each upstroke. She mewed, trying to buck back into him, gasping. She turned her head, and he wanted to sweep the strands of curls that obscured her face, to watch her expression, but the sounds she was making told him enough. Like before, he felt his testicles restricting again, retracting, pulling up, so close to his own release. *She has to come first.*

She pushed herself up on her elbows, and he reached around her, his fingers finding her moist center and her clit. She gasped, her head bowed as she bucked into him. The pressure in his testicles tightened even more, so tight it made it hard for him to control himself.

Suddenly she cried out into the bedcovers, and he could feel her clench down on him, feeling her shudder as she tightened on his shaft. He moved with more force, pounding into her, riding her hard. He made one last thrust, burying himself deep inside her, as he felt the euphoric gush of his seed. The sensation of his orgasm consumed him, made everything else around him fade away as the hot, jetting spasms shot down his penis shaft and into her, filling her canal again. His heart pounded in his chest and ears, and his body was wet with sweat, but he felt sense of completion, a sense of satisfaction that she had come first.

He lay down and pulled her to his chest, exhausted, hoping she was as well.

He fell asleep with his face buried in her hair and one arm holding her close, only slightly aware that she had relaxed into slumber as well.

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Author's notes:

The surname of Muldoon originally comes from the Gaelic as O'Maolduin, a patronymic name meaning 'descendant of Maolduin.' The personal name Maolduin is comprised of the elements of 'maol,' meaning 'cheiftain' and dun,' meaning 'fortress.' Among the many spelling variations of the surname Muldoon that are preserved in archival documents are Muldoon, O'Muldoon, Meldon, O'Meldon, and, of course, Maoldoon. (<http://www.houseofnames.com/muldoon-family-crest>) Why Severus knows this, I have no idea.

Fly agaric is the quintessential toadstool, *Amanita muscaria*, also commonly known as the fly Amanita. It is a large white-gilled, white-spotted, usually deep red mushroom, one of the most recognizable and widely encountered in popular culture. It is a poisonous and psychoactive basidiomycete fungus, one of many in the genus *Amanita*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fly\\_agaric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fly_agaric)

Severus' list of seeds would look something like this: [http://www.greenharvest.com.au/seeds/info\\_sheet/seeds\\_per\\_gram.html](http://www.greenharvest.com.au/seeds/info_sheet/seeds_per_gram.html)

Pasteur pipettes, also known as droppers or eyedroppers, are used to transfer small quantities of liquids. They are usually glass tubes tapered to a narrow point, and fitted with a rubber bulb at the top. Definition borrowed from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasteur\\_pipette](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasteur_pipette)

From searching for a name of the baby phoenix, I came across the name Aideen. The meaning of the name Aideen in Gaelic is Little Fire, although the origin of the name Aideen seems to be Irish. Note: It's the feminine version of Aidan, male, for Little Fire or Little Flame. I thought that appropriate.

<http://www.ourbabynames.co.uk/gaelicgirl.php> or <http://www.babynamesofireland.com/pages/girl-names-a-c.html>

I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, EverMystique, DuchessOfArcadia, and dandru for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

## Nesting Invasions

Hermione finally shows Ginny Severus' house. Severus knew that making the home hers was inevitable.



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#### Nesting Invasions

The soft pop by her bedside jolted her awake, only to see Pepper standing by her bed with a letter in her hand. "Master is expecting you to replies, Miss," Pepper said, handing her the envelope.

Hermione stretched, still sore from her evening before. She'd slipped from Severus' bed at some ungodly hour and sneaked back to her dorm unnoticed, except for a few portraits who'd admonished her for being out so late. She finally sat up, looked at the house-elf who'd been waiting patiently, and accepted the letter from her. Taking a quick glance around the room, she noticed that only Deborah and Nadine were still in their beds. Hermione broke the wax seal, withdrew a note card, and smiled at the curt reply.

*Mrs. Snape,*

*Can't say I was surprised to get your letter, what with all the attention my great-grandson has been doling out on me lately, but why in damnation do you want to spend Christmas Eve with me? I thought you had family.*

*Besides, the last time you were here, you bloody well wrecked my house.*

*Talfryn Prince*

"Give me a moment, Pepper, and I'll write a response for him," she said as she slid out of bed and opened her trunk, searching for a decent piece of parchment. Finding a suitable stationery card, she wrote:

*Dear Mr. Prince,*

*I'm terribly sorry about the state of your house after the Aurors captured your grandson and his co-conspirators. However, my only concern was for your welfare. I did try to reassemble your bedroom back the way it was, with Pepper's help of course. Nevertheless, I apologize for any and all inconveniences the resulting arrest may have caused.*

*My reason for requesting a visit is simply because you're the only family Severus has left, aside from his estranged Uncle with whom I'm certain he doesn't wish to continue any association. That, and I did quite enjoy meeting you. I realize it's an imposition, and if you're not feeling up to company, I'll relay your decline to Severus with regret.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione Granger-Snape*

She stuffed the card in its envelope and handed the letter to Pepper. "Thank you for carrying our missives, Pepper. How is he? Is he doing better?"

"Oh yes, Miss!" Pepper said exuberantly. "He even takes his chair downstairs and is walking on his cane, Miss! He tells all the wizards who works on the house how he wants his house and nots to gets the furniture dirty, Miss."

Hermione, although confused on how Mr. Prince took his chair downstairs, was thrilled that he felt better enough to go downstairs and supervise the repairs. "Oh, Pepper, I'm so glad," she said. "I'll tell Severus; he'll be happy to know he's doing better."

"Thank you, Miss," the elf said and vanished with a soft pop.

Hermione dressed and headed down to breakfast. The portraits and suits of armor were already decked out with garlands and bows for the holiday, and the Great Hall was decked out in full Christmas splendor. As usual, twelve huge trees were covered with shimmering decorations and magical candles. Garlands of evergreens and icicles hung from the beams of the vaulted, magically-enhanced ceiling, and lacy snowflakes drifted downward through the floating candles, disappearing before any of the flakes touched anyone's head.

"Good morning, sleepy-head," Wendlynne said as Veronica passed her the pumpkin juice. "Did you have a nice lie-in?"

"Hardly a lie in, she sneaked in at three in the morning," Veronica chided her as Hermione helped herself to toast and marmalade.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Hermione said and turned to look at Severus. He was watching her, but quickly lowered his head so that his hair obscured his face.

"You'd think he'd be in a better mood this morning, considering you... Well, he's been scowling all morning, and I heard that he was biting off everyone's head who greeted him on the way to breakfast," Veronica said in a hushed voice.

"He put four of our second-years in detention for laughing," Wendlynne said softly.

Hermione gave up trying to catch Severus' eye, even though she had the feeling he'd been staring at her the whole time.

"So how was the ball?" Wendlynne asked, thankfully changing the subject.

"It was lovely," she said and told her friends about the botanical garden, the hall and answered their questions about the ball. "Then we took a walk along the lake before coming inside," she admitted and blushed.

"That sounds like a terrific night! And you obviously had a nice time after, so, he~~s~~ould be in a good mood!" Veronica said, frowning.

Hermione was interrupted from answering when Pepper popped in under the table and tugged on her robes. Hermione leaned down and retrieved the envelope Pepper held up on her lap as the elf said, "My master wants me to gives this to you, Miss. He wants an answer so Pepper is to waits."



She opened the card, smiling at the curt response to her letter in the precise yet shaky handwriting:

*Oh, hogwash, don't be ridiculous! Imposition, yes. Inconvenience? I've house-elves, girl. They will do all the work.*

*What exactly are you expecting anyway? I haven't celebrated Christmas in over thirty years.*

*The kitchens' remodeled now, so old Dustin can cook anything you like. The dining room is serviceable; a few chairs are broken and are at the restorers, but the table has been repaired. But there are only the three of us, so that's not a problem. Of course, Delphinia's parlor is still a mess, so we'll have to use my lounge unless these lazy wizards get a move on and finish the repairs to the windows. Pepper will put up a tree in my lounge if they don't finish it by Christmas. That should cover it.*

*Don't buy me anything. I don't need any bric-a-brac or anything that requires dusting.*

*I want to eat at three. If you wish to arrive earlier, that's fine, but don't expect me to do much. I don't do much anyway but sit these days.*

*Talfryn Prince*

Hermione pulled a piece of parchment from her bag and wrote out her reply.

*Mr. Prince,*

*Three o'clock sounds wonderful. I'll see about coming early; I'm sure Severus will want to. Whatever Dustin cooks for supper would be delightful.*

*I'm looking forward to seeing you again,*

*Hermione*

She handed the note to Pepper and looked up at the staff table, smiling as the elf disappeared with a pop that made a few students nearby glance under the table. Severus was talking to Professor McGonagall. Sighing, she realized she had plenty of time to inform Severus that they'd be visiting Mr. Prince as planned. "Have either of you seen Ginny?" she asked, turning back to her friends.

Veronica nodded. "She's still at Quidditch practice," she stated.

Hermione rose and decided to seek out Ginny.

Ginny landed next to Hermione the moment she sat down on the stands in the Quidditch pitch. "So, it's a perfect day to go to Severus' house," the redhead said, brushing an errant strand of hair out of her face.

"And if I say no?" Hermione asked, shaking her head.

"Oh, c'mon! I'm dying to see his house, and you're being ridiculous!" Ginny answered with a laugh.

She hadn't let up about going to Severus' house all the way up to the dorm room, so right after Ginny had changed from her Quidditch gear into jeans and a jumper, Hermione followed Ginny down the tunnel behind the one-eyed witch. At least the Liquid Luck Potion seemed to be working; Hermione had the lightheaded feeling that this was absolutely the right thing to do, as ludicrous as that sounded, even in her own mind.

They entered Honeydukes without a hitch, purchased sweets, and then slipped out of the store. "We're out. Where to first?" Ginny asked.

"Grimmauld Place," Hermione stated confidently. Well, Felix was confident enough for both of them. "I want to get a few things first." She took Ginny's hand and Apparated to Harry's home. They shrunk a few boxes from the attic and took as many of Hermione's belongings as she felt comfortable taking. Once on the street again, Hermione took hold of Ginny's hand and Apparated them to the place Severus had told her to use. They arrived in a dark alley between two brick houses. Hermione led Ginny out onto the narrow cobbled street under a broken street lamp and turned left.

"Not a very inviting neighborhood, is it?" Ginny asked.

"No," Hermione replied, wishing Ginny would walk faster and not be so distracted by the other houses and weeds.

"These are Victorian worker's houses," Ginny stated.

"What does that mean?" Hermione asked, trying to understand the significance. Even though she had a good feeling about being here at this precise time, she couldn't shake the memory of the Death Eater she'd killed here well, a few streets over from this street. She shook her head to dispel the memory.

Ginny was looking around as if she were a tourist. "His house will be small, like two rooms on the ground floor and two rooms, possibly with a box room, upstairs. Most were renovated with small loos when modern plumbing became more common for homes, but when they were built, most of these homes had a privies outside and a common or communal bath house."

Hermione nodded as she visualized Severus' home. It made sense, only his house was larger than what Ginny described. She stopped at the last house on the street "This is it," she said, taking a deep breath and reaching out for the latch. "It should open to my touch since he keyed it to my magical signature."

Hermione gingerly tried the front door, not at all surprised to find it locked. She couldn't remember ever having heard Severus pronounce the spell that opened the door, so she assumed it was a nonverbal one. After trying a few unlocking spells, she tried the Middle English word, unloken, nonverbally, grinning when she heard the bolt turn. She took Ginny by the hand, the way Severus did with her the last time she was here, and pulled her friend inside.

~S~

Severus hated staff meetings. He'd tolerated them as a professor because he could always do the crossword while the meeting droned on, but as Headmaster, he was responsible for conducting them. Therefore, they were as short and to the point as he could make them, even if that meant reigning in a few of the others. He glanced at the clock for what seemed like the hundredth time. "Hagrid, I can sway the school governors to allow you to include any animal that the students might face on their travels that means common encounters, not the highly unusual. You may cover the practical aspects of avoiding confrontation with the more rare creatures in your lectures, but your subject is not Defense Against Monsters."

Hagrid crossed his arms and opened his mouth about to protest, but Severus cut him off.

"Have the students write essays if you must, but it's bad enough you requested a graphorn from the Edentaggart Magical Creatures Zoo for last month's lesson," Severus said in as patient a tone as he could muster. "I know mongoloths have been spotted in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, but the school governors think that they are just too dangerous to have at the school. However, if proper cages can be erected, I'll submit your request again. Now is there anything else?"

"No, Headmaster, sir," Hagrid said as he hung his head, and Pomona raised her hand.

"Yes, Pomona?"

Severus scratched out sesame and sunflower off his list of possible seeds on the side of his parchment as Pomona stood up to give her monthly report. "We have a few new additions for the greenhouses. You may remember Neville Longbottom? He ..."

But Severus was only partly attentive, well, not exactly actively listening as she droned on about Mr. Longbottom's current adventure and his gift; he was concentrating on his list. *Neither sesame nor sunflower seeds would work in the potion. Safflower is grown chiefly for the oil obtained from its seeds, as is Allium. Candytuft, Mignonette, Nasturtium are weighed not counted. Hyacinth Bean is shucked and chopped, same as Lupines, Melampodium and Sweet Woodruff...* He wrote down Seddium and crossed it out. He'd already considered it, and the directions now clearly stated 'crushed to remove the husk and press' the seeds. *One thousand of them... and they can't throw off the balance of the potion at that stage either... or the potion could explode. Flaxseed? Minerberries?* They were crushed to remove the husk or ground... He scratched off both.

"Point of order, Headmaster," Filius said, drawing Severus' attention.

He crossed Panicum and Calandrinia off his list before looking up at him. "I am already aware of the gift from Mr. Longbottom and have approved the addition of the plants. I trust that Pomona will segregate the rarer and more dangerous varieties into the greenhouses that hold the plants for the advanced students," Severus said calmly, and Pomona nodded adamantly. He hated parliamentary procedure, and as such, he rarely succumbed to it. "So there shouldn't be any need to discuss the addition. Was there any other new business? If not, happy holiday to you."

"Headmaster, I understand that you will be away from the castle during the holiday break," Minerva said before he could stand up.

"Yes, Hermione and I shall be gone at least a week," he stated. "Hermione wishes to see her friends, and we have obligations we must attend. When I know the exact dates, I'll inform all of you. Is there anything else?" Thankfully, Minerva shook her head, as did a few of the other professors. "Good. Meeting adjourned." He rose to go before Filius called point of order to put it to a vote.

Suddenly the stone he kept in his pocket vibrated.

Someone had entered his house.

~H~

The room was exactly as she remembered: the threadbare carpet on the floor, the sofa and two chairs with soft blue cushions around a small glass coffee table. The small bowl of aromatic herbs still sat on the table; only they weren't as aromatic anymore. Between the chairs and on one side of the sofa sat the rickety small side tables. Two standing lamps were placed on opposite corners, one by the sofa and one by a chair, where the light from the window and the candelabra didn't quite illuminate well. Hermione began pulling her boxes out of her pockets, setting them on the coffee table and on the floor as she enlarged some of them back to their normal size.

"The sitting room isn't too bad," Ginny said, looking around as she took a few boxes out of her pockets as well. "In fact it's rather pleasant for Severus."

The room had the inviting feel of a used bookshop to Hermione and smelled faintly of orange oil. "I think it's the room Severus uses the most when he's here," she replied, turning her head, realizing that all the books were still dust free and the wood of the shelves, mantel, and floor still shone with a warm polish. "At least he's keeping the room clean." She tied back the curtains underneath to let in the daylight. The window had obviously been recently cleaned.

"Show me the rest," Ginny urged her.

Hermione opened the concealed doorway in the bookshelves. "The kitchen and dining area and the door that leads to Severus' potions lab," she stated, leading the way to the elongated kitchen area. She walked between the small, scrubbed wooden table and dish cupboard to stand by the kitchen counter and opened up one of the cabinets, inspecting the few plates and few glasses lined up there.

Ginny opened the dish cupboard. "Not much in here. But then he lived alone, right?" She peered into another cabinet. "So you'll need dishes and some glassware. But you seem to have enough mixing bowls for now." She turned and smiled at the copper bottom pans on the rack that still shined almost like new. "And it's obvious that he likes to cook."

"I think he does, although there is never any food in the place." Hermione opened the door to the next room, leading Ginny into a room full of boxes that led to the sunroom and Severus' potions lab. She opened the door to her right, letting Ginny peek in at the efficient layout of the lab with its ample workspace and storage shelving.

Ginny examined the wall near the doorway. "He's added stone bricks to the walls," she said, her gaze going up to the ceiling, "and to the ceiling to protect the house."

"I'll show you the rest," Hermione suggested. She closed the door and they walked into the sunroom. The windows were still clean, and the rows of herbs and flowers on the shelves and gardening bench looked tended to. Hermione leaned over the shelf to peer through the glass. "There is a back garden but it's completely overgrown, and the plants have grown quite wild." She led Ginny back into the sitting room and through another door that opened to expose the landing of the narrow staircase, walking ahead of her friend up to the upper floor. When they entered the upstairs hallway, Hermione pointed to the doors, identifying each one. "That room's full of boxes and stuff, the loo, and Severus' old room from when he was a boy, and the master bedroom."

Beaming with curiosity, Ginny opened each door to peer inside. Hermione watched as Ginny seemed to ponder the layout of the house, her brow furrowed as her finger moved in the direction of each room.

"He didn't show you all of it," she finally said, opening up the door to Severus' old room. "Something's not exactly right." She peered into the loo and then into the room full of boxes. "These three rooms match the space from downstairs, the sitting room," she said, indicating the box room and then pointed to the other two doors. "The loo and Severus' old bedroom these are about the same size as the kitchen area." She opened the master bedroom. "But this one it looks like it's about the same size as the kitchen area..." Ginny walked over to stand by the door to the storage room and faced the wall. "There should be another room in the front of the house, here." She touched the wall then jumped back in shock.

"What?" Hermione asked in alarm.

"Dark magic, I think," Ginny said, frowning. "There is something here that we're not supposed to know about."

"Very good, Miss Weasley," the cool voice of Severus made both girls jump and turn around. "Now will you please tell me why you are not in school where you are supposed to be? And why you've invaded my house unannounced?"

"Ginny and I brought some things to make the place a bit more... comfortable," Hermione stated, feeling slightly guilty for being caught.

Severus arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms. "Comfortable? I can assure you that this house is perfectly *comfortable*."

"This house does not feel comfortable to me, Severus. If this is going to be my home, I wanted to have some of my things around me here as if I actually belong here," she explained, facing him, refusing to be made to feel chastised.

"I see. Move away from that door," he said coolly.

Hermione turned to face the blank wall. "What door?"

His voice became hard as granite as he ground out, "Now, Hermione. Back away."

"No. Tell me what's in there," she demanded refusing to be intimidated. It took all her resolve to stand there and face him without backing down.

"No," Severus said softly in his cold as ice warning tone.

Hermione crossed her arms stubbornly. "I will not live in a house with a room full of Dark magic."

"Well then, you apparently know what's in there, so move away. Now," he said with a warning growl and hardened expression.

Hermione stood defiantly with her arms crossed, and even though the magic emanating from the wall made her skin crawl, she shifted so she was closer to the apparent 'door.'

Severus's eyes narrowed, and he clenched his jaw, then spoke, his voice still dangerously low. "It's my study. Yes, there are Dark Arts tomes, Dark Arts implements, and such nothing I want you touching. I am allowed to retain them since I cooperate with the Aurors when they require my assistance. Satisfied?"

Satisfied with his answer for now, Hermione backed away, and he smiled smugly in approval. "Now, what did you bring that you feel you needed to decorate the house with?"

Hermione shrugged. "A vase, a couple of paintings... not much really. Some rag rugs that my grandmother made me years ago for the kitchen. I really just wanted to look around again."

"And see where you could decorate," he said with a smirk. "You may do whatever you please with the sunroom I will not go in there. Feel free to add to the kitchen, as long as it's functional. I do like to cook. I will *not* tolerate anything with kittens or chickens. The bedroom and sitting room are negotiable. This room is off limits as is my lab. Is that fair?"

Ginny was trying very hard to suppress a giggle. "You didn't tell him about the pictures."

"What pictures?"

"For the mantelpiece," Hermione said, raising her chin.

~S~

He'd known of course that this idea of nesting making the home hers was inevitable, but he'd never considered that Hermione would break the school rules to do so. He'd thought she'd at least wait until holidays started. Nevertheless, now that they were here, assuming that the all the boxes downstairs were hers, he might as well get it over with and see how much stuff she owned. He moved back with his arm outstretched toward the stairs. "Show me."

Hermione and Ginevra bounded down the stairs to his sitting room. The girls enlarged the rest of the boxes they had dumped around the room and started to pull things out that Hermione must have saved from her parents' house. Hermione carefully extracted a heavy frame out of one box, showing him a reasonable still-life painting. "My mum did this when she was in college."

Next, she took out one small frame after another and set the pictures on the coffee table as she identified the people in the images: "This one is of my grandmother, mother and her sister, Aunt Julianne, when they were young. This is my Aunt Anise and Uncle Herbert. They aren't really my aunt and uncle, just a really close friend of my parents. Dr. Myers, his wife and my friend Julie; I took you to their house once. This is Julie and me at the beach, the summer before I got my Hogwarts letter..."

Her voice had trailed off as she stared at the picture, and Severus wondered what had happened that that picture of her childhood friend would make her seem sad. At least she wasn't in one of those nothing-but-string bikinis.

"Hermione, are you okay?" Ginevra asked.

"Yes, we were excited that we were both going to go to the same school and live in the same dorm. But that didn't happen, obviously." She set the frame down and picked up more pictures, the smile returning to her face. "The DA and all my friends from sixth year, and this is one of Harry, you, Ron, and I, of course Colin took this one of us in the common room, remember Gin?"

Ginevra took the frame from Hermione and smiled at the image. "I remember this; we'd been discussing Harry's tattoo." Severus raised an eyebrow as she showed him the picture. "He doesn't really have one... you had to have been there."

Severus picked up one of Hermione, Ginevra, and Luna. "From her wedding," Hermione pointed out unnecessarily as the frilly yellow robes she and Ginevra sported and the flowing white robes on Luna made that plain enough. "I have three from that day."

She picked up two silver picture frames out of the box, showing him two pictures: one of a young man in uniform, and a picture of a woman holding a baby. Both looked like the color had been added as an afterthought. "This is my real grandfather, Roger Danielson. This one is my Grandmother Merle and my mother as a baby. Grandfather Danielson died at the invasion of Normandy in 1944. My grandmother was a nurse." She set down the two pictures and picked up another old photograph of the same woman with two little girls, but with a different man, also in uniform. "She met my Grandfather John Wellington when my mother was four. This was taken at their wedding." She set down the pictures and picked up three more. "This is my father's family: my grandparents, his brother and sister. This is my Uncle Christian and Aunt Maureen, Debbie and Catherine," she said, pointing to one photograph of a smiling family, possibly taken at Christmas since they all wore red jumpers. "And Aunt Cynthia, Uncle Marciel, and my cousin, Jean-Alexandre," she said, handing Ginevra the picture as she pulled out yet another picture frame. "This last one is my Great-grandmother Lelia and Great-grandfather Peter."

Severus looked at all the pictures and smirked. "And you want all these on the mantelpiece they won't fit," he said, handing back the antique silver frame.

"I thought I could put the smaller ones on the shelves, with my figurines."

Severus' eyebrows shot up in alarm at the pronouncement. "Figurines?"

"My Llando mermaids and centaurs," Hermione chirped gleefully as she carefully pulled out a porcelain figurine wrapped loosely in bubble wrap. "Mum and Dad bought me this one when I received my Hogwarts letter."

He smirked that there was a protective magical bubble around the porcelain figure even under the bubble wrap. Severus stared at the mermaid figurine with a pink tail and was grateful that it was at least small.

She carefully unwrapped the next figurine and terminated the magical protection. "And I got this one during the summer after my third year." She set a unicorn, staring at a bird sitting on its tail, on the table. Ginevra opened a box and took out three centaurs, two sitting with their legs folded under them and one standing as Hermione unwrapped and ended the protection on two more small mermaids. "My grandmother gave me these, one a year until she died," Hermione said.

As she set each one down carefully, Severus examined them with a look that wasn't exactly disdainful. "That is quite a collection," he said with a subtle sneer. "Where exactly are you planning on putting them?" he asked, glancing up at the shelves, wishing he had all his books back so there weren't so many gaps on the shelves.

Hermione jumped up and began to set her figurines about, smiling happily as she set, shifted, relocated each one, deciding where she wanted them. Ginevra placed the larger frames on the mantel, handing the smaller ones to Hermione.

Severus picked up one of the centaurs, examining it closely. It was a delicate piece of porcelain with tiny flowers that looked nothing like a real centaur female. But then the

mermaids were a romantic facsimile as well. He looked up as Hermione added sticking charms to keep her precious collection in place. "You will have to be the one to dust them."

"Of course," she said, smiling in delight.

He closed his eyes and hoped she didn't collect any other type of figurines. He noticed that she hadn't placed any of her precious belongings on the bookshelves that functioned as the doors to the stairs or kitchen. He followed the girls as they carried several items, including the painting, into the kitchen. The two rugs were enlarged and set on the floor, the crystal vase on the dish cupboard, and a low bowl on the table. So far, it wasn't too much of an invasion. He wondered idly where she intended to hang the painting and decided to put it up on the wall near the table. He shook his head. *There will be more of this, I'm sure. This can't be all of her precious decorations.* Hermione left and returned with a china tea set. "My Grandmother's," she said proudly, setting the tray on the dish cupboard as well.

"I'll make tea," he volunteered as the girls unwrapped teacups and saucers, all mismatched and none that matched as a set to the teapot.

Hermione prepared the teapot and let him pour in the hot water. When they sat down, Ginevra looked up at him, and he knew she was going to ask questions.

"I noticed that the houses here are the usual eighteenth century mill workers houses, two up and two back judging by the spacing of the windows and doors in the row but your house is wider," she said and blew on the tea before sipping.

Severus knew where the line of thought was going and smiled, knowing that Hermione would barrage him with questions later about the house if he didn't explain it to her satisfaction now. "My mother acquired the house next door when her father passed away. I was a teenager it was sometime just before the end of my fourth year. She said I needed more room for a desk and wanted to give me a potions lab."

"So she remodeled the house?" Hermione asked as if amazed that was possible.

He sipped his tea as he contemplated on how much to tell her, deciding that she should know about it *it was one of the few times I'd been proud of Mum's gumption standing up to him, sort of, even if it had led to...* He set down his cup. "My mother was very adept with Transfiguration, Hermione, it was her best subject. She apparently knew how to do renovation spells, like turning sections of a wall into a door. Originally, the upstairs only had two rooms and an elongated closet that also served as a storage room for linen and things. My mother moved me into their bedroom; my bedroom then became a workroom, and the old elongated box room, magically enlarged, became the bathroom. My parents moved across the hall. And of course, my magical study. My study was a place where I could do magic practice my spells because only those with magical ability can sense the room. My father wasn't able to enter the lab or the sunroom either, and thought that the house was normal for a while. Like Ginevra, he eventually figured it out, but by that time he was sick the drinking and heavy smoking has that effect on Muggles. Still, he was furious about it, but my mother tried to alter his memory to make him think it was how it had always been. He died just before I turned nineteen. Mum passed away that summer..." he said, not wanting to tell her what really happened, especially in front of Ginevra.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, her eyes downcast before looking up at him. "It must have been difficult for you."

"It doesn't matter how old you are, it's not easy losing a parent," He set his cup down and crossed his arms. "Have we finished decorating?"

Hermione and Ginevra both smiled, and Hermione shook her head. "Nope."

He dreaded asking but couldn't help wanting to know just how far this was going to go. "What else?"

Hermione held her cup with both hands. "Is this going to be my home?"

"Of course," he said smoothly. "It *has* been your home since we consummated the Bonding."

"Then we'll have to buy bedding," Hermione announced.

"Bedding?" he asked, caught off guard.

"Yes, bedding," Hermione sated emphatically. "New sheets, pillows, and a quilt."

"You didn't mind it before," he stated, ignoring Ginevra's snicker.

"I didn't think I'd be living here either," Hermione persisted. "And the curtains. How old are they?"

"I'm sure they were put up before I was born," he stated, dreading how much this was going to cost him.

"Would you like me to go so you can... talk?"

Turning her attention to the redhead, Hermione said, "No, Gin, it's fine," then turned to face him with her arms crossed. "If it's the cost, I can buy the bedding myself. I've got my money saved up from working for George, and he's paid me for a one of my inventions..."

He was not going to win this battle. "The money isn't an issue unless you expect something extravagant." He only knew of one place to buy bedding... Narcissa had mentioned it before. "Fine, we'll go to Filberts and Swags."

Ginevra's face lit up, but Hermione frowned slightly. "I was thinking about Marks and Spencer," she said and turned to Ginevra. "It's a Muggle department store. You'll like the place. I know there's one in Manchester."

"All right, on one condition," he said firmly, and both girls looked up at him. "No pink, no flowers or any lacy stuff."

"Sure," Hermione agreed. "Gin, you should probably do Side-a-long Apparation again since you've never been there."

"No," Severus said firmly. It was too much of a risk, and he was fully capable of Apparating himself and both girls. When they were standing in the alleyway, he turned to face Hermione. "Picture the place where we are going to Apparate to in your mind, a memory of the last time you were there, and allow me to look. I will not rifle through any of your other memories, only for the location."

Hermione agreed without hesitation. "It's St. Ann's Gate, Manchester City Centre," she said, looking him boldly in the eyes.

He found the images easily and broke the connection when he had a clear picture of the place. However as soon as he had, she took hold of Ginevra's hand and Disapparated. Swearing, he followed, nearly colliding into her.

Severus followed the girls as they walked through St Ann's Gate, Manchester City Centre and glared at the huge 'M&S' above a sign that read 'Marks & Spencer' in bright yellow and dreaded what was to come. Thankfully, Hermione seemed to know exactly where she wanted to go, even though Ginevra frequently stopped in her tracks when something or other caught her eye.

To Severus, a Weasley in a Muggle department store was not an enjoyable experience in the least. And at least Ginevra didn't wander off, but stayed close to Hermione.

In the area designated for bedding, Hermione and Ginevra wandered along the shelves, looking at the various patterns through the plastic bags. Most of them hadn't appealed to him. He refused to have flowers, plaid, pink, or soft pastels in his room, but they did agree that red, green or yellow were not an option. Unfortunately, Hermione didn't like the color black, and she thought that grey or beige were unacceptable as well.

Finally back home, Severus stood in the doorway, scowling as he watched the girls make up his their bed. It was beginning to look like the bed on the picture on the plastic bag. Not that it pleased him. Two pillows, a quilt and a blanket were more than enough bedding in his opinion.

Somehow, he'd been talked into a full bed ensemble titled, *Embroidered Japanese Blossom Tree*, that were of several shades of blue and soft greens, that comprised of a duvet, two more shams, a bed ruffle, and a throw pillow, plus the added expense of an extra set of blue sheets. He'd also purchased, as per her request, the duvet set, which was soft and fluffy, and the four pillows Hermione wanted that were filled with some unidentified synthetic fiber.

The bed had a dust skirt now, white sheets with light blue stitching in a kind of vine leaf design, one coverlet, which was just a blue blanket, and the embroidered blue and moss green quilt, over which Hermione placed a patchwork quilt her grandmother had made at the foot of the bed. He supposed the quilt did match, in some way, to the patchwork and embroidered quilt they'd bought. Plus, there was a throw blanket folded at the foot of his bed as well, for napping or reading. At the head of the bed the girls had placed two large, square 'Euro' sham pillows, two pillow sized 'standard' sham pillows, which were not to be confused with the two bed pillows for sleeping, and two useless pillows Hermione designated as being decorative pillows.

Hermione then laid an oval, hand-braided rag rug on the floor by her side of the bed, apparently so her feet wouldn't touch the cold floor when she slid out of bed. However, once she took a few steps toward either the door or the wardrobe she'd be standing on the cold hardwood anyway, so he was hard pressed to understand the need for the rug in the first place. But Hermione was making the bedroom 'hers', which meant she'd agree to sleep in it, and that was all that mattered.

Next had been the replacement of the old curtains with the new white sheer curtains and the blue curtains that had the same stitching as the duvet on them, and the matching bed curtains, which Ginevra clasped to the bedposts with what she called 'tie backs' that did exactly that, but buttoned instead of actually tying. At least there Hermione hadn't bought the ones that tied into large bows.

A comforter with matching sham pillows in a dark blue that had something called pin-tuck detail and a border of embroidered twigs with tiny white, blue, and purple flowers was placed in the wardrobe for cold nights. He had to admit, watching her smile as she examined her handiwork almost made up for the fact that his bed had flowers on it. At least no one else would ever see the bed but him and Hermione, and of course, Ginevra, but he'd made even Ginevra swear to keep quiet about it.

Back downstairs, Hermione asked Severus about the boxes in the box room. "It's just some old stuff that belonged to my dad I haven't gotten rid of yet," he said, scowling as Hermione and Ginevra both got up to go look. "We don't have to do this now," he grumbled as Hermione opened the first box. "My father's clothes."

"Why put off for tomorrow what can be done today?" Hermione asked and handed the box to Ginevra. "Do you mind, Gin?"

"Not at all. Sitting room?" Ginevra asked, ignoring Severus' scowl.

Hermione opened another box and looked up. "More of your father's clothes?"

"Obviously," he growled with a frown. The next two boxes to go held his mother's clothes and miscellaneous items that had seen better days and one that contained some Muggle kitchen appliances he didn't want anymore. When she reached for a box on the top shelf, Severus stepped into the room. "No!"

"Why?" Hermione asked, putting the box on top of another.

"That's personal," he growled as Ginevra carried one of the boxes of old clothes to the sitting room for disposal.

Hermione smirked at him in confused distrust. "Why is it too personal? What's in here?"

He clamped his hand down on the box as she continued to look up at him expectantly.

"Whatever it is, I won't judge."

Ginevra came to get the second box, and Severus moved out of her way. He shoved the remaining box of appliances into the kitchen for her.

"Thank you, Severus," she said with a smile.

Severus turned back to see what Hermione was doing and scowled. While his back had been turned, Hermione had opened the box and removed a well-worn picture of a very pregnant Eileen Snape. "Was this taken before you were born?" she asked, a small smile on her face as she stared at the image.

He looked at the wistful expression of his mother in the picture and turned his head. "No, my sibling or would have been," he stated. He stood in the doorway to block Ginevra from entering upon her return or from seeing what was in the box. From Hermione's expression, he knew she was going to ask. Thinking it would be better to tell her now and get it over with, especially since Ginevra was out of earshot, he answered her quickly, not caring if his words sounded curt. "My mother had a miscarriage two weeks after that picture was taken, from a fall my father's abuse he made her fall on the stairs."

"I'm sorry, Severus, that must have been awful," she said with a sigh and stared at the photograph. "Would she have been older or younger than you?"

He had no idea why she thought it important. "Younger." He glanced at the picture in her hands again and then averted his gaze, unable to look Hermione in the eye. From the sounds of it, Ginevra was still in the sitting room. He decided to tell her the rest. "She was pregnant again shortly after that, but he beat her for something I did, and she lost the baby... She was unable to bear any more children after that. That was when my grandfather disowned his only daughter because she wouldn't use her magic to defend herself against a mere Muggle." He turned to look over his shoulder again, to see if Ginevra was within earshot and then turned back to Hermione. "That box contains... Hermione, I don't want to do this now."

"We can do this later," she said softly as she set the picture back into the box and closed the lid. She stood up and replaced the box on the top shelf. "What about the other boxes?"

Severus sighed, drew his wand and levitated two more boxes to the floor. "These can go they are nothing of import." He silently vowed to come back another day and remove the things from his past all the stuff he wanted buried and gone.

"Severus, don't you have any pictures of your mum or friends that you'd like out?"

He looked at her and slowly shook his head. He'd had a Polaroid a stranger had taken of him and his mother one day when they had been on the Southend-on-Sea pier when he was twelve. He'd taken the Polaroid to school and had it replicated into a wizarding photograph. He'd kept the magical photograph tucked away in his trunk for safekeeping because it was the only picture he had of the two of them in which she actually looked happy. There was a picture of her when she'd won the Gobstones championship at school, but she looked sullen in that one, and one from her wedding, but again, her smile in that one was her forced-to-smile expression, not one of happiness.

He also had one of him and Lily that Petunia had taken the first year they'd been friends, one that Lily's parents had taken the first day he and Lily rode the Hogwarts express to school together, and the picture he'd found in Grimmauld Place that he'd torn in half so he could keep a reminder of Lily as a young woman... He didn't think Hermione would appreciate being reminded about Lily. There were others, but many of the young men in the pictures were dead or in Azkaban... "I don't put pictures out," he said softly.

Her smile faltered. "None? You don't have any pictures of family?"

"Hermione, my family was too poor to own a camera let alone have the money to develop prints. Besides, what part of my childhood do you think I want remembrances of?"

She looked down at the floor. "I keep I'm sorry," she said softly and walked past him into the kitchen.

"What are we going to do with the old clothes?" Ginevra asked.

"Throw them out," Severus stated.

Ginevra looked at the pile of boxes stacked up by the door. "But they're in good condition," she said thoughtfully, making Severus' gut clench. "How about donating them to the secondhand store?"

"They are outdated," he said not believing she thought anyone would want the old clothes.

"Have you seen what wizards wear when they dress as Muggles?" Ginevra asked, laughing at him.

Severus scowled. "That is beside the point," he said, but Hermione was actually laughing.

"It would be an improvement," Hermione said, turning to face Severus. "Let's. We can have lunch at the café across from George's shop!"

Severus frowned, but knew he'd give in. It was one way to get rid of the clothes, although he hoped he'd never see anyone in them. "Fine."

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*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## The End of Term

Chapter 47 of 63

The holiday begins, and Severus makes his move, well, her move.



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The End of Term

The last week of term seemed to go so fast for Hermione. Because most of the students were going home for the holiday on Saturday, the professors had given huge amounts of homework in each lesson. And since Hermione assumed that she'd be away from the castle most of the holiday, she'd tried to do as much of her research needed for all of her essay assignments as possible, much to Severus' annoyance. On Thursday, Hermione came up to see him after the lower years' curfew bell tolled, her bag bulging with books and parchments.

"I lost track of time," Hermione said in apology as she dropped her bag on the floor by the sofa. She was exhausted, but wanted to see him anyway, even for just a little while.

"Good evening, Hermione. I was beginning to think I wouldn't have the pleasure of your company again tonight," Severus said politely, if not a bit coolly, with the blank mask expression she hated because she couldn't tell what he was thinking. Nevertheless, he was upset with her, but it couldn't be helped.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Hermione apologized. "I have so much work to do, and I still have to find references to finish my Charms, Transfiguration, and Alchemy essays... What?"

"You'll have access to the library all you wish over the holiday," he said, his voice still polite but cool. "You would also have free access to the Malfoy library if you'd consent to accompany me there."

"Thank you," she replied as she picked up the book lying on the sofa and plopped down next to him, knowing that she'd never consent to spending any more time in that house than absolutely necessary. She read the titles of the books he had in front of him on the coffee table. *Applications and Antipathogenic Properties of Herbaceous Magical Perennials* was on top of the stack of books. She knew this book; it was a collective composite of the writings and theories of the ancient Greek physicians acquainted with the healing powers of all the plants that grow upon the earth including Agamede, Agnodice, Circe, Medea, Perimede... She read the titles of the other two books: *The Works of Mercuriade: Crisis, Pestilent Fever and the Cure of Wounds* and *The Syrups, Potions and Concoctions of Jacqueline Félicie de Almania*. She'd read Jacqueline Félicie de Almania's book years before for a Potions essay, however, the book on Mercuriade's works didn't appeal to her at the moment.

She looked at the book in her hands. The book didn't have the protective spell used on all the Hogwarts tomes. *Materia Medica: Composition of Curative Agents* by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson," she read aloud and looked at Severus. "She was the first woman to gain qualification as a medical practitioner in Britain and the first female mayor in England. My mother greatly admires her. She developed the New Hospital for Women and created the London Medical School for Women."

"Yes," he stated, his eyes never leaving his book. "She was a witch, actually, but chose to help enable poor women, both Muggles and witches, to obtain medical help from

qualified practitioners of their own sex. She was noted for her medicinal practice of using plants and plant extracts. Many of her herbal remedies are still used today."

"What are you reading?" Hermione asked, stifling a yawn.

He held the book so that she could see the title. *"The Trotula: Diseases of Women, Treatments for Women, and Women's Cosmetics?"*

"Are you reading these for the Médousa Potion?" she asked, opening the book she held to his first marker. She covered her mouth as she tried to stifle another yawn.

He inhaled deeply before answering her. "Yes and no." He lowered the book to his lap, and Hermione looked at him expectantly. "I actually enjoy reading the works of the ancient physicians, alchemists and Healers. Agnodice was the first female physician to practice legally in the fourth century BC, Athens," he stated.

Hermione turned her body to face him. She put her arm on the back of the sofa and rested her head on it as she listened to him as he continued.

"Jacqueline Félicie de Almania, for example, was tried before the bishops of Paris and the Dean of the Medical Faculty at the University of Paris because she was able to cure patients where other doctors had failed and given up hope of the patient's recovery. She was banned from practicing medicine and threatened with excommunication, but went on to become one of wizardkind's most renowned Healers one of the first to call herself a Healer rather than a physician."

"I had no idea you were so well versed on ancient women Healers," she said softly.

He lowered the book again and regarded her steadily, then turned to face her. "I'm well versed on a number of topics, Hermione, as well you know. I have a love of reading, not unlike your own, and practically have a photographic memory," he said, and she smiled. "I would have thought that evident by the collection of books in our home."

"Yes, your collection in the sitting room is quite impressive," she said, staring at him contentedly.

"Hardly the majority of my collection, I assure you," he said and smirked at her. "My dark tomes are in my study, my Potion books are in a closet in my lab, and my old or valuable books are safely stored in the small room upstairs."

"You have so many?" She tried to imagine bookshelves full of books in each space he mentioned, amazed by the revelation. "I bet your friends gave you books every Christmas," she mumbled through another yawn.

"Every Christmas and occasionally for my birthday," he said with a one-sided grin and rested his arm on the back of the sofa as well. "However, a good number of my books came from professional sources. I have all of Master Aramound Gruener's books, notes, and journals, which I told you about, as well as many books bequeathed to me from Albus Dumbledore's private collection. When Master Kirkwell Ogden passed away, he had bequeathed his personal books, notes, and journals to his latest apprentices, Master Raymond Terrell, Reginald, and me. I also received a number of books from the Dark Lord and from fellow Death Eaters..."

"Were they stolen?" she asked, assuming that the books Voldemort had given him were kept in his study.

"Which the Ministry has an accounting for, I assure you, but yes, many were stolen," he said smoothly. "Those the Ministry demanded I return if there were any magical relatives to speak of and if the books were not on the restricted lists. However, I replicated all of the ones they wanted returned before relinquishing them to the Ministry."

Hermione nodded, knowing that Madam Pince replicated some of the old tomes for the students to use to protect the handmade ancient books in the hermetically sealed room off the Restricted Section. "So you could keep a copy," she said and yawned. She hated the fact that she was this tired; she really did want to stay with him and was enjoying this conversation quite a bit.

"Yes, so I could keep copies," he said smoothly, stroking her hair as he brushed it away from her face. The act sent a warm, tingling sensation through her. "Professor Dumbledore made sure I retained as many as possible after my first trial, and subsequently, Kingsley did the same after my second trial. It helps that I'm well known for my knowledge of the Dark Arts and am on good terms with many of the Aurors."

The soft timbre of his voice was so soothing. "So what are you looking for in the old potions?" she asked. "I thought that the ancient potions had been improved upon through the years."

He put the book down and then sat facing her so that their knees touched. He perched his arm on the back of the sofa so that his hand rested near the arm she had tucked under her head. "True, there have been many advancements in Potions over the centuries, but the ancient physicians, alchemists, and Healers developed a thorough knowledge of all manner of plants and herbs. Many of them are still used for the same purposes today..." His fingers stroked her arm as he talked, explaining the value of the ancient practices, and Hermione smiled, not wanting to interrupt him, mesmerized by his voice. "...when they were at their most potent and the best time to harvest them for maximum efficacy, as well as which herbs were best for which ailment..."

"Hermione?"

Fingers brushed her cheek, soft and warm on her skin.

"Hermione, wake up."

She opened her eyes to see Severus leaning over her. "Oh gods, I'msoo sorry. I must've dozed off."

"Yes you did," he said, his fingers stroking her jaw. "Come to bed."

"Yeah, I should," she said and stretched as she sat up. He rose easily and offered a hand to her, which she accepted. Now on her feet, she felt a bit more awake. "When are we leaving tomorrow?" she asked, stretching her arms, adding, "for the Burke's party?" while yawning.

"Our invitation states that our arrival should be promptly at five o'clock if we are leaving from Malfoy Manor."

She grimaced and her arms dropped to her sides.

"Or, if you wish, we can depart from the school gates at half past five," he suggested with a smirk.

"I'd prefer to leave from here," she stated as she reached down and picked up her bag.

"You can leave that here," he said, pointing to her bag. He stepped closer to her, his fingers once again stroking her cheek. "Stay with me."

Hermione looked up at him hesitantly and then down at her hands clutching the strap of her bag. "I'm exhausted, Severus."

"Hermione, I can see that you are." He cupped her face tenderly. "All I ask is that you stay with me. I won't force you to do anything you don't want."

She nodded and let him lead her to the ornate Headmaster's bedroom. She dropped her bag on the floor as he opened the wardrobe. He handed her a nightshirt. "It's all I have," he said and then smirked, "unless you wish to sleep à la natural."

"I appreciate the nightshirt," she replied and went into the bathroom to change. She'd never slept nude before, and was too self-conscious to. She shrunk the nightshirt before putting it on and realized that she got the length a bit too short but hadn't fixed the neckline since the three-button slit down the front opened to well past her breasts. She yawned as she did up the buttons, mentally scoffing, *Too tired to shrink a nightshirt you're pathetic, Hermione* at her transfiguration.

He was in bed when she returned. Hermione climbed in and drew the covers up to her chin. "You're sure that you're okay with this?" She was so tired; she'd be out as soon as she closed her eyes. She hoped he wouldn't be upset if she did.

"Silly girl," Severus purred silkily as he rolled onto his side and pulled her to him, then kissed her temple. "Yes, I'm 'okay with this'."

She snuggled into his embrace, finding that she fitted comfortably in his arms. "Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Hermione," he said softly and kissed her tenderly. She turned her head to kiss him back, their lips coming together in long, languid caresses, and she responded to him, enjoying the sensual kiss. His lips sucked gently on her bottom lip, releasing it slowly, and she smiled, lifting up to press hers firmly on his. His kiss became firmer, not demanding, but passionate, and she parted her lips, inviting him in. Kissing him like this was actually making her feel much more awake, and not just her mind.

He shifted, leaning over her, and she rolled so she lay on her back under him. As his hand slid up her side, gently caressing her, she slid her hands up his back and down to his bum, appreciative of the lean muscled tone of his body. He smiled against her lips before slowly kissing his way down her jaw to her neck and chest. He unfastened the front of the nightshirt, spreading it wide open, and his hand cupped one of her breasts as his mouth covered the other. "That's it, Hermione, feel," he said smoothly, his voice like chocolate silk and his breath warm on her skin.

She rolled her head back as he suckled gently at her breast, his lips pulling slightly on her nipple. His hand began to roam up her thigh, pushing the nightshirt up in its path. Her breath caught as his finger delved into her. His finger withdrew slowly, gently stroking up to her clitoris and back repeatedly. The long sensual movement and the gentle way he savored her breast increased Hermione's need to have more. She arched her back, thrusting her breast against his mouth and pushing her groin down on his hand. "Oh, gods, Severus..."

He chuckled as he pushed a knee between her legs, and she spread open for him, wanting more than anything what she knew was coming next. He shifted to position himself, lowering himself to her. She tugged at his nightshirt, eager to feel his skin on hers. His penis poked at her as he helped her pull off his nightshirt.

"Eager little thing," he purred. "I thought you were tired."

"I want you," she gasped as he pressed at her entrance, his hand cupping her hip. He kissed her passionately as he entered her, slowly filling her. She arched her back, meeting his thrust with each stroke, closing her eyes to the sensations. His strokes became more urgent, and he leaned up, his fingers stroking her, pushing her over the edge into pure bliss. His movements quickened and then stilled, thrusting deeply inside her as he came.

They stayed like that for several heartbeats, Severus leaning over her on both arms and buried inside her. Slowly he withdrew and lay down next to her, holding her close. "Thank you," he murmured softly.

"Err, you're welcome?" she murmured uncertainly in reply, thinking she should be the one thanking him, not the other way around. She lay there for a while, comfortable in his arms, just listening to him breathe until his breathing took on a soft snore before sleep finally took her.

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Saturday, Hermione woke up slowly and carefully eased away from Severus, so as not to wake him, to use the loo. Severus was up and dressing when she returned. He walked over and kissed her. "We overslept. I've asked Mispy to bring you your clothes," he said and walked out of the room.

Mispy arrived a second later and carefully lay on the bed what she'd selected for Hermione to wear. "Mispy brings mistress what I's sees mistress wears when mistress does not haves lessons," she said and stood, looking at Hermione expectantly. "Does mistress needs anything else?"

Hermione asked for her toothbrush and paste, and the elf smiled at her. Mispy was gone and back in seconds with Hermione's toiletry bag. "Thank you, Mispy."

The elf bowed and left, and Hermione hurriedly dressed to go to breakfast.

At breakfast, Severus made an announcement: a few mountain trolls had damaged one of the railway bridges for the Hogwarts Express, and so the train had been rescheduled to leave on Sunday, which made many of the students groan or mumble in dismay.

When the *Daily Prophet* arrived, there were two photographs of the wizards repairing the damage to the bridge and another showing several wizards standing around four trolls who were bound in magical ropes.

"Oh, Merlin's beard they think they'll have that fixed by tomorrow morning?" Wendlynne exclaimed in shock, her hands dropping to the table as she looked up at her friends.

Alestra flipped the page. "The article says there are thirty wizards repairing the bridge," she stated, reading aloud, "'Marline Baden of the Department of Magical Transportation stated early this morning that the Ministry has the situation well in hand, and they are in the process of making temporary repairs to the bridge to allow the Hogwarts Express to operate two runs tomorrow. 'The repairs will hold,' Miss Baden assured this reporter, 'until the stonemasons can build a more permanent...'" She lowered her copy of the paper and looked up too. "They should have it sorted out by tonight."

"Circe, I hope so!" Veronica said, still leaning toward Alestra so she could read the article. "It says that it took twenty-three wizards to subdue the four mountain trolls!"

"And just think, my blockhead brother, Harry, and Hermione managed to *subdue* one all by themselves their first year at school," Ginny said with a smirk, reaching for the marmalade. "So, Hermione, want to toss the Quaffle with us today?"

Sunita and Veronica looked up in shock, and Hermione groaned inwardly when she saw that Sunita's star-struck-gobsnacked-guppy expression was back. "You the three of you a-a mountain troll? In your *first year? At eleven!*" the dark-haired girl stammered, her dark eyes huge. "I thought that was an exaggeration?"

"Nope, Sunita, that one is an actual fact. Harry and Ron saved Hermione from a fully grown mountain troll in the girls' loo their first year of school," Ginny said with a proud smile as Sunita stared at Hermione with awestruck amazement.

Truth was, it made Hermione a bit uncomfortable, and she was relieved when Ginny asked again, "So, since we're here for another day, how about it? Who's up for tossing the Quaffle? Veronica, you can ask Jeremy; Alestra can ask Thornton, and it looks like Blake Blume and Lawrence Carlin are headed this way."

Beside the girls, Bryan Randell, Wilber Wevernthrall, Jack Sloper and Ernie Coppersmith all turned in their seats, smiling. "We're on for a game," Jack said, his enthusiasm echoed by his friends as Blake and Lawrence stopped right behind Hermione.

"So, does that mean that we're invited, too?" Blake asked, grinning. "Hiya, Hermione. I was going to ask if you had time today to work on our Egyptian hieratic and demotic translations, but if you're going to be out on the pitch," he said and indicted Lawrence with his thumb, "we'd love to go."

Hermione hung her head, shaking it with her eyes closed and then looked up at the expectant faces around her. "Okay, sure. Why not. We can spend the morning out on the pitch and still have all afternoon to..."

"...revise in the library," Ginny and Alestra finished for her.

Hermione gave her friends an annoyed curl of her mouth. "Very funny."

However, when they all arrived at the Quidditch pitch, Hermione had tried to bow out and just watch her friends play, which made Blake somewhat concerned. "She hates



flying," Ginny said casually.

Blake nodded in understanding. "Don't blame you. The school brooms are sometimes temperamental, and they're not very responsive because they're so old and well used," he said as he handed Hermione his broom. "Here, I'll use one of the school's Cleansweeps."

"I shouldn't," Hermione protested, trying to hand him back his sleek broom. It looked like Harry's old Nimbus 2000, only the twigs were so well aligned, the handle so nicely carved and polished that she knew it would go as fast as his Firebolt and that thought alone frightened her.

"No, it's fine," Blake insisted and explained that his Nimbus 3000 was a reliable broom and good for one-handed maneuvering. "Lawrence and I'll fly next to you. Just shout if you need help," he persisted. "Besides, the Headmaster will kill me if anything happens to you."

Hermione laughed softly. "Probably," she said.

"Probably, hell definitely!" Lawrence exclaimed. "Believe me, we aren't letting *anything* happen to you."

Hermione scowled as several of her friends burst out laughing. "Word's out, I'm afraid," Bryan Randell stated. "The Headmaster is really protective towards you."

"...and *no one* had better do anything that gets *you* hurt," Wilber Wevernthrall added.

"...or else you'll wish he gave you cleaning *every* cauldron in the school as a detention!" Ernie Coppersmith finished.

"Cauldrons! Blimey, he had me scrubbing the loos like a house-elf for a month!" Blake exclaimed, making everyone laugh.

"I'm sorry about that Blake, really," Hermione said, but he brushed it off with a smile. "All right, I'll fly. But I'm not really good at sports."

The other girls all started laughing again.

"You do well enough at home," Ginny stated, kicking easily off the ground on her broom with the Quaffle tucked under her arm.

"You'll do fine, trust me," Blake said as she mounted his broom.

The Nimbus vibrated in anticipation, making Hermione nervous. Blake nodded encouragingly. "Go on. It's really responsive. All you have to do is keep your balance over the handle."

She swallowed, trying to ignore the energy of the magic. This broom was stronger than Ron's, she could tell. Blake and Lawrence both waited patiently until Hermione kicked off and then followed her up. Instead of shooting up as she'd expected, the broom seemed to read her thoughts and rose smoothly until she leaned back, holding her arms extended to level off. She held back at first, but after a while, Hermione was pleasantly surprised at how well Blake's broom responded to her every move. True to their word, the boys stayed close to her, and eventually she relaxed enough to join in the game. By the time they landed, she had to admit that the morning spent on the Quidditch pitch hadn't turned out as badly as she'd anticipated.

Hermione thanked Blake for the use of his broom and hurried to the library to work on her essays. Hermione received a note from Severus that afternoon as she and Blake worked on their Ancient Runes translations.

*Hermione,*

*Please come up to my rooms to change. Narcissa sent one of her house-elves to assist you. I do not wish to be late.*

*Severus*

When she arrived in Severus' office, he asked her to follow him up to his room. The house-elf, Elbee, who had brought Hermione her robes, was standing in the middle of the room, waiting. The strapless, dark green velvet robes with the gold underskirt were laid out carefully on the bed. "Ifs you disrobes now, Elbee is to dresses you."

Hermione turned to Severus. "Er, do you mind? I, er... I feel self-conscious doing this in front of you," she said to him, awkwardly holding the black knickers and hose.

He crossed his arms with an amused smirk. "I've seen you in your knickers before, Hermione and a lot less."

"It's not the same you're watching me!" she implored as she stormed off to the bathroom. She knew it was childish, being so uncomfortable with him staring at her, but she'd never been watched while dressing before, and it was really unnerving. Even the girls in the dorm turned their backs when they were dressing. When she came back, he was still standing next to the bed. She scowled at him, timidly covering her breasts, standing in only her knickers and hose. "Do you have to stare?" His gaze was practically hungry as his eyes swept down her body.

He moved to stand behind her, holding a Victorian corset, saying, "You'll want to wear this."

"Excuse me?" she asked, staring at the garment, hoping he was kidding. She'd never worn one before, but the images of women sucking in their breaths, making slight grimaces as the corset was being laced up, flashed in her mind.

"You'll be more comfortable tonight if you wear this," he said, holding the corset in front of her with both hands.

Hermione turned so that she faced him. "You expect me to wear *that*?" Surely it wasn't necessary.

"Yes," he said, taking hold of her shoulders and turning her around.

As he positioned the corset in place, she felt the rigid boning with her fingers as she protested, "It won't fit under the dress."

"Yes it will," he said with finality that brooked no more argument. Severus pulled the lacing so tight it was strangling the air from her.

"I can't breathe," she complained.

"That's the point. It has to be tight or you'll never get your dress on over it."

She tried to pick up the dark green robes, but the corset prevented her from bending. Elbee made them float over her head as she asked Hermione to raise her arms, and the dress slipped down her body. Severus fastened up all the buttons on the back of the dress for her, his fingers sending a shiver down her spine. He kissed her shoulder after he'd fastened the last one, his lips sending a delightful shiver down her spine.

She turned to look at him, and his lips quirked into a small smile. She watched him walk to the wardrobe, presumably to change himself, as the elf then placed a stool behind Hermione. "Please sits, Miss," she asked. The corset made Hermione sit ramrod straight as the elf fixed her hair. Behind her, she could hear Severus moving about, her mind imagining him changing his clothes. Hermione soon realized that if she didn't fight the corset and maintained proper posture, it wasn't really all that uncomfortable, although she had to take shallow breaths. When Elbee moved in front of her to apply her makeup, she heard Severus leave the room. Finally, the elf helped Hermione with the Georgian style malachite jewelry.

Mrs. Malfoy's malachite necklace lay heavily around the base of her neck, but the matching earrings were charmed so they wouldn't tug on her earlobes. After pulling on

the long, black gloves, Elbee helped her with the catch of the thick bracelet.

Severus returned, striking in his black tuxedo frockcoat and trousers, and picked up their cloaks off the foot of the bed. "You look lovely," he said as she placed a hand on her stomach and took in her appearance in the mirrors on the wardrobe doors.

The strapless, velvet robes were dark enough to have a bit of a black sheen, but they wouldn't have been her first choice. The color was good for her, and the robes looked expensive... *Definitely a good reflection on the Malfoys unless everyone will think Severus spent this much on me?*

His eyebrow arched as he asked, "Ready?"

She nodded, murmuring, "Yes," and turned to accept her cloak.

"Let's go," he said, indicating the door.

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The Burke's house was a four-story, brick Victorian, Gothic Revival house, painted white, with the second and third floors showing Italian Renaissance influence. The house had several towers, bay windows, carved stonework, fancy shingles, iron railings, and had balconies on most of the second floor windows. Many of the windows were decorated with stained glass. The inside of the house was quite opulent: every window had heavy damask curtains in dark colors, floral wallpaper above the white wainscoting, ornate Chinese or Persian rugs in rich, dark colors on every floor and most of the rooms were filled with well made over-stuffed furniture with intricately carved tables set in various corners, with lovely antique vases and figurines.

Mrs. Malfoy had swooped down on Hermione the moment she and Severus entered the formal entry hall, and she and Mr. Malfoy had paraded her around as they introduced her to all their friends. Severus, apparently amused, had simply followed them, greeting everyone Hermione met with a formal politeness. Dinner had consisted of ten courses and lasted a good three hours of absolutely inane conversation as a quartet had played softly in the background.

Following dinner, everyone went into the drawing room to listen to classical music. However, the padded wooden chair was anything but comfortable, and Hermione noticed that every woman in the room had sat with their backs straight, stiff and proper with their hands resting demurely in their laps, which she'd tried to do even though she'd wished she could slouch like the men. The first performance was a very thin wizard on the Pianoforte. After two pieces, a woman who played a harp accompanied him for several pieces, and then a dark-haired girl on the flute joined them for several more. The dark-haired girl left, to be replaced by a Soprano who, after a long arietta, sang a lengthy duet with a robust tenor...

It had been excruciating having to sit for so long. Hermione realized just how thoughtful Severus had been to insist on her wearing the corset since it helped her maintain her posture and supported her, keeping her back from hurting, although her bum had been numb by the time the concert was over.

Afterwards, the men had retired to the library for cigars and brandy, and the women had gathered in a parlor for idle chatter and to sip on champagne. Mrs. Malfoy had escorted Hermione around the room as she flitted from one group of ladies to another.

By the time Severus had escorted Hermione back to the castle, she had been utterly exhausted as well as quite inebriated. Severus had helped her disrobe and remove the corset, but she'd still felt a sudden heady rush as if her brain had been denied oxygen all evening. She'd nearly tumbled, almost fainting, if Severus hadn't caught her and carried her to the bed. She'd fallen asleep as soon as her head had sunk into the pillow and her back stretched out on the mattress.

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Severus watched Hermione stretch out with an appreciative smirk that faded as her face relaxed into sleep. He stood there, looking at her, staring at her body with regret. He felt disappointed and would have to go unsatisfied, although he hoped that she wouldn't involuntarily vomit.

Severus left his room to get Hermione a Hangover Potion for the morning. Narcissa had chided him for not giving Hermione an Inebriation-inhibiting Potion, but he hadn't known that Hermione would imbibe so much champagne. Fortunately, she had been able to maintain proper decorum, which had impressed him.

In fact, she'd performed admirably all evening. Her manners in the severely formal setting were more than adequate, but then the careful dance of etiquette carried on by the upper echelons of wizarding elite was little more than a subtle, intricately stylish and fastidious ceremony still reminiscent of the high bourgeoisie. The social rules of conduct Severus abhorred but adhered to in certain circles.

He still remembered his first invitation to the Burke's annual Christmas party. It was right after his skills with obscure potions and ancient spells had assisted Narcissa in conceiving where the Healers had failed: a combination of two obscure but potent fertility potions taken precisely eleven days before her menstrual period and then repeated three days after that, followed by two questionable potions of his own devising (one given her and the other to Lucius on the day the Fertility-detection charm glowed a deep pink) and then an ancient potion rich in folic acid, calcium and iron to give the developing fetus the nutrients it needed once conception was confirmed. He'd lived in the manor throughout the pregnancy, carefully preparing whatever potions Narcissa required. Nevertheless, pregnancy had been quite hard on Narcissa, but with Severus' potions, she managed to carry Draco to full term. Both Lucius and Narcissa were eternally grateful. His reward had been his introduction into the social elite and an excruciating, unbelieving tedious evening of refined social decorum, propriety and gentlemanly conduct.

Although he'd learned some of the fundamentals of wizarding etiquette from his Slytherin classmates, Severus' natural tendency toward observation and his reserved nature had lent well in the formal setting, and he'd managed to pick up on the rules well enough to pass. Still, he'd hated it, even though he'd been able to master the art of faking it. Severus had only felt the need to attend the Burke's party upon Narcissa's insistence for Hermione's benefit.

Even after the Dark Lord's first fall, members of the social elite would, on occasion, come to Severus when they wanted something, some potion that was morally ambiguous or with assistance with some Dark artifact, and wished discretion. A few of the families who escaped persecution, especially those who'd suffered the Dark Lord's displeasure on occasion, had likewise sought his aide conceiving their sons and heirs. It had earned him quite a bit of gold over the years as well as cementing his acceptance among the elite. Being Head of Slytherin had also helped his position among the elite as did his appointment as Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Once back in his room, Severus stripped and slid into bed beside Hermione, hoping that she'd be amorous after taking the Hangover Potion in the morning.

~H~

Hermione woke slowly with a pounding headache, cotton-mouthed and once again unsure as to where she was. Even the few rays of extremely bright light that penetrated narrow spaces between the drapes hurt her eyes, making her groan softly. Unfortunately, and to her dismay, the sound of her own moan increased the throbbing pain in her head. She rolled over, colliding with a firm, yet immovable object.

The bed dipped as Severus rose from the bed, his feet making loud slapping noises to her overly sensitive ears.

He came back to her side of the bed and knelt over her. "Hermione," he said softly, urging her to turn toward him. "Drink this. It will help."

Reluctantly she rolled toward him, squinting at the bright light, and covered her eyes with one arm. "Wha' is it?"

"Hangover Potion," he said, his voice very low.

She tried to nod, but the movement hurt. He supported her head with one hand, tipping the lip of a vial to her lips. Hermione swallowed the potion and lay back on the bed, covering her eyes with her arm again. She closed her eyes, waiting for the potion to work. When she opened her eyes, a moment later, Severus was stretched out on his side of the bed watching her. She hadn't even realized he'd moved. "Thank you," she mumbled, feeling much better.

"You're welcome," he said as he brushed a strand of hair from her face. He leaned down as if to kiss her, and she quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

"Bathroom. Teeth," she uttered as she scrambled from the bed.

Severus sighed and fell back onto the bed with a groan.

She scurried in to brush her teeth, calling out, "What time is it?"

"About a quarter to ten, I suppose," he shouted back.

"Ten?! But that means that everyone is leaving!" she screeched, grabbing a black, terrycloth dressing robe off the hook by the door.

"Minerva and Hagrid have things well under control," he growled from the bedroom.

She moved to stand in the doorway as she belted the dressing robe in place. The large, black robe was so long, it pooled at her feet. "But I haven't been able to say goodbye to my friends!"

He rolled over on to his side to look at her. "You'll be seeing them in four days."

"Not Ginny Alestra, Wendlynne, Veronica, and Sunita! I wanted to ask them for their addresses," she said, looking for her dress. "You should've woken me!"

"You needed to sleep. Besides, I can get you their addresses from the school registry," he said, sitting up. "Hermione, what are you looking for?"

"My robes and shoes," she replied.

"In the wardrobe. Your things are in the left side," he stated, pointing at the doors.

She yanked the door open... and gasped. All her clothes were hanging up on hangers on the bar, her cloak and camel opera coat were both on sturdy wooden hangers on the hook, and her shoes were lined up on the shoe rack... She pulled open the top drawer and saw all her undergarments folded neatly within... "What is this?"

Severus was sitting on the bed, leaning comfortably against the headboard, nude. "I had the house-elves bring your things here this morning," he said smoothly.

"Without asking me?" she shrieked, trying to avoid staring at his erection or his smug expression.

"As per our agreement, remember?" He raised his eyebrow, and one side of his mouth pulled back, making a crooked smile. "Or must I spell it out for you?"

Hermione gaped at him in disbelief at his presumptuousness.

His smile faded, and he turned, leaning on his elbow so he faced her. "We are spending the afternoon of Christmas Eve with my great-grandfather followed by what I predict will be an awkward evening at Potter's. You insisted on sleeping at Potter's, which, by the way, Ginevra has extended her invitation and from her assurances, is happy to have us. So that means I will have to endure Christmas day with both Potter and the Weasley clan, at your insistence, until we leave for Malfoy Manor at five o'clock. You will then spend Christmas night *and* New Years Eve with me at the Manor, in my rooms, although I suspect Narcissa will expect us to remain for Boxing Day. So for the next few days, we shall be staying here, since I have end of term business with the staff and a meeting with the school governors on Monday. The rest of the holiday, with the exception of New Years eve, we may either stay here or reside at our home in Manchester."

"Manchester?" she asked, still running over his plans for the holiday their plans ones they'd made... Then she remembered their argument. "You're going to hold me to it all of it." She was going to be in staying at the Manor... The memory of her torture in their drawing room asserted itself and she fought to suppress it. It will be all right, it will be, it has to be...

He smirked at her. "Of course."

Hermione needed to sit down, but the only available place was either the narrow padded bench beside the bed or the upholstered bench at the foot, unless she crawled back up onto the bed with him. She fought back the irrational fear that threatened to break free, telling herself over and over that Severus promised that she'd be unharmed a welcomed guest in the manor. She forced herself to remember the lunch she'd had with Mr. Malfoy, his polite manner and assurances that he wanted to amend his association with her.

Severus chuckled at her as he shook his head, then rolled off the bed and walked into the bathroom. She watched him go, still angry at his impertinence.

But was he really being all that impertinent? Analyzing it logically... Sure, he had moved her things without telling her or talking about it he had simply assumed that it would be okay. But really there was no point in going back to the dorm; they were going to be staying together over the holiday anyway, that was the agreement, and with the girls not there she would just be sleeping in an empty room. Therefore, she grudgingly admitted to herself, it made sense for her clothes to be here at least for the duration of the holiday.

Pushing aside her anger, she dressed quickly and was pulling on her boots when he returned.

He opened his side of the wardrobe and began pulling out his clothes. "We'll have breakfast as soon as I'm dressed," he said casually.

"I'm not really hungry," she said, pushing past him, still hoping irrationally that she'd catch her friends before the train departed, although she knew it was futile. Her trunk was sitting on the floor next to the stairs in the sitting room. Suddenly, a house-elf appeared, making Hermione jump.

"Kirch did not means to startles mistress," he said, wringing his hands as he bowed to her. "Kirch will punishes his self most severely for startling mistress."

"No, no, don't harm yourself," Hermione said, and the elf looked up at her, his ears sagging and his brows knit in confusion. "I wasn't expecting you, that's all. Why are you here?"

Kirch straightened, his hands still clasped together tightly as he stared at her. "Kirch is to puts away mistress' things, but Kirch does not knows where mistress wants them. Kirsch did not know if mistress wants her books to be put on the shelves or in the wardrobe."

"It's only for a few days, Kirch," Hermione said, smiling at the elf. "You can leave my trunk here..." The elf's forehead wrinkled in confusion again. "Or maybe just place it somewhere in the bedroom out of the way?" *If there is an out of the way place.* "Maybe by the window?"

Kirch smiled. He grasped the handle of her trunk and vanished, taking the trunk with him as Severus entered the room.

"So shall we send for breakfast?"

"I want to go to Hogsmeade," she stated as she looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece, and her hopes sunk. It was now five minutes after ten. The train had already left.

"The Hogwarts Express has already departed," he said, after making a cursory glance at the clock. "Unless you wanted to have breakfast in town or do some shopping?"

She didn't really need the confirmation; she was already well aware of the fact. Disappointed that she'd missed her friends' departure, she considered what she should do

with her day, missing Severus' question. *I suppose I could go to the library and get a head start on my essays... Or I could read.*

"If you do, I can send a message right now to Aurors Robert MacNaughton and Aaron Brodes and request that they remain in Hogsmeade while you shop," Severus said as she stared at the shelves in the room, deep in thought.

"Shopping?" she mumbled, surprised by the offer and considering the option. *I could shop for Christmas gifts.* However, she hated the idea of shopping for a suitable Christmas gift for Severus or Mr. Prince with him hovering over her and the Aurors standing guard.

"I will inform Reginald of my change of plans," he stated casually.

Hermione shook her head. "No." I could look through the magical catalogues and order what I want by owl post. Alestra, Wendlynne, and Veronica have a stack of them in the dorm room, and Ginny had the latest international catalogue from Queerditch Quality Quidditch Quarter in her trunk. She looked up at him, just realizing what he'd said. However, seeing him scowl confused her, and she tilted her head. "You had plans with Professor Reynolds?"

"Of course," he said stiffly. "Since most of the students are going home for the holidays, it leaves us plenty of time to work on the missing ingredient."

Hermione smiled. There was one more ingredient that they had yet to identify. "Maybe I can help?"

Severus shrugged noncommittally. "We are going over the list of all the possible seeds and calculating their probability in the quantity specified in the directions. You'll be bored in half an hour."

She crossed her arms defiantly. "Professors Vector and Newton both say I'll pass my N.E.W.T.s in Arithmancy and Alchemy, respectively, with Outstandings, even if I took them now. They happen to be two of my favorite subjects, and I *do not* find probability equations boring."

Severus chuckled softly. "I'm well aware of what your professors say about you, Hermione; they all extol your superior intellect, enthusiasm, and natural ability. I, myself, know your academic abilities as I had you as a student for six years."

"I helped solve the identity for the Bluepike crab roe and the phoenix tears," she pointed out, hating to be told that she lacked knowledge on any subject.

Severus raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched, although not enough for her to call it a smile. "However, there is so much more to calculating out the probability of an ingredient in a potion," he said as he tilted his head and regarded her steadily. "You must know and understand how an ingredient reacts, its innate properties, have a natural feeling for the interaction between multiple ingredients, and how variances such as temperature, for example, can change that reaction or interaction. Even the size and type of cauldron can make a huge difference."

She pondered what he was saying. "But it's a matter of deduction," she started to say, stopping when his lips drew back even further. "And I thought it called for a standard size three pewter cauldron."

A deep chuckle escaped his throat. He looked at her thoughtfully. "Follow me." She followed him down to his office. He opened a drawer and pulled out a roll of parchment.

Hermione looked up at him expectantly.

"This is the list that Reginald and I are considering. It's every seed that we know of which is used in potions." He handed her the roll. "Go to the library and see if you can find any seed we might have missed."

Hermione accepted the roll and smiled. "I'll do my best."

He smiled back at her. "I know you will."

"Hermione," he said as she reached the door. Something in his tone made her turn around and look at him. He was still standing by his desk, his fingers splayed slightly on a pile of books on the corner of it. He looked as if he was about to say something.

"Yes?" she prompted, thinking that he might have forgotten to give her more instruction. Severus frowned a little, but then straightened.

"I'm... sorry that you missed your chance to say goodbye to your friends," he said. Then, he cleared his throat, and his more familiar half-scowl returned, "I'll see you in the Great Hall for lunch. Don't be late."

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*Just for fun; these women are real:*

Agamede, Agnodice, Circe, Medea, Perimede are all ancient Greek women physicians: and are both legendary and mythological Greek women.

Mercuriade was a Medieval Italian physician, surgeon, and medical author in the 14th century. She is one of the few woman physicians known from the middle ages. She was the author of several medical works on "Crisis", on "Pestilent Fever", and of "The Cure of Wounds". The book I mentioned in the chapter, the composite of her works, however, I made up, as well as the fact that she was a witch.

What Hermione and Severus said about Elizabeth Garrett Anderson is fact. However, her being a witch was my own addition for the story.

What Severus said about Agnodice is a fact. The things mentioned about Jacqueline Félicie de Almania is also fact, well with the exception of her treating 'wizardkind', I added that bit for the story. The book I credited her writing is also my invention.

Trotula was another Medieval woman physician, although little is known of Trotula's life, and it's not known exactly when Trotula lived. According to Wikipedia Diseases of Women, Treatments for Women, and Women's Cosmetics are usually referred to collectively as The Trotula. However, there is no evidence that Diseases of Women and Women's Cosmetics were actually written by Trotula; these two texts circulated anonymously until they were combined with Treatments for Women sometime in the thirteenth century. However, Treatments for Women bears Trotula's name.

I found them all while searching on Wikipedia under Ancient Women Physicians and Medieval Women Physicians.

Most surviving texts in the Egyptian language are primarily written in the hieroglyphic script. However, in antiquity, the majority of texts were written on perishable papyrus in hieratic and (later) demotic, which are now lost. However, in this story, the old texts were maintained by the wizards and magical priests and achieved through the ages. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian\\_writing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_writing)

I want to thank Arabella bloodgood, my alpha-reader, and my betas, EverMystique, DuchessOfArcadia, and dandu, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my

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Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

## Débuted and Eluded

Chapter 48 of 63

Hermione makes her formal début, and two more Death Eaters make a move on Hermione only to be thwarted.



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### Débuted and Eluded

After spending all of Sunday and most of her day Monday in the library, searching through piles of potion books for any mention of a seed not on her list, Hermione returned to Severus' room to find Mrs. Malfoy's house-elf, Elbee, waiting for her again, this time laying out the lovely gold dress robe on the bed. The thousands of tiny black crystals on hand-tatted black lace embellishments glittered in the candle light on the lightweight, gold silk brocade and gold taffeta. She picked up the robes and held them up to her as she stared at herself in the mirror on the wardrobe. The off the shoulder, sweetheart v-neck design bodice was very romantic, and the full skirt with its layers trimmed with the same beaded lace was beautiful. She held the skirt out with one hand and turned back and forth, watching the fabric sway. *Yes, like a princess*, she thought as she set the robes back on the bed. She wondered briefly why she was to wear the gold gown instead of the typical white usually worn by debutantes, assuming that it might be because she was already Bonded to Severus.

The house-elf looked nervously at Hermione. "Miss, Elbee is to helps miss dress," she squeaked, wringing her hands. "Does miss not wants Elbee to helps her?"

"No, I appreciate the help," Hermione said as she silently undressed, then donned the garments that the elf handed her. Mrs. Malfoy had sent cream knickers with ivory lace, a matching strapless brassiere that, despite appearances, was remarkably comfortable, a cream garter and silk stockings. Hermione glanced at herself in the mirror, thinking, *Severus is going to simply love this* ruefully as the house-elf held the robes open for her. She lifted her arms again, and with a snap of the elf's fingers, the robes slid into place.

After the house-elf finished her makeup and hair, she helped Hermione don her elbow-length, black gloves and put on the jewelry.

Hermione turned to look at herself in the mirror. The robes fit her perfectly, as if custom tailored just for her. Her hair had been tamed into a perfect coif, an elegant but complicated upswept hairdo of curls and twists with dozens of black crystal pins. Mrs. Malfoy's antique, Victorian bohemian garnet necklace and earrings, with its clusters and dangles, were pretty but far more elaborate than she'd have chosen. The heavy makeup made her skin look flawlessly smooth, like porcelain, hiding even the light freckles on her nose and the tiny scars on her forehead and jaw. The house-elf had emphasized her eyes, bringing out the gold and amber hues, and her mouth... Elbee had once again transformed her into a living doll. Picture perfect. Cinderella made ready for the ball. *Then why do I feel more like Narcissa's Barbie than Cinderella?*

She sighed. *Why is all this necessary, being paraded around the pure-blood elite? Just eight or nine months ago, none of these people would have accepted me. They'd have spat in my face and called me a Mudblood.*

"Hermione?" Severus asked from the doorway. "Are you ready?"

She turned slowly to face him. He was dressed in his best black robes again, holding their traveling cloaks on one arm, and his posture and natural grace made him appear every bit the elegant gentleman. She squared her shoulders and straightened her posture so that she had the same air he did. "I'm ready," she replied.

"You look lovely," he said as he held her cloak open for her.

She smiled at him, hoping that it didn't appear forced. "Thank you," she replied, mentally sighing at the endearment as she turned to allow him to drape the heavy fabric on her shoulders. Of course she looked lovely; once again Elbee had done her best to make her so, but it was a mask, a façade. With the heavy makeup, ostentatious jewelry, elaborate robes and the intricate hair style, Hermione had never felt less like herself.

He stepped aside to allow her to leave first, and she led the way to his office. He opened his office door, allowing her to descend the stairs to the corridor, like a perfect gentleman, then held his arm so she could place her hand on it as they descended the stairs, but he was quiet. Hermione followed along, wondering to herself what her friends were doing: if Neville was home yet, if Harry and Ginny were at the Burrow tonight, if Veronica and Alestra were with their boyfriends...

She squared her shoulders when they arrived at the gates and allowed Severus to Apparate them to their destination.

\*

The Moncrieff's home was a large brick, eighteenth century house with graceful, park-like gardens. The parlor she had been led to was a showcase of elegance and money: dark, rich red on the walls with golden-cream crown molding and wainscoting, huge Oriental rugs on the floor and gold brocade drapes. The elegant Chippendale and Hepplewhite furniture was upholstered in expensive Italian fabrics.

Mrs. Malfoy had written a lengthy letter to Hermione, explaining the events of the evening. Guests arrived at six-thirty for hors d'oeuvres; the debutants had been bustled upstairs upon arrival and gathered together until seven o'clock when the girls' sponsors would 'make her application for presentation' to 'the court.' It gave Hermione time to get a bit more acquainted with several of the other girls, including Astoria Greengrass, who was likewise being introduced to society by the Malfoys even though Astoria was already engaged to Draco. Hermione had been thrilled to see Luna among the girls to be presented and greatly appreciated Luna's calm, serene disposition. It seemed that Hermione's exploits were well known to the girls, and she and Luna both found themselves answering questions and retelling stories about their adventures.

At seven-fifteen when the girls were lined up for their formal introductions to the court, which were a collection of elderly matrons of the elite wizarding society, Hermione collected herself and prepared to meet each woman with as much politeness as she could. However, her fears of being snubbed by these witches proved to be unfounded. Only three were politely cool toward her. Mrs. Burke had a serene but accepting smile when Mrs. Malfoy reintroduced them, and Mrs. Moncrieff herself expressed a warm regard "for such a brave young lady to have taken on the Dark Lord and survived." Hermione avoided Mrs. Malfoy's eye when she thanked the lady.

Mrs. Tulloch, Mrs. Robards, Mrs. Lodwick, and Mrs. Burkwald asked her about her creation of the spell that had saved Severus' life and were delighted to hear that she and Ginny would be validating his other potion discoveries. Mrs. Gabnold, Mrs. Nordquist, Mrs. Oswald, and Mrs. Parish had been astounded that the stories they'd heard about Hermione's involvement in the Gringotts break in were true and that she'd actually ridden a dragon to Scotland.

Mrs. Hopkirk and Mrs. Gumboil asked Hermione if she had any interest in magical law after finishing school, and Mrs. Hammond inquired if she would possibly like to consider International Magical Cooperation under her husband and offered to make introductions if she did. Hermione thanked her and said that she'd think about it. Mrs. Longbottom, Mrs. Gottlieb, and Mrs. Donovan greeted Hermione warmly: Mrs. Donovan asking how she was getting along in school and Mrs. Longbottom asking how her situation with Severus was working out.

At eight o'clock, the girls were lined up to be escorted down the grand staircase into the grand ball room. "How are you holding up?" Severus asked as he handed Hermione a flute of sparkling greyish-peach... something while they waited to be introduced. "It has a few potions in it, to help with nerves as well as to keep you from getting inebriated, so it might taste a bit strange," he warned her.

"Thank you." Hermione drank the contents quickly, eliciting a chuckle from him.

"Not at all, but a word of caution, sip the champagne from now on," he said softly with a smirk.

"I promise," she replied, not wanting a repeat of her experience after her last party, and slightly irritated by his patronizing attitude. A wizard in a white coat took her glass and told to take her place at the top of the stairs.

Severus tucked her arm in his with a smile. "You'll be fine," he assured her. When it was her turn to descend the stairs, a wizard with a booming voice announced, "Hermione Jean Snape," complete with her titles and honors.

As they took their position on the dance floor, Hermione was grateful that Severus was such an assured lead, and she relaxed in his arms as they moved around the dance floor. Since she and Severus were Bonded, she was able to spend the first set of dances with him, instead of being passed around to all the eligible wizards, which was a comfort.

Mr. Malfoy approached them when Severus finally led Hermione off the dance floor. Mr. Malfoy handed Hermione a flute of blush-peach sparkling wine, saying, "Its Moncrieff's own vintage. It's renowned among the wizarding world."

Hermione accepted the glass and took a tiny sip. The delicate flavors that danced on her tongue were incredible.

"May I say that you look absolutely lovely, my dear," he said smoothly, and she forced herself from rolling her eyes. After all, his wife had chosen the ensemble, and he'd paid for it, but she still felt like she was gussied up on display for the Malfoys' benefit. Severus smirked slightly, standing proudly.

She had been about to thank him when he added, "I would love the pleasure of a dance."

Hermione took a sip as she watched the guests, wanting to decline, but knew that since he was technically one of her sponsors, she couldn't refuse. "Of course, Mr. Malfoy, I'd be delighted," she said as politely as she could. She accepted his hand and followed him to the dance floor.

"How are you enjoying the ball?" he asked.

Hermione forced a smile. "It's lovely," she replied.

"But not exactly your forte?" he asked. He was strong and assured, and Hermione found that she could relax and trust his lead.

"Only a year ago many of these people wouldn't have given me the time of day," she said honestly.

He smirked at her. "You don't give yourself much credit."

"But I'll never be one of them," she replied. *Pure-bloods the Death Eaters?* He tilted his head. "It's that I'm from a middleclass Muggle family, not the social elite, and everyone here are pure-bloods, aren't they?"

He laughed softly. "Not all of them, but the vast majority are. Even though we behave much like the bourgeoisie, many of the higher Department Heads at the Ministry and many notable wizards in their fields are generally invited to most of our functions."

She was about to ask, 'which functions,' when he added, "Your accomplishments alone have gained you the respect of everyone here, Hermione, and as Narcissa and I have tried to tell you, your Bonding with Severus promotes your position, if not their approval. You really should spend some time with Narcissa; she can explain the intricacies of the pure-blood society to you."

"I'll consider it," Hermione said, looking past his shoulder at the couples dancing near them. *So the Death Eaters were not all from the social elite?* She thought of Alec and Amycus Carrow, who Neville referred to as pikeys, or Antonin Dolohov with his long, pale, twisted face, or the brutal-faced Sherman Yaxley... *Surely none of them would fit in with this crowd.* She wondered briefly if the Lestranges ever did. "Maybe we can talk when I visit next... or after the holidays."

The music stopped. "You will be welcomed in my home anytime, Hermione," he said with a slight bow. He held her hand up in his as he led her in Severus' direction. He stopped and turned to face her. "I now regret the misfortune of our previous associations, and I know you have reservations toward me and my family. I well know they are deserved. However, please believe me when I say that I would like very much to set that behind us and begin anew."

Hermione regarded him, watching his eyes for any sign of Slytherin concealment or deceit and found his expression one of open sincerity. "Draco said something similar... *Maybe Ginny's right,* she thought, still staring Mr. Malfoy in the eye. She saw Severus approach with a sense of relief. "I think... I'd like to try."

His lips started to curve into a smirk that widened into a smile, and Hermione turned to see what he was smiling at. A thin wizard with a thin twisted moustache and wearing a monocle approached whom Hermione remembered from the Burke's party. "Ah, Hermione, may I reintroduce you Mr. Byron Ingoldsby," Mr. Malfoy said.

Mr. Ingoldsby greeted both Severus and Mr. Malfoy and then asked Severus for the pleasure of a dance with Hermione. Severus responded for her, and Hermione found herself dancing with a man who was stiff as wood and seemed to thrust and push her around the dance floor instead of guiding her like either Severus or Mr. Malfoy had.

After dancing with Severus again, Mr. Malfoy introduced her to several men of the social elite, including many of the husbands of the women she'd met earlier and many of the higher department heads of the Ministry. Hermione had been amazed by the fluidity in which Severus socialized with these people. In many ways he blended in, indistinguishable from the pure-blood elite; his posture identical to the majority of the men at the party, his quiet and reserved nature, in these surroundings, coming across as confidence rather than indifference as he conversed politely.

It was very early in the morning when Severus and Hermione returned to the castle. As she predicted, Severus was very appreciative of the cream and ivory lingerie, although being as exhausted as she, he was too tired to do much but hold her once they climbed into bed.

They rose late and enjoyed a light breakfast in bed the next morning. "What are your plans today?" she asked as she plucked a cherry from her breakfast pastry.

"Unfortunately, I have staff meetings all day, one of which I am late for," he said, leaning over to lick a bit of jam from her lips that turned into a leisurely kiss. "Not that I have time for this."

Hermione giggled. "Who's stopping you?" she asked, grinning.

"Minx," he snapped, smiling in return.

"Severus, do you really associate with all those people?" she asked, exchanging her pastry for her teacup. At his questioning frown, she added, "From the party."

"Not socially, no, except when required to do so if it's related to the school somehow or if they want something from me," he said with a smirk. He set his plate aside and leaned over to kiss her again. "Introductions, Hermione, are never for 'nothing'. I suspect that you'll choose a field in which you are able to change the world or make great discoveries," he said, still smirking at her as he rose and walked to the wardrobe. "Your contacts with the social elite will help you with whatever endeavor you take on, if not just financially."

"I don't like using people for their money," she stated, affronted by his statement.

He turned to face her as he buttoned up his shirt. "Did you or did you not try to raise student awareness your fifth year to the plight of house-elves?" he asked. He was apparently using a nonverbal charm of some sort to do up his buttons, because they seemed to fasten themselves as he moved his fingers over them.

"You knew about that?" she asked, blushing at the example, watching him tuck his shirt into his trousers.

"Of course. As ignorant as your assumptions were, you wanted to right a wrong," he stated as he sat on the edge of the bed to put on his boots. "You've even tried to champion me. I'm sure there will be another cause you'll want to undertake."

"You make me sound like a crusader," she groaned.

He turned to look at her with his hand on his knee. "You stand up for what you believe in," he said and walked to the wardrobe to get his coat. "I'm late," he announced, pulling on his frockcoat. "What are your plans today?"

"I thought I'd work on your list," she replied, watching his fingers as he did up the buttons. He was so quick, so agile, it had to be a charm of some sort.

"How is that coming?" he asked.

Hermione set her cup aside, and Mispy appeared to remove the tray. "I haven't found anything to add to the list. I have been making notations on how they are prepared, cut, sliced, ground and such, and quantity, but I haven't seen any potion requiring one thousand seeds. You were right, they are generally measured in large quantities, and I haven't seen any number larger than fifty mentioned."

He pulled on his robes. "If you've exhausted all the books in the Potions section, you may use your time for something else," he said. He came over and sat on the bed next to her.

She hadn't exhausted all the books yet, not all the ones in the Restricted Section.

"Or you may use our Floo to go visit your friends," he suggested.

Hermione smiled at the suggestion. She weighed her options. "No, I'll get started on my holiday homework. We'll be seeing my friends the day after tomorrow anyway."

"Don't remind me," he sneered halfheartedly.

Contrary to what she'd told Severus, Hermione spent her day poring through Potions books. At lunch, Severus sat with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, deep in conversation about something apparently serious, and not altogether pleasant, considering the way Professor McGonagall kept pursing her lips, the way Professor Flitwick's brow creased as he shook his head, and the scowl on Severus' face. Hermione had sat with Hagrid and the few students remaining at Hogwarts. Hagrid, who absolutely loved dragons, led a fascinating discussion about the creatures.

After lunch Severus had parchmentwork he had to finish, so Hermione went to see Hagrid and was surprised to see Professors Flitwick and McGonagall sitting at his table. "Hermione!" Hagrid exclaimed with a huge smile. "I didn't know ya were going with us."

"Going with you?" she asked and greeted her professors.

"I have an order to pick up at the bookshop, and Filius needs to take the pillows for his lessons to be restuffed," Professor McGonagall said, indicating the huge box on Hagrid's bed.

"Oh, well, I would like to go," she said and glanced at Hagrid, "if you think it would be all right. I would like to get something for Severus. I haven't been able to shop without him, er..."

"...hovering over you," Professor Flitwick finished for her with a grin. "I'm sure that it would be fine if you came with us." He jumped down from his seat. "Well, shall we go?"

"My money," Hermione said, ready to run back up to the Headmaster's tower to get her wallet.

"I'm sure the merchants will accept a payment voucher," Professor McGonagall said, collecting her gloves and cloak. "If not, you may pay me back for anything you wish to buy within reason, of course."

Hermione smiled and thanked her. On their last shopping trip, Severus had signed a payment voucher but, as far as she knew, students were seldom allowed to. She had a good idea how much money she had left in her trunk, so if she were frugal she'd be all right.

The walk down to the village and the leisurely stroll through the shops was delightful for Hermione. Hagrid wanted to look through the secondhand store, and Professor Flitwick required new quills and ink. In the secondhand shop, Hermione bought a pair of lovely butterfly hair combs for Luna, and in the window of Wise Wizard's Wear, gentleman's robes for all occasions, she found a nice pair of dragon hide gloves for Severus and two wizard traveling cases she purchased for Harry and Ron. The cases were the size of a cigar box with compartments for all sorts of items, which would be perfect if they had to travel as Aurors. By enhancing a few of the spells, she could make them hold as much as her beaded purse had. In the stationery shop, she bought pretty silver and crystal inkwells for Alestra, Wendlynne, Veronica, and Sunita. However, she hadn't wanted to get Severus nor Mr. Prince quills, ink, or stationery; Severus had plenty of that, and she didn't know if Mr. Prince needed any.

Professors Flitwick and McGonagall both wanted to spend some time in the bookshop, which made Hermione smile, so Hagrid went to the Magizootological Emporium. Hermione searched the shelves for something Mr. Prince might like, but she really didn't know him well enough to know his tastes in literature.

"I'm surprised you don't find him easy to shop for," Professor McGonagall said casually, levitating a book from a lower shelf so she didn't need to bend over.

"I'm not sure what he'd like," Hermione replied, putting *Magical Transmutation of Common Metals* by Arthur Helmont back on the shelf with a frown, then taking *Exoteric Practical Applications In Magic And It's Esoteric Aspects* by Abelard Ashmole out. "What do you get a man who seems to have everything he needs and requires so little?" She was staying away from the shelves that carried the older tomes and first editions since she was trying to watch her spending. She already had two books that she

thought Severus might like; one on Chinese Herbology and another, *The Alchemical Philosophy of Transmutation of Elements of the Hellenistic Greeks* that she found fascinating. She was hard pressed to choose, really wanting to buy both, even if she kept the Alchemy book for herself.

"He has many interests, Hermione," Professor McGonagall said, sending the book she had looked at back to its place on the shelf.

Hermione looked at her quizzically, then smiled when she realized they were speaking of two different men. "Oh, not Severus; I mean Mr. Prince, Severus' great-grandfather." Professor McGonagall looked at her in surprise. "Severus and I are spending tomorrow with him. I want to get him something, but I have no idea what."

Professor McGonagall's expression turned contemplative. "Where does he live?"

"In the Yorkshire Dales," Hermione said while putting the book by Abelard Ashmole back on the shelf.

"I may have an idea," Professor McGonagall said with a thoughtful smile. "If you're ready to go, I'd like to show you one of my favorite shops."

Hermione nodded, smiling at the prospect as she scrambled to her feet, clutching her three books to her chest. "I'm ready."

After they made payment arrangements for their books, Professor McGonagall requested that they be sent to the castle under her name and told Professor Flitwick where they were going. She led Hermione out of the shop to a quaint Scottish shop. Professor McGonagall showed Hermione a display case holding several ornate, shallow cups made of stone, brass, wood, horn, and silver. Each cup had two or three small, flat handles projecting horizontally from opposite sides of the rim. "These are Scottish friendship cups otherwise known as a quaiche. It has been given as a gift for hundreds of years by Scotts to signify a bond of friendship with dear friends or to represent love. It's sometimes called the loving cup," her professor explained as the shopkeeper walked over to them.

They were pretty, the Celtic carving and knot work designs made them look special and the significance of the cup was perfect. "I think I'd like that silver one," Hermione said, and the shopkeeper smiled as he removed it from the case. It was lovely and the price, while a bit more than she'd expected, was within her means.

Professor McGonagall paid for the cup Hermione chose and had it sent to the castle. "Pay me back when we return," she said, handing Hermione the receipt.

Out on the street, Professor McGonagall asked her about her and Severus' plans for the holiday. Hermione was surprised that her professor thought they would be staying at the Malfoys' until New Year; but then Severus had moved her things into the Headmaster's suite without so much as informing her. "No, we'll be spending most of our time in Manchester," she said, explaining that they were only staying at the Malfoys' for two nights and part of Boxing Day.

~M~

Maggie could hardly believe her eyes; Professor Minerva McGonagall and Hermione Granger-Snape were leaving the adorable Scottish shop owned by Gregor MacFerguson and his lovely wife, Igraine. *Oh, of all the luck!*

Just as Maggie was about to wave at Mrs. Granger-Snape to get her attention, and hopefully ask the girl if she and her Bonded mate would please reconsider signing her Bonding confirmations, Professor McGonagall turned to the girl and said, "Severus indicated that you would be staying at the Malfoys' until New Year."

Maggie inhaled in astonishment. *The Malfoys through New Years. Everyone knows they are hosting those Quidditch player alumni from Durmstrang! Oh, what were their names?* Not that Maggie expected an invitation to either of the Malfoys' parties, but she knew that the famous international Quidditch player Viktor Krum would be there, as well as the Chudley Cannons new player from Portugal, Bartolomeu Gonçalves.

However, the girl turned her head before Maggie could catch her eye. "No, we'll be spending most of our time in Manchester," she said and waved at Professor Flitwick across the street.

*No matter, Maggie thought, I'll simply ingratiate myself with the...*

Suddenly, a sickly pale, grayish-lime-green streak of light hit the wall of the shop next to Maggie, and she pulled back against the shop in terror. *Death Eaters!* Maggie saw both Professor McGonagall and Mrs. Granger-Snape draw their wands as they backed into the space between the nearest shops as two more spell fire blasts hit the walls of the shops behind them.

"Did you see where it came from?" Mrs. Granger-Snape asked nervously as Maggie recoiled, screaming in fear. Maggie cowered, her panicked mind searching for a way out...

"There. Brown robes, by the goat sallow," Professor McGonagall said, pointing with her wand. Down the street from her, Maggie saw Professor Flitwick had his wand drawn and was firing a spell at the place Professor McGonagall pointed out.

"Stay behind me, Hermione; Filius and I will handle this," Professor McGonagall said.

"But I can help," Mrs. Granger-Snape replied while Maggie fought back tears of panic as she hurried through the nearest door, just as the cracks and explosions of spellfire filled the street and shattered the widow of the shop.

"Hermione, get back," Maggie heard Professor Hagrid bellow from the street, and Mrs. Granger-Snape turned, just in time to use her shield to deflect a jet of bright red aimed at her. Maggie watched in spellbound horror as the girl defended herself in the street. Never had Maggie believed how skilled a fighter the swot was until this very moment.

"He's aiming for *you*, Hermione," Professor McGonagall said as she and Mrs. Granger-Snape sent hexes at the space between the shops where the curses were coming from. At the same time, Professor Flitwick lunged forward and rolled so he ended up kneeling, facing the gap between the shops, then fired his own spell. The Death Eater jumped out from the cover of the shops, firing curses as branches from the goat sallow went flying into the street; he fired at Professor McGonagall and Hermione again, taking Professor Flitwick's spell in the chest.

"Hermione, get back," Hagrid bellowed from down the street.

"Ma'am, come away from the window," a shop assistant said, trying to pull Maggie back into the shop and away from the gaping hole that had once contained glass.

She couldn't move; her own memory of the night her home had been attacked by Death Eaters warred with the sight unfolding before her. Junior Aurors and Aurors-in-training in their sharp, blue tunic uniforms arrived, and other wizards, Aurors perhaps. Harry Potter appeared, his wand blazing with one spell fired after another. Between him and the girl, Mrs. Granger-Snape, they were an amazing and horrible sight to see. The fighting was over in minutes, but to Maggie it seemed an hour. Harry Potter approached Mrs. Granger-Snape, and they ran toward Professor Hagrid and another dark-haired Auror Trainee.

"Ma'am, I must insist," the young man said, gently guiding Maggie away from the broken windows.

She allowed him to guide her, her thoughts tormented by the scene she'd witnessed. Her hand shook so that she nearly spilled the tea in the teacup she hadn't realized she held or recalled accepting. She could still recall the green, yellow, purple, and red spell lights, hear the screams of her family and the smells... so much like what had wafted in through the shop's window.

A wizard in a blue tunic uniform asked her if she was all right, and offered to escort her home. "My home?" she asked, remembering how the Death Eaters had demolished the side of her home as her mum pulled Maggie into the Vanishing cabinet to escape... *Her father lying on the floor by the remains of the Floo... The green flames fading to*



*light orange and yellow fire...*

"Ma'am, are you all right?" the nice young shop assistant asked.

"No yes. I'm... Home. My... da," Maggie muttered as she nervously wondered if the Dark Mark was floating in the sky above Hogsmeade. Another huge tear rolled down her cheek.

~H~

Hermione saw Cho Chang running a few paces behind him, and another man Hermione didn't know was running toward Cho, taking aim. Hermione fired a Leg-locker and a Stunner in lightening quick succession at the man chasing Cho, pleased that her Stunner hit its mark and the wizard went down before his curses hit her. Behind her, Hermione heard Professor McGonagall call out to Professor Flitwick to see if the man by the Goat sallow was incapacitated.

"He's immobilized and securely tied, Minerva," Professor Flitwick shouted back.

Down the street, Hermione saw Cho cast a binding spell at the wizard Hagrid was wrestling to the ground and then she pulled something from her pocket and spoke to it.

Beside her, Professor McGonagall said, "*Periculum*," aiming her wand at the sky. Red sparks shot into the air. The pops of Apparition filled the street, and shouts from the arriving Aurors and Auror trainees could be heard all around them.

More Aurors suddenly appeared. "Hermione, are you all right?" Harry asked, running up to her, his wand in hand.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied, pointing at the guy on the ground in the middle of the street. "I stunned him, and the professors captured someone back there, next to the Goat sallow."

Harry turned and groaned. "That's Auror Raphael Sparks; he's Cho's training instructor."

Hermione's shoulders slumped as she realized her mistake.

"It's all right; he's only stunned, right?" he asked as he tried to draw her aside, out of the middle of the street. "Let's get you back to the castle, shall we?"

"But who are they and why did they attack us?" she asked, moving quickly toward Hagrid and Cho instead. Cho and two other Auror trainees were pulling the tightly bound wizard into a sitting position.

Harry approached Cho. "The other one got away. But this is Gene Bulstrode, Harry," she replied when he asked. "He's on the suspect list. He's friends with Wallace Avery and Flavius Mulciber and the late Evander Pucey, but we've never been able to find any evidence that he was a Death Eater."

One of the trainees Hermione recognized, Imelda Drake, a Hufflepuff from Fred and George's year, pulled Bulstrode's sleeve up and cast a complicated revealing charm. "No Dark Mark. Possibly a supporter."

Aurors Hayward Blume and Ralph Lerman approached, followed by Professors Flitwick and McGonagall. "Wilmont Griswold," Blume said to the trainees, "and he had the Dark Mark."

Harry rubbed Hermione's arm when she inhaled sharply at the news. "His daughter is in Gryffindor... sixth year. They own an inn in Fort William by the Loch Linnhe. She invited me to go..."

"Well, I hope you've decided to decline," Cho said, her smile not concealing her concern. "You all right, Hermione?"

She nodded as Professor McGonagall said, "She's fine, but I'd best get her to the school. If you need us, please feel free to come to the castle. Miss Cho, Mr. Potter, Miss Drake, thank you very much for your assistance. It's good to see you. Hermione."

"Might be best if we get the account now while it's fresh in your minds," Auror Blume suggested. "Since Sparks is going to St. Mungo's to get checked out, I'll proctor Miss Chang."

Professor McGonagall nodded, giving her consent. Auror Blume walked back to the castle with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall as Hagrid and Hermione walked up the hill behind them, talking with Cho and Harry. They all went into a classroom on the ground floor, and Professor McGonagall transfigured the old desks into a table and chairs.

~S~

"What happened?" Severus demanded as he burst into the room, his robes billowing behind him.

Hermione jumped up and ran to him. "We were attacked in Hogsmeade, Severus."

He grabbed her by her arms, his gaze sweeping over her as he asked, "Are you hurt?"

"No. I'm fine," Hermione said to reassure him. "Professors McGonagall and Flitwick got one of them, and Hagrid and Cho got the other, but the third one escaped."

Harry quickly told Severus what had happened. Severus relaxed slightly, but put his arm around Hermione as he turned to face her friend. "Thank you, Po-Harry."

"You're welcome, Severus," Harry replied, then added, "We're going to take statements," as he turned to Cho. Hermione sat back down, knowing how thorough the trainees were in their investigations.

Cho was very professional and concise with her questions, taking down Professor Flitwick's, then Professor McGonagall's statements. When it was her turn, Hermione told Cho what she knew and precisely what she did and saw. Finally, Cho questioned Hagrid on his account of the attack and then wrapped up her questions. Blume checked everyone's wands with the *Priori Incantato* to verify what spells were used as Cho wrote them down.

Once Cho was done, Hagrid stood up, his chair scraping on the stone floor. "I'll see everyone to the gates, Headmaster," Hagrid said, looking hopefully at Harry.

Professor McGonagall leaned toward Hermione. "Come up to my office when you have a moment," she said softly and rose. Severus eyed her suspiciously as the elderly woman approached Cho and Auror Blume.

"Hermione," Severus growled softly as Hermione went to thank Hagrid for the afternoon and for helping to save her life.

In the Entrance Hall, Severus scowled as Hermione stopped to hug Harry. "Thank you for coming," she said in his ear.

"It's my job, but I'm glad you're okay," he said and then whispered, "Don't let him berate you too much; it wasn't your fault."

She hugged him tighter and then backed away. "Tell Ginny and Ron hello for me."

"I will. See you tomorrow," he said and left.

Hermione watched everyone leave and turned to walk up the stairs with Severus and Professor McGonagall, both women chatting away and ignoring his dark expression.

When Hermione and Severus entered his office, Severus turned on her. "What in the hell were you doing in Hogsmeade? You were supposed to be in the library!" he snarled.

"Hagrid and Professors McGonagall and Flitwick were going, and they invited me along." Hermione tried to pull out the chair in front of his desk to sit and realized that her arm felt strange... numb. "I thought it would be fine. Get some last minute gifts for Christmas... and something for Mr. Prince," she replied, staring at her hand as she flexed and extended her fingers and rolled her wrist.

"What's wrong with your hand?" he asked, his anger making his question sound sharp.

"It feels... asleep... and my fingers feel... thick," she said, trying to grip the chair again. Her hand responded as it should but her grip felt weak and her hand numb.

He walked over and gently took her hand in his. He drew his wand and then did a simple nerve conduction test. "Take your jumper off," he insisted.

"Not in here," she refused, rolling her eyes toward the portraits.

"Fine," he snapped, turning her forcefully so she faced the stairs. "Go up to the room and strip out of your top there."

She decided not to argue with him. As soon as she entered the bedroom, she pulled off her jumper and removed her blouse, fighting back her nervousness under his glare, and was surprised to see a huge red welt on her upper arm.

He cast a detection spell on the welt and shook his head. "Your arm was grazed by one of the curses," he stated.

Aideen cooed at them from her perch.

"Who hit you? Did you see the spell light?" Severus asked, examining her skin closely.

"I don't know. I only saw a few. Two a sickly green, two or three were a bright red, a purple and a yellow one," she said, watching him with concern, "but I deflected those easily enough."

Aideen fluffed her new plumage, her brilliant golds and reds so similar to her sire, and trilled.

Severus turned his head. "Quiet down," he admonished the bird softly, but there was little ire in his voice. "What other spell sign did you see other than the color?"

The young phoenix scooted closer to the edge of her nest and spread her wings as she trilled again.

Severus lowered his wand and approached the bird. "You have something to impart on the situation?" he asked the phoenix, and Aideen bobbed her head, stretching her neck toward Hermione. "You want to go to Hermione?" he asked, holding his arm for Aideen to mount. Hermione approached, and Aideen tried to reach out to her.

Hermione moved closer, intrigued that the young phoenix wanted to see the welt as well. As she turned so that the bird could see the welt on her arm, Aideen cooed, straining again for a closer look. Finally Hermione realized what the bird really wanted and moved closer. Aideen hopped up onto Hermione's shoulder, angled her head and small pearlescent tears fell from her eyes and dripped off her beak onto Hermione's arm. The sensation was both cool and warm at the same time as the tears absorbed into her skin. Her arm tingled, spreading up her shoulder as well as down her arm to her fingertips in seconds, and her whole arm felt stronger and warm.

Aideen reached out her foot to Severus, and he extended his arm for the young phoenix with a look of awed amazement. She settled back on Severus' arm and cooed softly, the sound of pure contentment. He gazed at her in dumfounded wonder.

"I didn't know she was mature enough to shed healing tears," Hermione said in amazement.

"Nor did I." Severus stroked Aideen lovingly, making the bird coo even more. He looked up at Hermione. "How does your arm feel?"

"Never better," she replied, testing the strength of her hand. Even the welt had disappeared. "Thank you, Aideen."

The young phoenix fluffed her feathers and looked longingly at her stand. Laughing softly, Severus returned her to her nest. "She hasn't even taken her first flight yet," he said in awe, his voice rich with emotion.

Hermione walked up and put her arms around him. "Severus, tell me about Aideen," she asked. "How did you come by her?"

"The nest and the stand were gifted to me as well as a few of Dumbledore's belongings in his will," he said, looking at the small phoenix. "I even have a set of the old man's robes."

He took Hermione's hand and sat on the bed, indicating she sit between his legs, and held her tight. "Fawkes knew his human familiar was dying; he tried using his tears several times on the old man's cursed hand, to no avail. The tears would help the pain and heal the hand and forearm temporarily, but never completely. As the curse spread up the Headmaster's arm, even the tears stopped helping well, except for the pain. Finally, Fawkes began flying everyday to get the materials for his funeral nest. Dumbledore had planted the necessary Boswellia and Commiphora myrrha in one of the greenhouses. Boswellia resin, as you know, produces true frankincense. Fawkes also collected oak twigs, grasses, and strands of unicorn hairs from the Forbidden Forest. His last combustion created a deep layer of ashes in his nest for his entombment," he explained.

"So you added your tears to the nest and lit the ashes to bring forth the new bird," she said softly, hugging his arms around her middle. "That's why you were crying that day."

He nodded and rested his chin on her shoulder. After a long pause he said, "I don't want you leaving the castle without me. I don't want you hurt."

She twisted around so she could face him. "I thought that with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall with me that I had enough protection. Besides, except for the graze on my arm, everything went all right."

"Yes, but you were lucky. Professor Flitwick is still as agile as ever, but Professor McGonagall is not as spry as she once was. Umbridge's attack your fifth year and this war has taken its toll on her, and Hagrid hasn't got a proper wand." He tightened his arms and held her close. "You take too many risks. You let your guard down too easily. You must stop being so naïve and trusting." He leaned back to look her in the eyes. "Bloody hell, girl, you survived two battles and a war and you never learned to be aware of your surroundings?"

"Three battles of the same war," she said, trying to lighten the mood, but flinched at his scowl. She knew he was right, but she'd honestly believed she'd be fine.

Severus kissed her temple. "Even a graze on your arm can turn bad, Hermione. The magic of the curse made contact, and many curses can fester, spread and even gain strength by drawing from your own magic to consume you. Never assume a graze, indirect glance, or a rebounded curse's graze makes a difference. It still must be tended to."

"I know that, but I didn't feel the spell's contact at all." She laid her head on his shoulder. "I just don't want to live my life paranoid like Mad-Eye Moody did and blast at shadows or alley cats or anything I see moving."

He turned her face toward his with his fingertips. "You're too sensible to turn into someone like Alastor Moody," he said softly and kissed her.

The soft flutter of his lips on hers sent a tingle through her, and she shifted so that she could wrap one arm around his neck and kiss him back. His arms tightened, and he nipped softly on her lower lip, then gently caressed the soft flesh with his lips. She closed her eyes, allowing the strength of his lean body to support hers, and ran her fingers through his hair. She inhaled deeply, loving combination of spices and his scent.

The soft teasing turned sensual, and his breath tickled and warmed her cheek as his mouth melded with hers. She opened her mouth slightly, and his head shifted, his tongue seeking entrance. Hermione stroked his tongue with hers, turning in his arms so that her other arm could slide around his body, and she clung to him. He chuckled, guiding her to move her legs so that she now straddled his thighs.

With a wicked grin, she pushed him onto his back, never losing contact with those incredible lips. Her hair framed them both as she took over the kiss, enjoying having him lying beneath her. One of his hands tightened in her hair, holding her securely but not too tightly, and the other grasped her hips as he responded to her kisses, matching her movements with equal ardor.

She stroked his face, trailing her fingers down his cheek, jaw and down his neck, but he froze and hissed when her fingers grazed his scar. "Does it still hurt?" she asked, pulling back.

"No," he said, crushing her to him as he rolled on the bed so that they now lay facing each other. He leaned forward to kiss her, but she withdrew in concern. "Sometimes," he said, staring at her. "Sometimes when something touches it, it feels odd tingles. It's nothing."

She pushed his hair from his face and slid one finger down his cheek to his chin as she stared at him.

"What?"

"Just looking," she replied, still staring at him as she slid her finger across his lower lip. He kissed her finger as it passed, which made her smile.

"Hermione, I hate being stared at," he said, twitching his head so that his hair fell freely again.

She tried to push his hair behind his ear, but he angled his head to prevent her. "Why don't you ever tie your hair back?" she asked.

"I hate my ears," he replied, leaning down to kiss her. She ran her hand through his hair, pushing it back again. "Hermione," he growled silkily.

"I love it when you do that," she replied, and Aideon cooed softly from her nest.

"Do what precisely," he growled out slowly, rolling each word so it came out like smooth velvet.

"Growl like that," she said, just the inflections of his voice made her breath hitch and her heartbeat speed up. Her leg slid up his so that her groin pressed on his thigh, and her arm tightened around him, pulling him closer as if on their own accord in response to his voice. "It's so sexy."

He smirked. "The sound of my voice is sexy?" he asked, melodically enunciating each word.

"Yes!" she said, leaning up to kiss him.

His mouth met hers, and he pressed her back into the mattress. "Good," he said and nipped at her lips. She tried to nip him back, but he sniped at her and caught her mouth with his, crushing her slightly in a sensual kiss that left her breathless. His kiss intensified, becoming firmer and consuming, until she was literally writhing beneath him. "Minx," he growled, his hand grasping her so that he pinned her down. "I still have work to finish before we can leave tomorrow."

"What's stopping you?" she asked cheekily, knowing full well she was having as much of an affect on him as he was on her.

He pushed himself up so he leaned over her. "You are." He kissed her nose. "Now be good, stay ~~inside~~ the castle and let me finish my work."

She sighed as he shoved himself off her and climbed off the bed.

~S~

Severus walked to his office with a smirk firmly in place. Things couldn't be better. He loved the fact that she had pushed him back onto the bed and kissed him. If he didn't honestly have a ton of work to finish before he could leave the castle, he'd have let her have her way to see how far she'd have taken things. Or he'd have undressed her and had her ride him, just to see her taking her pleasure from him. In fact he would, tonight. The idea made his already engorged penis twitch with anticipation.

But there was all the end-of-term parchmentwork to finish for the school governors, as well as the necessary papers from the Apparition Testing and Guidelines office for the Apparition lessons that would begin next term, and the inquiry sent from the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures regarding the new regulations for the school's animal paddocks. That, and Madam Hooch still insisted that the schools brooms needed replacing. *The joys of being Headmaster.*

It was always one thing after another.

At least he didn't have imbeciles to teach or plagiarized papers full of grammatical and spelling errors to grade.

~ T B C ~>

~~~~~oOo~~~~~

*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes who added a bit of British flare to my dialogue, and my beta, DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Christmas Eve

Chapter 49 of 63

Severus and Hermione have Christmas Eve dinner with Talfryn Prince and then go to Grimmauld Place. However,



~~~~~o 49 o~~~~~

## Christmas Eve

Mispy scurried around the room, busily packing up Severus' things into a wizard traveling case while Hermione stared at her clothes to decide what she should take with her. She only needed to pack enough for two nights, and possibly three days, but those two nights included Christmas parties: Harry's and the Malfoys', and dinner with Mr. Prince. Hermione stood silently and stared at the clothes laid out on the bed. Christmas morning at Harry's would be casual she could wear the jeans and her Weasley jumper she'd already pulled out, or her red blouse... The royal purple taffeta dress robes Narcissa wanted her to wear to the Malfoy's Christmas Ball lay on the bed along with her lovely creamy topaz robes for dinner with Mr. Prince. She picked up her beaded purse in her hand and fingered the worn-out, once beautiful bag with a heavy sigh, regretting that she'd never taken the time to repair it. Not that any amount of repairing would actually restore it properly, too many of the beads were gone and threads stuck up everywhere. She dropped the purse on the bed.

She turned to look at her clothes hanging in the open wardrobe and pulled out her simple, black button-front robe and soft leather boots just in case. She was trying to decide what to wear to Mr. Prince's house, unsure how dressy she wanted to be. It was his first Christmas in years he'd told her so and she wanted to look nice for his sake. She was contemplating the golden copper robes or her Mediterranean green ones. Her dressy robes, the one whose color changed from blue to green as she moved, was a bit indecent; the neckline was a bit too low for the occasion, and he'd already seen her in her topaz robes, and neither the rust nor the garnet-colored ones were dressy enough.

She sighed as she fingered the sleeve of the black velvet robes Severus had bought for her. She loved the open cutwork across the neckline and on the sleeves, and the robes had made her feel so sexy in the store, but Mrs. Malfoy had been specific in her letter that she had to wear certain robes to each function. It's not that she was ignorant to the importance of following certain traditions if she was going to be a debutant, and she'd dreamed about being a debutant for a season as a little girl, but she really wanted to wear the black velvet robes to at least one of the parties.

"Miss is taking this?" Mispy asked, holding the beaded bag in her hands.

"Yes. No... It's seen better days, I'm afraid," Hermione replied, putting the golden copper robes on the bed. "But I haven't an overnight bag, so it will have to do."

The house-elf frowned at the bag. "It needs cleaning," she said and disappeared with the bag.

Hermione laughed. It needed much more than cleaning.

Severus walked out of the bathroom as she pulled out her caramel sweater and taupe pants. "Moving out or packing?" he asked when she'd pulled out her favorite black jeans and set them on the bed. "How much are you going to take?"

Frowning, she turned to face him, taken aback by the fact he wore only a towel loosely wrapped around his hips, and he was still wet. "It's not like we're only going away for the weekend we've parties to attend it's Christmas... Why are you still wet?"

He smirked at her and said, "Water is wet," as he pulled his wand out from under the edge of the towel, making the towel fall to the floor. Hermione could only stare at him as he cast a quick drying charm on himself and then opened his side of the wardrobe.

She averted her gaze quickly. "It might be nice if you wore something with color for a change," she said to hide her embarrassment at his nudity, wincing at the nervousness in her voice, and forcefully focused her attention on her clothes except she could see him quite clearly in the open wardrobe mirrors... Both of them... The mirror on the door of his side of the wardrobe reflected in hers, creating infinite images of...

"How about midnight black?" he asked, facing her. He crossed his arms and watched her with an amused smirk on his face. Now, not only was she faced with a full frontal view of his... everything, she could see both his front and his back clearly reflected infinitely in the mirrors.

"So no then," she said with a frown as she stepped closer to the wardrobe and contemplated her... shoes. It wasn't as if she wasn't getting used to seeing him naked, but she felt awkward with him walking around so casually, his cock bobbing... She watched him slyly in the mirror as he pulled up his pants and donned his shirt, his fingers moving so quickly down his buttons it seemed as if he did them by magic. She shook her head and returned to the problem of what to pack.

"Bring the black getup," he said silkily from behind her.

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. "Black *get up*?" she managed to choke out and blushed.

He engulfed her in his arms and kissed the side of her head. "Yes, I wouldn't mind seeing that again," he purred and kissed her cheek. "Besides, it would work well under the purple robes," he added casually as he let go. "I'll be in my office. We should leave about half past one or so."

Hermione nodded. "Okay," she replied and smiled. That gave her plenty of time to see Professor McGonagall, wrap her presents and still have time to work on her Charms homework.

\*

When Hermione returned from the library to change, she saw her beaded bag on the bed. She picked it up, amazed. Mispy not only cleaned her bag but had repaired it with abalone buttons of various sizes that the elf had arranged so that they resembled flowers and leaves, and she'd filled in the random bare spaces with pretty mother of pearl ones. The deep blues, greens, and purples in the abalone and the iridescent white of the mother of pearl really added to the simple design of the bag. Hermione fingered the buttons with a sense of wonder at the elf's kindness. The work was so carefully done it made her eyes well up with tears.

She opened the bag, not at all surprised to find everything she'd need, even her toiletries and cosmetics bag, placed neatly inside.

Hermione quickly dressed in her golden copper robes and pulled out her camel opera coat. She was putting on her best shoes when Severus appeared in the doorway. "Ready?" he asked.

"Almost," she replied as she dug into her trunk and pulled out two small gifts, guest soaps wrapped in handkerchiefs and tied with ribbons she'd bought for Kirch and Mispy, and placed them on the bed, hoping the elves would find them. She turned and retrieved the gifts for Mr. Prince and his two house-elves from her trunk. Severus looked at them, then at her and raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment, so she didn't offer any explanations as she slipped them into her bag. "Okay, I'm ready," she said, clutching her purse.

He reached down to pick up her bag sitting next to her trunk.

"I, er, don't think I'll need my school books," she stammered, her brow furrowed.

Severus' brow furrowed, apparently not understanding her, so she added quickly, "With everything we have planned, I won't need them until after Boxing Day."

"Then where are all of your clothes? Your shoes your toiletries? You aren't taking your trunk are you?" he asked, setting her bag down.

Hermione smiled and held her beaded bag up for him to see. "Nope, just this."

"It all fit in there? Everything you had on the bed?" he asked, his eyebrow cocked in bewilderment.

"Non-detectable extensions charms on the purse and the inside pouch," she said proudly. "I used it last year when Harry, Ron and I went into hiding. It holds a ton."

He nodded. "Impressive. Shall we?" he asked, indicating the door.

She cast protection charms on her shoes once they exited the Entrance Hall, since the stairs were coated with a thick layer of snow. Smirking, Severus offered his arm and led the way to the waiting carriage. Hagrid, who was chopping wood outside of his cottage, stopped to wave to Hermione as the carriage rolled past.

As soon as they stepped out of the carriage outside the school gates, Severus Apparated them to the gate of the old stone house in Yorkshire. Hermione took his proffered arm and walked with him up the path through the overgrown lawn. Even under the blanket of snow, she could tell that the tangle of various magical plants, flowers and herbs had been severely pruned, which only emphasized the neglected state of the now frozen pond. However, the snow that filled the tiers of the water fountain and the ice cycles that lined the rims made it look rather pretty, like a wedding cake. Hermione smiled, trying to imagine what the front garden might have looked like when it had been properly cared for. "Who was the one who loved gardening?" she asked.

"According to my mother, my grandmother Deidre enjoyed gardening, but tending to the front garden was always my great-grandmother's pastime. I remember how fussy she was about her peonies," Severus stated as they approached the door. "That and her cashmere goats."

Hermione was shocked. "Goats?" She'd assumed that the Princes lived a life of leisure like the Malfoys did.

One side of his mouth twitched and an eyebrow quirked as he repeated, "Goats." He rapped on the door.

Pepper opened the door and clasped her hands together. "Pepper is so glads that you comes!" she said and opened the door wider to let them in. Hermione had to stifle a laugh at the petite house-elf. She had a wide, bright green ribbon wrapped around her chest over her Christmas tea towel, and she wore a bell suspended on some silver garland around her neck. On her head was a Santa hat decorated with several tree ornaments in the point, and she'd placed sprigs of holly with bright red berries on the side by her ear. "Master is waiting in Mistress Delphinia's parlor."

Hermione looked around. Mr. Prince had written that Pepper would decorate, and the elf had certainly outdone herself; the banister of the stairs was decorated with so many garlands, evergreens and holly that she could barely see the railings. Every doorway had heavy bunches of the same greenery and garlands, and every candle had a wreath of holly berries entwined with ribbons tied in bows.

Severus handed Pepper his cloak. When the elf turned, Hermione smiled at the huge bow neatly tied on Pepper's back. Hermione pulled her small clutch out of her pocket before Severus helped her with her coat, and he smirked at her as he gave Pepper the coat.

Pepper snapped her fingers and disappeared, returning in the blink of an eye. "My master is this ways," the elf said and ran into the room on their left.

"Thank you," she said when Severus casually ended the spells on Hermione's shoes. He only nodded in reply.

They followed Pepper into the parlor, and Hermione couldn't help the sharp inhalation of surprise at the sight of the parlor. It was gorgeous: a huge tree stood to the side of the room, covered in vintage glass ornaments and fancy baubles, shiny glass bead garlands, and hundreds of tiny magical candles. The crystals on the Bobeches on the silver candelabras in the room sparkled like diamonds, and festively embroidered decorative pillows were placed on every chair. The smell of pine, cinnamon, orange oil, and spices filled the air.

Mr. Prince sat on a chair facing the doorway with a green throw covering his legs. "Well, stop gawking and come in," he said, sitting his teacup on the small table at his side with a clink.

Severus and Hermione both crossed the room. "Hello, Mr. Prince, it's so nice to see you again," Hermione said politely.

"Yeah, yeah, sit," he said, indicating the sofa facing him. "Don't make me crane my neck to look at you." Severus followed Hermione and waited until she sat before sitting next to her.

"Well, at least Eileen taught you manners," Mr. Prince said.

"She tried," Severus intoned. "Being in Slytherin helped."

"Yes, they always were a stuffy lot," Mr. Prince said.

Pepper walked in carrying a tray with a lovely antique tea service and looked up expectantly. "Milk and a small amount of sugar for me; Severus prefers milk only," Hermione stated, then accepted the cup Pepper handed her. Hermione looked up at Mr. Prince. "You're looking much better."

"Yes, well, now that no one is trying to kill me, and I have decent potions, of course I'm improving," Mr. Prince said, then turned to Severus. "I understand that I have you to thank for my recovery."

"It was the least I could do," Severus stated, setting his cup on his saucer.

"So, are you still sending me potions?" the old man asked, and Severus nodded.

"Yes."

Pepper came in carrying a tray of tiny, bite sized sandwiches and sliced fruits that she set down on the coffee table between them. "Crazy elf is trying to stuff me," Mr. Prince grumbled as Pepper handed him a plate with a selection of the sandwiches.

"I'm sure she means well," Hermione said as she examined the tray. She was surprised by the selection: there were cucumber, egg, cheese and watercress, chutney and cheese, fish paste, ham, and smoked salmon and even thinly sliced beef on wafer-thin bread. She could get her fill on the sandwiches alone.

"Has your appetite improved?" Severus inquired.

Pepper shook her head as Mr. Prince replied, "Yes, it's improved. But I don't need to eat five to six times a day."

A long silence ensued.

"Your house looks nice," Hermione stated, turning to look at the new windows. "The new windows are lovely."

"They should be; they cost a fortune," Mr. Prince said. "So, are either of you going to tell me what in the blazing horntails happened here?"

Hermione nearly choked on her tea. "You mean no one told you?"

"The Aurors told me that I was being poisoned by my Healer, and my Grandson and that no good Osgood spawn tried to kill me," Mr. Prince stated. "Apparently, my great-grandson, who I haven't seen since he was seventeen, decided to intervene on my behalf and corrupted my house-elf into helping him."

Hermione nodded. Apparently he knew quite a bit. She hid her smirk behind her teacup when he added, "I had to threaten clothes to get her to talk," indicating Pepper, who looked guiltily at her master. "And even then she was beating herself silly with a slipper instead of the frying pan they used to use. So out with it, girl, tell me everything."

She told him about her research into the Osgoods and her discovery of Miss Priswell's true identity. Severus casually explained what he knew of Charles Prince's and John Osgood's plot. Mr. Prince merely grunted. "When Pepper came that morning to warn Severus, he was not in his office. Dumbledore's portrait said he'd gone to the Ministry, so, my friend Ginny went to get Severus and the Aurors, and I came here to try and stave them off until help arrived," Hermione said. "I'm really sorry about the house."

Mr. Prince was thoughtful for a while, and Hermione sipped her tea, watching him. "I suppose I should thank you," he finally said and turned to Severus. "So, why the interest after all these years?" He popped a sandwich into his mouth and waited, staring at Severus expectantly.

"Nostalgia," Severus stated nonchalantly as he set his cup and saucer down, and Mr. Prince huffed. Hermione looked at Severus expectantly, and he sighed. She reached out and touched his arm, and he clasped her hand in his. "I find myself Bonded to a witch who is constantly asking me about my past and my family, so I decided to visit." His fingers tightened around hers before he let go. "When I first met Miss Priswell, I was unimpressed, to say the least, and became concerned when I checked your potions. So yes, I made an arrangement with your house-elf to exchange your potions, and I've been brewing them for you ever since."

"Humph, and now I don't have a Healer," Mr. Prince stated with a scowl.

"Might I make a suggestion?" Severus asked, and Mr. Prince looked up at him. "Panderosa Alden, she was my student twelve years ago and resigned from her position at St. Mungo's about a year and a half ago to care for a terminally ill parent. She is competent and, from what I gather, I believe she is available."

"Have her come here so I can meet her. I don't want some young whippersnapper thinking she can run my house," Mr. Prince stated, then looked pointedly at Hermione. "So what's your interest in me, young lady? Where is *your* family?"

She covered her mouth as she swallowed. *My family.* "I'm an only child; my parents are in Australia. They moved there before the war," she said, not wanting to go into details. She wasn't ready to introduce Severus to her Grandmother Merle or her Aunt Julianne, even if Hermione could revive her Aunt Julianne's memories.

One her father's side, Hermione had her Uncle Christian, Aunt Maureen and two cousins who had moved to Italy the same time she had her parents go to Australia, and her Aunt Cynthia, Uncle Marciel and cousin, Jean-Alexandre, lived in France. Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Marciel were affable enough, however they were wary of her due to her previous adolescent magical outbursts. But then her cousin, Jean-Alexandre, and his friend, Jacques Turgot, were snobby prats and bullies. Hermione had accidentally made her Cousin Jean-Alexandre and Jacques blue one summer. Of course that was over seven years ago, and someone from the Ministry had finally put Jean-Alexandre and Jacques right again, but Aunt Louise hadn't forgiven her yet. "My best friend is Harry Potter, he's like a brother to me, and the Weasley's, of course, they're like my adopted family..."

"So you chose to spend Christmas Eve here, with me, instead of these Weasley's?" Mr. Prince asked.

"Hermione thought we should divide the day between you and her friends," Severus stated and sipped his tea.

"Humph," Mr. Prince merely grunted, picking up his tea by the saucer and popping one of the sandwiches Pepper had placed on his saucer in his mouth.

"I got this from us," Hermione announced, opening her beaded bag. She handed Mr. Prince his present.

He stared at it. Pepper took his cup and saucer, and Hermione placed the gift in his hands. Mr. Prince slowly untied the plaid ribbon before he ripped off the paper and opened the box. "A quiche," he said, holding up the cup.

"A Scottish friendship cup," Hermione said, smiling as he examined the engraving on the cup.

"I know what they are," he said, letting the wrapping roll off his lap as he held the cup with both hands. "Thank you."

Severus pulled out a small wrapped bundle from his pocket. "And this has a more practical use," he said as he held it out to the older wizard.

Mr. Prince set his quiche next to his tea cup and took the gift, his fingers shaking slightly as he unwrapped it. "It's a... pocket watch for your wrist?" he asked curiously, stretching the watchband.

"It's a foe glass you can wear on your wrist. Yes it tells the time, but if anyone should mean to cause you harm, they will appear in the crystal," Severus explained. "The band should be flexible enough to be comfortable on your wrist, and it will magically adjust without pinching your arm hairs."

Hermione was impressed. As Mr. Prince stared at his new watch, Hermione took out the two smaller presents, extending one out to Pepper. "This is for you."

"What is this?" the small elf asked, afraid to take the gift.

"Just a little something," Hermione replied, then added quickly, "It's not clothing of any kind, I promise." Pepper took the gift, holding it like it might explode. "I have one for Dustin as well."

There was a loud crack, and Hermione saw a very old house-elf, seemingly much older than even Kreacher, hobble closer to them, leaning heavily on a little cane. "Miss calls Dustin?" Unlike Pepper, Dustin's only adornment was his Christmas tea towel, which he'd wrapped around his thin hips like a kilt and held in place with a piece of red rope.

Hermione knelt in front of the old elf and offered him his small gift. "I have a gift..."

"Why?" he croaked, eyeing the present warily.

She smiled and extended her hand with the gift toward him. "For cooking..."

"Dustin does cooking. Dustin does not need presents for cooking," he snarled and Disapparated with a snap of his fingers, however when the elf disappeared, the gift was gone as well.

"You'll spoil my house-elves," Mr. Prince grumbled.

"Hermione has a thing about house-elf enslavement," Severus stated, his pose and tone casual, but Hermione knew he was laughing at her even though his face remained expressionless. "She doesn't understand the symbiotic relationship."

"What's to understand? They like to cook and clean, and I let them," Mr. Prince stated. "So, since I knew that you'd want to do this, even though I specifically told you not to, I have gifts for you. Pepper." Pepper appeared by his chair. "I want the red one." Pepper ran to the tree and came back, holding a present in red paper. Small bits of holly and a bright bauble decorated the bow.

Hermione unwrapped the gift and found herself holding a red velvet jewelry box. She opened it with a feeling of apprehension, wondering why the old wizard would give her jewelry. Inside laid a simple but elegant necklace and a bracelet of deep red garnets, with a matching pair of earrings. The large oval stones that linked together in a chain were all the same size and beautifully matched; the necklace had seven garnets set in a flower-like cluster in the center, and the earrings had two dangling, pear-shaped drops. "I-I can't accept these! They are much too expensive," she said breathlessly. They were gorgeous, obviously old, and she loved them, but knew she couldn't accept.

"Hogwash," Mr. Prince snapped, and Hermione looked up at him in shock. "They were Deidre's. Edgar wouldn't let her give them to Eileen. Since you're now family..." He turned his attention to Severus. "You are going to marry the witch, aren't you?"

Severus shrugged. "Eventually," he said, and Hermione turned to him open-mouthed as he added, "When she finishes school."

"End of June then," Mr. Prince asked with a smile. "'Bout time, too. Doin' it right. It's not necessary, waiting all this time, but then young witches like long adjustment periods, don't they?" He looked at Hermione. "You're my daughter-in-law well, great-granddaughter-in-law now, and I haven't any other family left, so you'll wear them. Besides, they're just lying around." He called out for Pepper. "Where's the other one?"

Pepper handed Hermione a huge box, decorated like her first one. Hermione opened the box, her eyes going wide at the fur trimmed cloak lying inside. "I hope it fits," Mr. Prince stated as Hermione slid the fur between her fingers and smiled at the black satin lining.

She ran her hands on the fine mohair in awe of the expensive second expensive gift. Why he was being so extravagant on her she had no idea, considering he had accepted their visit with reluctance in his letters. She decided to simply say, "Thank you, it's beautiful."

Mr. Prince told Pepper to get the other one, but the small elf made a soft nervous laugh before going to the tree. Pepper returned and handed Severus what looked like several books wrapped individually and tied together with a ribbon, ignoring Mr. Prince's questioning scowl.

Hermione watched Severus as he untied the ribbon binding them together, and unwrapped the first well-worn book. His face was inexpressive as he read the title page. He set the book gently on the table and opened the next one, examining the slightly worn binding and index of the second book. Then she saw it, the teeniest flicker of... longing remembrance... But then it was gone, hidden behind his controlled blank mask. She waited until he opened the third old book to watch his eyes again, and even though his face remained impassive, there was that flicker of recognition a teeny twitch of his lips.

"Delphinia used to read them to your mom I think Eileen read them to you when you were here," Mr. Prince said. "Give him the box." Pepper levitated a huge box over to Severus. "Here," Mr. Prince said with a wave of his hand. "I thought you'd like these."

Severus opened his box and pulled out one of the books, and Hermione smiled at the flicker of surprise that was quickly concealed. "They are old, first editions, I think," Mr. Prince said, watching Severus as he examined the first layer of books. "Been collecting dust some were Edgar's some were your mother's, a few are older than me... Might as well take them now as you'd have gotten them eventually anyway."

"Thank you," Severus said softly, but she heard the slight emotional inflection in his voice. He put the children's books on the collection of old books and sat back, resuming his casual pose and inscrutable expression.

Dustin hobbled in and said, "Dinner is ready, master," and hobbled out.

Pepper scooted over to Mr. Prince's chair, handing him his cane as Mr. Prince rose unsteadily to his feet. Hermione wanted to go to him and offer her arm, but Severus held onto her elbow. Mr. Prince led the way, but it was quite obvious that Pepper was utilizing some sort of magic to aid him and to keep her master upright. Hermione and Severus followed them into the next room.

The dining room was lovely. The dark Hepplewhite table had been polished to a high shine, and a centerpiece of holly, fir and ivy wrapped in ribbons and decorated with Christmas wizard crackers stretched out on the table between the three large, gleaming silver candelabras. The crystals dangling on the Bobeches on every candle matched the elegant candelabra hanging from the ceiling. A huge Persian rug, mostly in greens, covered most of the floor, and dark green taffeta drapes contrasted against butter cream walls. Hermione smiled at the three places set with antique fine English bone china, gleaming silver flatware and sparkling crystal glassware at the end of the table. Christmas wizard crackers sat on each plate, and one was tied to each of the napkins.

As soon as Mr. Prince settled into the place of honor, serving dishes of roast turkey with nutty stuffing and bread sauce, little chipolatas, glazed duck and walnuts, prime rib with madeira sauce, venison with port, winter greens and Savoy, roasted potatoes with carrots, onions, and Jerusalem artichokes in rosemary, brussels sprouts with shallots and mustard seeds, green beans with cranberries, almonds, and parsley, cranberry sauce, tiny sausages wrapped in bacon, parsnips and swede filled the table between them.

Mr. Prince picked up both of his crackers with a 'Harrumph.' He turned to Hermione. "Well, give it a tug, girl, so we can dispense with these," he said, holding one end of his cracker firmly. Hermione grinned and tugged, smiling at the bottle of cognac that landed gently on the table next to him and the shiny crown. The second gave him a tartan Tam o' Shanter and what looked like a hefty Nebula Plasma Ball.

Hermione held out one of hers. "Will you share the honors with me?" she asked. He pulled the end, and she gasped at the lovely pearl and diamond tiara and a silver hand mirror that floated over to her.

"Those rascals, I told them to wrap it," he grumbled.

"Pardon me?" Hermione asked, examining the exquisite tiara.

"Open the other one," he said, pointing to the ones by her plate.

Hermione opened it to see a pearl necklace and a pair of diamond and pearl earrings come out with a black, asymmetrical boater hat with a large red peony and black feathers on the side. "But these I can't accept these!" she stammered as she examined the jewelry. She looked up at Severus, but he was simply watching with veiled interest.

"That was the jewelry they were Delphinia's, my wife's, when she was still a Pepperell," Mr. Prince stated. "She wore them on her coming out, and so did Eileen."

Hermione was deeply touched. "I'll wear them proudly," she replied, setting them on the table.

Pepper appeared and picked up her gifts, whispering, "I'll place them in your bag, Miss," and disappeared.

Hermione looked at Severus expectantly and smiled. He sighed heavily and broke his crackers open. The first held a black top hat with a huge red bow and sparkling tinsel, which he flat out refused to wear, and a bronze and bone letter opener. Two more crackers floated onto his plate, and he scowled. Severus pointed at them and made a flick of his finger. The crackers popped open with loud bangs: one sending a dark green classic Derby style with a brightly colored, graphic interior lining and a small desktop foe-glass on a brass stand flying up in the air; the other produced a dusty, green-blue color Glengarry hat with a red toorie on top with black and with dicing and a family crest badge on the left-hand side and a pair of matching green leather gloves. They all froze midair and landed gently next to his plate.

Hermione saw Pepper's hat and her ear tips appear beside Severus and then disappear after he handed her his gifts.

"Great, now that's done, let's eat," Mr. Prince said, and their plates magically exchanged with ones heaped with servings of each delicious dish, including a Yorkshire pudding and petite sweet breads.

They ate a leisurely Christmas dinner. Mr. Prince wasn't much of a conversationalist at dinner, mostly asking Hermione questions about her classes and teachers. Apparently he knew Professors McGonagall and Sprout personally.

By the time the glazed pears cooked in wine and vanilla, Amaretto trifle and plum pudding was served, Mr. Prince was speaking slower, slouching slightly in his chair, and his eyes were drooping. She and Severus made their excuses and bid him a Happy Christmas. Pepper met them at the doorway to the parlor with Severus' cloak and new gloves and Hermione's coat and beaded bag. "Pepper puts your cloak and jewelry in your bag, miss, and Pepper will takes books and cracker gifts to the castle, sir, if you likes."

"Thank you, Pepper," Severus said, and Hermione added, "For everything."

Pepper laughed nervously and disappeared with a snap of her fingers.

~S~

Severus held his arm for Hermione to Apparate them to Grimmauld Place, forcing himself to concentrate on the destination instead of the revelation Pepper had reminded him of the one his grandfather had unknowingly, or deliberately, made. The children's books.

They arrived on the pavement, and uncharacteristically, he had to steady himself. Hermione murmured her apology, which he pointedly ignored, as they walked down the pavement.

His mind now took advantage of his moment of relaxation. *Those stories. My mother read them to me when I'd been at that house? When?* Severus couldn't remember any other time they'd spent at the house other than the two times his mother had tried to beg her father for money. But the stories were familiar; his mother *had* read them to him during their picnics on the hillside overlooking the small village of Havenhold. The place where he'd buried her. He had thought she'd written them, since she'd read them from an old journal he'd had.

"Severus, are you all right?"

He shook himself out of his reverie. "Yes, I'm fine," he said as he looked up at the house. *The Black house Grimmauld Place. Harry Potter's house.* He inhaled deeply. *I agreed to this.*

The front of the house had obviously been renovated. Although snow covered the grass out front, the slender patches of earth along the front of the house now had carefully tended rosemary topiaries and jasmine enclosed behind wrought iron fencing. All the old ornate black ironwork looked freshly painted, and the old brick façade had been painted to match the color of the other houses on the street. The most notable change being the now red door with a new knocker: a brass phoenix with a huge ring in its claws that hung in the center of the door; the original snake knocker was stuck firmly to the wall next to the doorway, apparently simply a decoration now. Under it was a plaque which read:

The Phoenix House

The old Headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix.

This house served as headquarters for the ...

Severus was distracted from reading the rest as Hermione mumbled something, then tapped the knocker once, and the door opened to admit her.

Inside the entry, Severus noticed, besides the new fabric covering the walls and fresh paint, there was a huge painting depicting all the members of the Order of the Phoenix where Mrs. Black had once hung. In the background of the painting, behind the collected members, was a depiction of another portrait, showing the original members of the Order of the Phoenix. They were all there, even Lily, Caradoc Dearborn, Clarinda Havenworth and Emmeline Vance, their smiles sent a knife through his heart. He'd betrayed each one, 'necessary sacrifices' Dumbledore had said, 'for the greater good.' Severus was portrayed as a thirty-eight-year-old adult in the painting beside Dumbledore as well as himself at twenty, young and stupid, in the background painting. *No*, he wouldn't reminisce about what had happened; he had too much to look forward to. He turned his head, saw Hermione's sympathetic smile, and shook his head.

She nodded in understanding.

"May Kreacher takes your cloak and coat, miss, mister."

Severus looked down and was startled. The ugly old house-elf looked transformed. He wore a clean, red pillowcase over his body, one side held by a knot and the other with a sword-shaped kilt pin with a bit of holy tucked underneath. A shinny gold locket hung about his scrawny neck, and he wore a Santa hat perched on his head.

"Master is in the drawing room," Kreacher stated and then disappeared with Severus' cloak and Hermione's coat.

Severus looked up and saw that the house-elf heads had been removed, and in their place were a number of framed photographs. He felt a stab of regret at the two pictures of Lily and Potter, and sneered slightly at the one of the Marauders (as they liked to call themselves) and the picture of Harry and Black.

When he and Hermione stepped into the drawing room, he was astounded again by the transformation. Behind the huge Christmas tree hung new dark green drapes. The fabric on the walls had been replaced with a cream silk with thin, intricately woven flowering vines and all the wainscoting and borders were an off white. The new Persian rug on the floor was beige with green and black accents definitely much homier than he'd remembered the room. The years of built-up grime on the marble mantelpiece were gone, and the fireplace looked well tended. Above it hung a huge gilded mirror, but the silver snake candelabras on either side he'd remembered from before had been replaced with delicate gold oak branches. A sparkling chandelier hung in the middle of the ceiling, the ceiling now painted in variegated shades of green... Potter had certainly spent a lot of his inheritance refurbishing the house.

"Severus, Happy Christmas," Ginevra said, holding out a mug for him to take.

"And to you, Ginevra," he said politely as he accepted the drink, nodding to Harry as he approached.

"Hello, Severus, welcome," the boy said, smiling actually smiling at him.

"Thank you," Severus said and took a sip from the mug. It was hot spiced rum, well blended so that the flavors enhanced each other rather than fought for dominance. Hermione watched him expectantly from over the rim of her own mug.

"Well, do you want the tour?" Harry asked.

He nodded to the boy no young man.

"You've seen the entry."

"Yes," he said with a smirk. Severus followed Harry through the house as he pointed out the various rooms. The dining room was now mostly red. The sitting room the girls had used as a bedroom had been returned to its original function, now pale salmon with russet and gold touches. Every bedroom was freshly painted with new curtains, and throughout the house all the old furniture had been reupholstered. The hardwood floors gleamed, and there were new rugs on nearly every floor. He hardly recognized the place as the same house. Their room, the one the twins had occupied, was done in shades of teal and white. Severus smirked at the bed, somewhat smaller than the one at school, but large enough for two. Hermione was clutching her bag in the doorway, talking to Harry. He turned when he caught a snippet of the conversation.

"...I told him we'd go around about eight."



"Go around where?" Severus growled softly and held his breath, waiting for the bad news.

Harry looked up at him. "The Longbottoms'. Neville invited us for desserts and cocktails."

"Cocktails," Severus repeated as he exhaled. *That's not so bad.*

"Yeah, he invited most of the DA over," Harry stated, and Hermione smiled. "Luna said it's formal, but I suppose your robes are okay."

*Great. This gets better and better.*

"Harry!" Hermione admonished him. "We've got formal robes." She turned to Severus. "You packed yours, right?"

"Of course," he replied smoothly as Hermione hurried from the room. He followed Ginevra and Harry back to the drawing room, resigned to behave as politely as he could. Hermione returned several minutes later, looking quite pleased about something.

Thankfully, Hermione seemed to have a lot to talk to Harry about, and the young people chatted away happily. Severus merely made the noncommittal smirk or affirmative or negative grunt occasionally as he listened to the girls relate life at Hogwarts to Harry, and he discussed life as an Auror trainee.

When the clock chimed half past six, Kreacher announced that dinner was served. Severus followed the young people down the kitchen, although he was hardly hungry.

The kitchen hardly looked any different. It had been freshly painted, but the fireplace and the furniture remained the same. The scrubbed wooden table was set with simple, formal bone china, nice stemware and silver place settings on a red tablecloth with holly and candles as a centerpiece. The smells from the stove reminded him of Molly's cooking.

Severus sat himself next to Ginevra as she passed out the Christmas wizard crackers. He smirked at the Weasley Whistling Lollypops, confetti and tall, pointed hat covered in color-changing stars that emerged from Hermione's; the glasses with the fake nose, Weasley's Stealthy-Disguise Specs and white Shako hat with a huge kelly-green and canary yellow plume Harry received, and Ginevra's ascot with the white and ice blue swan and Weasley Bubble bath ducky. Each one had a slip of parchment with a joke, which each person read aloud to peals of laughter or embarrassed snickers. Severus stared at his wizarding cracker with trepidation.

"Well, go on, see what you got," Harry urged, and Severus shot a glare at him.

"How bad can it be?" Hermione began to ask, then clamped her mouth shut.

"Severus," Ginevra said, and he looked at her. "George made yours specially. The hat may be ridiculous, but he selected the crackers himself. So if it's horrible, well, I won't mind if you singe it."

"And I shall know who to blame," he said, reluctantly pulling on the end. Six bell-shaped, footed black objects fell out, and a wide-brimmed, black Fedora with a questionable peacock pheasant feather trimming on the side popped out. He cocked his eyebrow at the simple hat as the others smiled.

"Plumesmoke Decoy Detonators," Harry said with a smile. "Very helpful those. I keep a set in my desk for raids."

"Indeed," Severus said, wary about touching the Detonators on his plate, lest they go off.

"Oooh, that's a nice hat! Put it on, Severus," Hermione urged him, a bit too enthusiastically.

"Men don't wear hats inside," he grumbled, setting the hat at the end of the table. Only the ridiculous hat flew back up toward his head. He tried again but with the same results. Considering the others were wearing theirs, and it appeared he had little choice, he put the hat on, and a small slip of parchment fell onto his plate.

*Professor,*

*This hat, although charmed to make you at least try it on, is not a trick. It's a gratuity for all you've done for my family, especially for saving my dad and the numerous times you've helped Fred and me. This hat is a Headless Hat, when you want it to be, a prototype that makes the wearer disappear from head to chest when you say 'Perdu me.' I think you'll appreciate the humor in that choice. To terminate the spell simply say 'Denude.' I chose these two words because most wizards don't use them, not in regular speech anyways.*

*Enjoy the hat and use it well.*

*George Weasley*

Severus slowly and deliberately crumbled the note in his hand and set it with the remains of the cracker. Although he hated wearing hats, he could see that this one could possibly come in handy on occasion, and he appreciated the fact that the Weasley boy had at least given him a hat with certain sense of style unlike Potter's Neapolitan monstrosity with its garish plume, or Hermione's ridiculous witch's hat with its color-changing stars, reminiscent of the ones that Dumbledore had liked to wear. *Good grief*, he thought, glancing at her as the swan on Ginevra's hat stretched its wings when she leaned forward to retrieve the pitcher.

Ginevra pulled her wand out, sending the cracker remains in the bin as Kreacher served the dinner. A traditional roasted beef in port surrounded by roasted parsnips and a turkey wrapped in bacon appeared on the table on a huge platters. Serving bowls of herbed apple stuffing, bread sauce, crisp roasted potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes, Brussels sprouts with chestnuts and bacon, Yorkshire puddings, and, of course, little chipolatas and sausages...

Severus groaned inaudibly and smirked at Hermione's slight grimace. He helped himself to his second Christmas Eve dinner as Harry continued to entertain the girls with his wondrous exploits as an Auror.

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, to Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

# Intervention and Surprises

Chapter 50 of 63

Severus endures an evening at the Longbottoms, Hermione has an encounter with Ron, and Ginny intervenes.



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## Intervention and Surprises

Even after the girls had excused themselves to go make their preparations for Longbottom's party, Harry and Severus remained in the kitchen and drank their coffees in relative silence. Severus felt relieved that Potter was able to sit companionably without needing to converse.

Severus still felt uncomfortable around him. Despite his having Lily's emerald green eyes, the boy would always remind him of James; the uncanny resemblance, the way the boy brushed back his hair only to make it even messier than before, the arrogant smirk he sometimes made, the calculating gleam in his eyes, the angry squint he'd made when he'd been caught doing something or being someplace he shouldn't have been, even the way he held his knife and cup all reflected the boy from his youth that Severus hated.

However, Hermione was right, in other ways he was little like his father. His choices in friends attested to that, his penchant for standing up for others rather than bullying them, and his embarrassed sincerity when accepting praise. Potter was also not a show off, and although Severus was loath even grudgingly to admit Dumbledore was right, the boy was modest. Having worked with Potter on a few Auror cases, Severus noticed that the boy had a natural ability to lead others, recognizing his teammates' strengths and utilizing them, and always gave credit where it was due. The brash, impetuous, hot-head had grown up into a respectable Auror. Although Severus didn't believe that he and Potter would ever be good friends, certainly not close by any means, Potter was not as impossible as when he'd been a student.

Severus finished his coffee and set the cup aside, a motion mimicked by Potter. As if on some unspoken cue, both men rose to go change, Severus cringing at the thought of the impending soirée.

"Severus, I wanted to show you something," Harry said on their way up the stairs to change into their dress robes.

"What?" he replied noncommittally, wondering what Dark artifact the boy had uncovered in his renovations.

"Ginny got a suspicious package and sent it to me," he replied, leading the way up to the next floor.

Severus' attention was definitely piqued.

"It came in a plain wrapping paper," Potter continued, looking at Severus over his shoulder, "and upon first glance it seemed innocuous, but when she tried to open it, it well, smoked puce colored smoke like the stuff we encountered outside Summercourt, Cornwall, but it's acidic. She cast the Bubble-Head Charm and managed to place a strong enough shield around it and sent it by Floo to the Aurory. I have some and was hoping you'd recognize it."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You have some here? In the house?"

"In the attic," Harry stated and led the way, taking the stairs two at a time.

Severus followed Harry quickly up to the attic, apprehensive as to the mysterious substance, and hoping he was wrong in his initial presumption.

Last time Severus was here, the attic had been full of boxes and had been used for a hippogriff pen; the space littered with old newspapers and buckets. The boxes remained, neatly stacked on the far end, but most of the space seemed to be Harry's work area now. The standard grey desk with two drawers and a file drawer on each side stood near the middle of the room with a six drawer file cabinet within easy reach, both sporting racks and bins on the surface, and the usual wall mounted peg board covered in notes... It was apparent that Potter frequently brought his work home with him. Two tables stood on the side of the room, one the typical style for holding potions equipment, the other worktable holding a stone chest and various magical implements that Severus easily recognized. He'd have to talk to the boy about the danger of doing potions in an attic later.

Harry walked up to the stone chest and lifted the lid. He turned, holding a large glass orb with a smaller orb suspended inside it. "This is the stuff."

The smoke swirled in two directions at once, the hue changing a mixture of puce, purples and dark maroons, and a grey residue was forming on the inside of the outer sphere. "Yes, I know this substance the Dark Lord's Black-Acid Smoke it's extremely dangerous, much more so than merely Garroting Gas or Asphyxiation Plume. Inhalation of the smoke particles restricts the bronchial tree in the victim's lungs by blocking the bronchioles. The residue in the ash will seep into one's skin and eat away at their tissues," Severus said, then looked at Harry. "Was Ginevra checked out by Madam Pomfrey?" He was rather disconcerted that this was the first time he'd heard about it.

"No, she was taken to the Auror ward at St. Mungo's as a precaution," Harry stated.

"So she received it here?" Severus asked, relieved that he'd not have to have the Gryffindor girls' dorm checked or the common room either. *But if she received it here, that meant...* He dreaded the answer but he had to ask, "Did they inspect the house?"

"Of course," Harry replied, much to Severus' relief. "Top to bottom, all cleared." He pointed to some creased brown paper and twine lying on the end of the table. "That's the wrapping. After casting the Bubble-Head Charm and containing the smoke, Gin used her wand to clamp the box it came in closed. The wizards in the Regulation and Control of Harmful Substances Department said she'd acted quickly enough. The spells were ones her brothers, Fred and George, taught her they apparently learned it from Bill... thankfully it was strong."

Severus drew his wand and cast detection spells on the plain, brown paper wrapping, finding nothing.

"There was a slight residue in the box, but it had turned charcoal grey. The R.C.H.S.D. has it now," Harry continued as Severus levitated the paper to get a closer look.

"A clear indication that the smoke had dissipated and 'burnt' out," Severus stated. There was nothing visible on the paper, and the address had been printed carefully, almost child-like in standard black ink. He shook his head.

"Yeah, I didn't find anything either," Harry said as Severus let the paper fall to the surface of the table.

"Mr. Potter Harry, this, Black-Acid Smoke, is really difficult to produce, let alone capture," he said, pointing to the orb. "It's created by making a significant quantity of myrrh oleoresin coagulate with an equal amount of the poisonous nitrated-phosphorus dragon excreta, then using a Dark magical flame to ignite the contaminated myrrh. The resulting smoke becomes alive, a living entity much like Fiendfyre, dangerous, uncontrollable and extremely deadly. The Dark Lord used it on occasion, but the fumes are extremely toxic, even to the caster, and he actually preferred Fiendfyre instead. Clenittia Lestrangle tried using it once on a Muggle-born household, but it escaped out the windows and consumed her as well as the neighboring houses on the cul-de-sac. Bellatrix used it in 1978 in a small village of magical residents on Loch Maree near Wester Ross and wiped out the entire village: every person, animal, and even some of the fish and insects. She escaped only because she set the contaminated myrrh on fire to release the smoke and Apparated away. Mulciber was somewhat adept at controlling it, as was Rowle, but Mulciber is dead, and Rowle was Kissed in Azkaban. I don't know anyone else who can use it even I can't control it nor contain it once it begins to plume." He was now sufficiently impressed with Ginevra's shielding capabilities; she must have acted quite quickly.

Harry nodded and set the orb carefully on a three-pronged stand in the stone chest, then closed the lid carefully, and sealed it in place. "I'll inform the guys on Monday. The good thing is that it dissipated once it spread out enough and its concentration became sufficiently diluted. No one was hurt by the residue that I know of."

"Then whoever cast it was inept," Severus stated, "which means that someone read how to make it and experimented."

Harry walked to his desk and picked up a clipboard holding multiple sheets of parchment. He scanned through the pages, shaking his head every so often, saying, "Nope. No. None... No." He lowered the clipboard and looked up at Severus. "Nothing on the census roster no one has been to St. Mungo's with magical smoke asphyxiation or skin or tissue deterioration this week."

Severus was surprised that Harry had one of the census rosters. *But then he is bloody Harry Potter, boy wonder that lived twice, and savior of the wizarding world twice.* "Which only means that either they are dead, or sought out help elsewhere," he stated, trying to remember anyone else who'd know about creating Black-Acid Smoke or had the knowledge or resources to create the contaminated myrrh. The few who knew how to ignite the myrrh were in the Dark Lord's inner circle during the first uprising, and only a handful were told which dragon breeds produced the optimum dragon excreta. Of those who might, few of them would have known how to make the elements coagulate properly...

"Do you think Rabastan Lestrangle could have done this? He's Bellatrix's brother-in-law, and he's still at large?" Harry asked.

"Not very likely," Severus said, shaking his head. "He was a slash and maim kind of wizard, liked to use my Sectumsempra and the Entrails-Expelling Curse."

"I just thought since you mentioned both Clenittia and Bellatrix Lestrangle as having done it," Harry said, crossing his arms as he leaned against his desk.

Severus shook his head. "Seeing your mother die of asphyxiation as her skin is eaten away would be quite the deterrent to try it," he said. "But then again, the Lestrangle boys were always a little on the... dark side."

"So, I'm not going to rule out Lestrangle," Harry said as he stood and stepped away from his desk. "Besides, Gin may have had a run in with him at the final battle. I know that we fought him in the Department of Mysteries, and Bellatrix was killed by her mum... that could be cause to want revenge?"

"If you say so," Severus said, following the younger man from the attic. He went downstairs to the room designated as his for the night to change into his dress robes. He had to go to a party and face the students that made his first year as Headmaster literally unbearable a living hell. He wasn't at all pleased; it wasn't part of their bargain, and he'd wished that he could simply stay here and read in the library instead.

~H~

Hermione had been delighted when Mispy had answered her Floo call. The house-elf had happily agreed to get Hermione her black velvet dress robe, but she'd adamantly refused to pass them to her through the Floo. However, after dinner, her robes were hanging on the wardrobe door, and her black lacey undergarments were laid out neatly on the bed. She'd changed into her underwear, slipped on a dressing robe, gathered up the rest, including the garnets Mr. Prince had given her, and hurried to Ginny's room to finish dressing.

Ginny smiled as soon as she entered. "Good, you can zip me up," she said, turning her back as she finished dressing.

Hermione dressed quickly, being careful not to put a run in her stockings. "New robes?" Hermione asked as she helped with her friend's zipper as Ginny examined her lithe figure in her new Persian turquoise green dress. "That color is wonderful on you," she complimented her friend.

"Thank you. I went shopping with Angelina, and she helped me pick it out," Ginny said, waiting to reciprocate and zip up Hermione.

Together they fussed over their hair and applied up their makeup. When Hermione opened up the red jewelry box, Ginny inhaled sharply. "Oh my!" She looked up at Hermione. "Where did you get those?"

"They were Severus' grandmother's," Hermione said, putting on the necklace. "Mr. Prince gave them to me for Christmas."

"Oh, I thought..." Ginny started to say and then made a small smile. "You're lucky. I wish..."

Hermione fastened her earring on and stood to face her friend. "I have a feeling your Christmas is going to sparkle, Gin."

Ginny's expression brightened up and her smile widened. "What did you hear?"

Hermione was reluctant to say anything more, not wanting to spoil the surprise.

"Harry already showed me my Christmas gift, considering that he wanted my opinion on which house we're going to live in so give! What is he planning?"

Hermione smiled. "And ruin your surprise? Never," she said, smirking at Ginny's pout.

"You're no fun."

"I made a promise," Hermione teased, checking her image in the mirror.

When they walked down to the drawing room, both Severus and Harry, who were deep in conversation over by the fireplace, immediately stopped talking and turned. Hermione smiled as Severus stared at her. His mouth curved into an appreciative smile as his gaze swept down and then back up her body, becoming truly smoldering once they made eye contact. In that moment, Hermione felt suspended in time. Somehow the silent appraisal meant so much more than the compliments he'd given her each time before, and made her breath hitch. Besides, for some reason, tonight, Hermione felt more like herself, much more relaxed and sure.

Harry approached, drawing Hermione's attention away from Severus' stare. "Gosh, Gin," was all he said, but Ginny smiled, blushing.

"Luna told us to Apparate under the canopy on the front path, since it might rain," Ginny said after a long pause.

"Then I suppose we should be going," Harry said with a nod, accepting the two cloaks that Kreacher handed up to him.

With a snap of his fingers the elf was gone and back again, this time with Hermione's coat and Severus' cloak.

"Well, if we must," Severus deadpanned as he crossed the room and helped Hermione with her coat.

"Severus, please..." Hermione whispered, but he held up his hand.

"A wise witch once told me, these people are part of the package," he said softly.

Ginny turned sharply and stared at him.

"I'll be polite," he added with a smirk and draped his own cloak on his shoulders.

Since Severus had never been to the Longbottoms, Hermione had to take him by Side-Along Apparition, and if that annoyed him, he hid it well. When Hermione arrived at the party with Severus on her arm, she half expected everyone in the room to stop and stare. Instead, a few people turned to look at her, Ginny, Harry and Severus as they entered the large drawing room, but other than a few nods of acknowledgement and waves in greeting, the conversations hardly lulled at all, much to her relief.

Across the room, the guys, Dean, Seamus, Ernie and Terry were talking animatedly, most likely about Quidditch, and over by the fireplace, George, Angelina and Lee faced Katie and Oliver, talking about something a bit more serious. Hermione smiled at the way Oliver placed his hand on the small of Katie's back for a moment. Lavender, Mandy, Hannah and Susan sat together in the chairs, sipping on punch and eating from small plates. Megan Jones and William Summers were talking with Neville and Luna. Luna excused herself and walked up to them.

"Are we late?" Harry asked as Luna hugged Ginny in greeting. Asia brought them drinks and disappeared with everyone's cloaks.

"No, everyone just arrived before you did," she said serenely, hugging Hermione. "Hello, Severus. Grandmother Longbottom is in the parlor if you'd prefer mature company." She pointed to the doorway across the entry. "She said our music was too much for her nerves."

"Thank you," Severus replied, placing his hand on Hermione's lower back protectively. "I'm sure I'll endure."

Hermione nudged him gently as she looked at him with a crooked smile and then walked over to join Hannah and Susan as Lavender and Mandy went to refill their cups. "Hello, Headmaster, Hermione," Susan said, as they approached, "nice to see you."

Anthony Goldstein joined them, and Severus stepped closer to Hermione, making her chuckle silently.

"Looks like everyone is here," Anthony stated.

"Not everyone; Padma and Parvati are in India this Christmas, and Justin couldn't make it, he's at his parent's home," Lavender said sweetly. "His family is hosting a party."

"Well, Ron's here," Anthony said with a smirk, jutting his chin toward the door. "I see he brought Amelia Bunton."

"Bugger, I forgot he was still with her," Harry said, turning to face Hermione. "Hermione, if..."

"No, its fine, Harry," she replied, turning, smiling as Michael Corner waved from across the room. She waved back, seeing Ron walking over to them with a witch teetering on her high heels as she clung to his arm. Severus placed his hand on Hermione's lower back again, his posture straighter, but his expression remained cordial at least.

"Hi, you all know, Amelia," Ron said, taking a drink from Asia and downing it in one go.

Hermione tried not to gape at the girl. Looking at Ron's date, Amelia, was almost like looking into a mirror. They were the same height and build, same hair color, although her eye color might've been darker brown than Hermione's, but it was hard to tell. The girl had dark smoky eye shadow, dark berry painted lips and glittery rouge. Her warm brown hair was styled with softly curled layers, silkier than hers. Hermione held out a hand. "Hello, I'm..."

"Oh, like I don't know who you are! You're Hermione Grang...er...Snape!" the girl exclaimed immediately, and Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Oh, and you're Severus Snape, and you're Harry Potter! I can't believe I finally get to meet you! This is so exciting. I know we'll all be good friends, won't we? Ron's told me all about you, of course...the things you've done! I..."

Hermione sipped her fizzy drink to hide her amusement. The girl was completely star-struck and babbling away about what she thought she knew of them, mostly tripe from the paper, as Severus' eyes turned stony, and Harry rolled his eyes.

Ron simply mumbled something softly to his sister, but Ginny shrugged and pulled Harry aside. "Let's go say hullo to Dean and Seamus," she said.

Severus gripped Hermione's elbow. "You haven't said hello to Mr....George," he said and turned. "I believe I have something to discuss with him. Shall we?"

Hermione stifled a chuckle and excused herself, then followed Severus.

"Insufferable girl," he grumbled once out of earshot.

She knew it was wrong to judge the girl so quickly, but she had to agree. "I get that reaction quite a bit, actually, especially from the younger years," Hermione said and waved back to Megan. "Sunita Gupta still gets that gobsmacked guppy look every now and again. It's part of being famous, I suppose."

"I hate it," he said, nodding to George and Angelina as Katie and Oliver left to talk to another group of friends.

"Hate what?" George asked.

"Being a celebrity," Hermione said.

Angelina shrugged, smiling. "I suppose you should have thought of that *before* you helped save the wizarding world."

"She was doomed to her fate the day she tackled a troll in the girls' loo," Severus said, giving her a sardonic grin. "That was the first of your many exploits, I do believe."

"Yes, her pivotal move from mere swot to a loyal and brave Gryffindor," George said, pretending to wipe away a tear. "Fred and I were so proud of her ever since."

"Didn't you call her that annoying priss in our sixth year?" Angelina asked with a grin before Hermione could defend herself.

"Well, Miss Perfect Prefect took a page out of Percy's book and kept trying to thwart our product development," George replied. Severus cocked an eyebrow at him, and George raised his glass to him, adding, "And our good professor here helped save our arses multiple times."

"Someone had to sort out the experiments and hazardous concoctions you two created," Severus said, scowling slightly at him. "You put quite a few students into the hospital that year."

"Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey kept copies of your notes on the antidotes," George said with a smirk. "They came in quite handy. So, Severus, still up on your potions skills? I could use a wizard with your talents."

Severus' lip curved upward slightly. "I do believe that Healers Earl Midgley, Gerhard Callicott, Akshaya Kumagar, Maryanna Pinchuk and Arthur Schopenhauer currently have that honor."

"Yes," George said, placing his hand on his heart. "The Healers in the Hector Dagworth-Granger Poison and Potions Accidents Ward and the Thaddeus Turkell Transfiguration Accidents Ward are *soo* helpful. As well as Healers Sengi Podhuvan, Leonia Henkin and Harvey Freidman from the Archibald Alderton Accidental Magic

Ward, and Galen Cavallaro, David Cadwallader and Joanna Hibert on the Spell Damage Ward. They send their regards, by the way."

Severus lifted his glass and said, "Touché," with a sardonic grin as Angelina laughed softly.

"And how is it that you know all the Healers at St. Mungo's?" Hermione asked, unamused that they knew so many Healers by name. "What are you doing that's so dangerous?"

"Relax, Hermione," Severus said with a smirk. "I occasionally consult with the Healers on the Accidental Poisonings and Potions Mishaps Ward."

"As well as some of the cases caused by Dark Arts or Dark Artifacts," Harry said, joining the group.

"And just how many Healers do you know?" Hermione asked Harry, a bit more sharply than she intended.

Harry turned his head and blushed. "Not all of them," he replied softly.

"Comes with the territory, right, Harry?" Ginny asked with a smirk. "It's not that bad, Hermione. At least they get prompt attention, being on such familiar terms with so many of them."

Somehow Hermione didn't find that at all reassuring, remembering how concerned she'd been the last time he'd been laid up in the hospital.

"I see you escaped the Hermione-look-alike," George stated, slyly pointing to Ron and his girlfriend.

Ginny scrunched her nose. "She is nothing like Hermione."

Hermione turned to look, catching Ron's eye as Amelia leaned against him and ran her fingers through his hair. "Clingy, isn't she?"

Ron blushed, trying to subtly disengage the girl as he turned his attention back to Seamus. Severus smirked and took a sip of his drink.

On the other side of the room, the boys started laughing. Hermione hoped it had something to do with Quidditch.

A short while later, Hermione dismissed herself from her friends to go use the loo. On her way back to the party, she ran into Ron.

"Avoidin' me are you?" he asked, clearly somewhat inebriated.

"Ron, every time I see you, you've been across the room," she said and tried to side-step him.

He reached out and grabbed her arm. "You look pretty."

"Thank you. You look well," she lied. He was clearly smashed, his hair was mussed, his tie was crooked, and he had lipstick smudges on his face.

"Hermione..." he said as she tried to pass him again. She stopped. "I miss you."

"I'm..." she started to say but she faltered. She missed him too, just not in the same way he meant.

"With Snape," he said, downcast. "You don't have to say it, it's obvious. You've been hangin' on him all evening."

Hermione's eyes widened at his statement. "I've hardly been hanging all over him!" In fact, other than his hand placed possessively on her lower back whenever she was talking to one or more of the guys, Severus had merely stood beside her, making every attempt at polite conversation. "We've been socializing, that's all!"

"He's been hoverin' o'er you all nigh'," Ron whined, his ears going red. "You haven't even said Happy Christmas to me."

She smiled indulgently. "Happy Christmas, Ron," she said sincerely. "But I'll be seeing you tomorrow. You'll be coming over for Christmas."

"We'll be share ta-night," he snapped, staggering slightly. "But don't worry, I won't be bugging you and your git."

She refrained from rolling her eyes. "He's not a git, Ron. I know you've had dealings with him at the Ministry, and you've gotten on well enough the few times I've seen you together."

"Shat was work," he said defensively as he leaned against the wall. "Dis is differen', in'n' it?"

"Ron, you're... wrong. Isn't it time to get along with him?" she asked. He was pissed drunk, and in a way she still felt sorry for him. He needed a decent witch to care for him, not some clinging Lethifold in high heel sling-backs and too much make-up.

Ron hung his head. "Are you happy?"

Hermione smiled as she considered her answer. "Yes, Ron, I'm happy. He's good to me." She didn't really want to tell him more than that so as not to hurt his feelings. She was happy with Severus. Even though he could be moody, they had actually come a long way as a couple. "I need to get back."

Ron stood up and leaned forward. For a moment, Hermione thought he might stumble and reached out to steady him. Instead, he leaned down and kissed her gently on the cheek. "I'm glad you're happy," he mumbled, his breath hot on her ear. "Happy Christmas, Hermione."

He stood and ambled away from her, and she watched him go. She felt a deep sadness for him, knowing he was unhappy, but there wasn't anything she could do for him. She turned to go back to the party and saw Severus standing in the hallway. His face was set, his expression stony. He turned on his heel and walked into the parlor. She let out a heavy sigh. Oh yes, progress, she thought ruefully.

When she entered the drawing room, Ginny ran up to her. "Are you all right?"

Hermione shook her head. "Severus is angry." Ginny's head tilted in confusion. "He saw Ron and me... He kissed my cheek when I told him I was happy with Severus and wished me a happy Christmas. Severus walked away before I could say anything."

Ginny nodded. "I'm sure he'll understand when you explain things. Why don't you go talk to Luna for a bit? She'll cheer you up."

Hermione smiled weakly and nodded. "I'll ask her if she got rid of the Wertzles in the mistletoe."

"It's Nargles, I think," Ginny said with a chuckle.

~G~

Ginny watched Hermione cross the room to where Luna stood with Neville, Dean and Susan. She turned and walked into the doorway of the parlor. Mrs. Longbottom was sitting with a few of her friends, listening to the wireless and chatting, but Severus wasn't there. She tried another room, and another. Sighing, she cast a warming charm on her robes and slipped outside. He was standing on the top steps that led to the garden. She approached him, making sure her heels made loud enough clicking noises to alert him. "Hello, Severus."

"I'm not in the mood, Ginevra," he growled out without turning to acknowledge her.

"Misinterpretations and assumptions will do that," she said softly as she moved to stand beside him.

His head snapped in her direction. "Pardon me?"

She gazed out at the grounds as she said, "Making assumptions leads to misunderstandings."

He turned his head so that he stared at the lush garden landscape, buried under a layer of snow.

She turned to face him. "Look, I know my brother can be a git, but really, I thought things were getting better between you?"

"Mr. Weasley..."

"Not you and my blockhead brother you and Hermione," she corrected him. "My brother is going through witches like socks, trying to replace her. This latest one should attest to that!"

He snorted at her, still staring straight ahead.

"Look, Hermione told me what happened," she stated, forging forward. "Ron apparently asked her if she was happy, and she said yes. He kissed her cheek and wished her happy Christmas, and I believe her. Maybe instead of jumping to conclusions you should ask..." she faltered when he turned the full force of his glare on her. Ginny swallowed and lowered her tone. "Did you ask her what happened or just walk away, assuming the worst?"

"That's none of your concern," he snapped.

She shrugged. "Right, because I like seeing my best friend hurt and miserable but forcing a smile to hide it while her mate, my friend as well, is outside freezing his arse off, wallowing in self..."

"I do not wallow."

She suppressed her smirk. "After everything you've been through, do you really think she'll go back to Ron?"

He turned his head to look at her.

"She moved her stuff into your house, and you've bought bed linen! Tonight she's stayed with you all evening, smiling at you each time you joked or carried on friendly banter with her friends."

His eyebrow rose questioningly.

"Well, for you that was friendly banter. I do have to consider the source."

The side of his lip pulled back into a smirk. She knew he needed to calm down a bit more before she took him back in; his expression had yet to soften. "The gardens are lovely, aren't they?"

His eyebrow rose again as he regarded her.

"Would you rather I remarked on the stars?" she asked, unable to contain her amused smile.

"No," he replied, his voice low and controlled. "Aren't you cold?"

*Good*, she was getting somewhere. "I had a warming charm on my robes," she replied and felt grateful when he refreshed the charm. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, stowing his wand away.

"So when do you plan on giving it to her?" Ginny asked, the warmth of the gown not doing much for the cold that touched the exposed skin of her bare arms, chest and neck.

He turned to face her. "I had hoped to do so tomorrow morning."

Ginny smiled. "That's perfect."

"I thank you for your assistance acquiring it," he said, clasping his hands behind his back.

Any other wizard and she'd have been suspicious. "You're welcome. I know she'll love it."

There was a teeny flicker of uncertainty in his expression, and then immediately his normal mask was back in place.

She grinned, pleased that she was finally beginning to be able to read those minute inflections he occasionally let slip around her. "It will be all right. I know she'll love it," she said again to reassure him.

They stood there for a short while until she noticed his shoulder relax ever so slightly, almost unperceivable, except it was what she'd been waiting for. "I think I'd like to go back in now," she said as if he'd been the one to escort her outside for a bit of frigid cold air.

~H~

Hermione and Harry were talking with Neville, Dean, Seamus and Susan about the inequity of magical legislation regarding magical Beings when Ginny returned to the party and walked over to where her brothers were talking Quidditch with Oliver and Angelina. Harry smiled at Ginny, then turned his attention to their discussion about werewolf rights and the possibility of overturning the current anti-werewolf legislation.

Seamus' arguments were that if werewolves were given sanctions, others Beings, like vampires and banshees, would want them too. Harry argued that if proper precautions were taken, such as holding cells and Wolfsbane Potion, werewolves posed no real threat to wizarding society. Susan, who'd admitted that she'd been saved by Professor Lupin twice during the final battle and recalled that during his year as a professor no student had been attacked by him in his wolf form, somewhat reluctantly agreed with Harry, to a point. She was still afraid of them though.

When Severus finally returned to the party, he was quieter at first, but soon relaxed. Ron stayed across the room with Amelia still clinging to his arm as if he'd float away. It saddened Hermione seeing her friend unhappy, even though they'd been estranged since the Bonding.

One of the times she'd been watching Ron, Severus leaned close to her and said her name, "Hermione?" softly.

She shook her head, not really wanting to talk about what happened in front of everyone. "Later?" she asked and turned back to the conversation. He watched her, his dark eyes not leaving her face until she blushed and shook her head again. Unfortunately, his expression turned stony again.

When the party ended, and after all the best wishes and farewells were said, everyone Apparated home, Ron and his date arriving the same time as Severus and Hermione. Severus' fingers loosened on her arm, but he didn't let go, guiding her into the house. Ginny gave Hermione an understanding smile as Harry offered everyone drinks. "I think I've had plenty," Ginny said with a stretch and a fake yawn. "I think I'm ready for bed." She turned to Ron and Amelia. "I'll show you to your rooms?"

"Excellent idea, Ginevra," Severus said, adding, "Hermione and I bid you all goodnight," a bit too pointedly.

She was about to rebut him, but decided not to. They needed to talk, and she knew that he'd be more receptive in the bedroom. "Severus is right, I'm tired. We'll see you all in the morning." She led the way upstairs with him right behind her. However, he was very quiet once they reached the room.

Severus turned her so that he could unfasten her dress robes.

"I don't like seeing Ron so unhappy," she said sadly, staring at the pattern of the wainscoting. His fingers moved slowly, making casual flicks on her skin. "I think he's finally come to accept our Bonding, and I know that Ginny keeps telling me he goes out, but I didn't like the girl he was with."

He was silent, so she turned her head to look at him. He cocked an eyebrow and she shook her head wishing he'd understand. "He's my friend, and I still care deeply for him, but I wish I do want him to be happy."

"You're too kind," he said, opening the dress so it slid down her body and pooled at her ankles.

She turned to face him, rolling her eyes as his gaze swept downward. She'd worn the 'black get up', as he called it, for him, but obviously it was turning out to be too much of a distraction. Unfortunately, she didn't have her dressing robe. He trailed his fingertips along the top of the garter as he stared at her breasts. "Severus, we need to talk."

"I had other things in mind," he said, his hands reaching out to encircle her to unfasten the bra.

She clasped his forearms to stop him. "About Ron and me; why did you just walk away? Why don't you trust me?"

He sighed and turned, taking off his frockcoat, his fingers sliding down the buttons, unfastening them as they went.

She sighed and plopped down on the bed with a heavy sigh.

"What about you and Ronald Weasley?" he asked, his tone coolly indifferent as he unfastened the buttons on his shirt.

"He's my friend," she stated, trying not to sound petulant.

He sat down next to her. "I'm well aware that you were his *girlfriend* prior to our Bonding," he said as he removed his boots.

She turned on the bed, one leg bent with her foot behind her other knee, to face him, still in her undergarments and stockings. His gaze locked onto her knickers for a moment before sweeping up her body to her face. One side of her lips twitched in response. "He was. I have never lied to you about that. But things changed," she said. "Severus, it's over between us, it has been since, well, you."

He nodded and turned to face her, sitting like she was and pulled her to him. She allowed him to pull her onto his lap. "I didn't like seeing him kiss you," he said, kissing her shoulder. "I may have overreacted, but it was either leave or hex him, and I know some rather creative hexes."

"I bet you do," she replied with a smile, exclaiming in surprise as her bra gave, and he lowered her to the bed. His mouth descended on her breast, tantalizing her nipple deliciously. "D-do you want kids?"

"Not tonight," he said as his hand slid down to her knickers. "I'd rather you give me a book."

She inhaled sharply as his fingers found her sensitive spot perfectly. "But you're Oh!, going to to marry me, right?"

"Yes, someday," he said, nuzzling her neck. "Scoot over," he said, nudging her hip.

She complied. "When?"

"Hermione," he growled as he kissed his way down her stomach. "Not tonight."

She ran her fingers in his hair as he unfastened her garters. "June. Mr. Prince said June."

"Hermione," he growled as her knickers were pulled down to her ankles. "Shut up and just feel." He lifted her leg and stroked her with his tongue, sending a jolt through her.

"Severus, everyone will hear us!" she exclaimed as his skillful tongue found her clit.

He purred, "Let them," against her, making her moan in pleasure. He brought her to the brink of orgasm within minutes, but she was straining to remain quiet, but it was no use. He knew her body well, what she liked and what could push her to the edge and beyond.

"But my gods, we'll, be Severus!" She had tried to refrain from crying out, unsuccessfully, and fervently hoped that the boys hadn't heard her. Except he wasn't stopping, his tongue unrelenting, feeling oh, so good... tantalizing and driving her wild. She tried to squirm, but he held her firmly. "Severus!"

"What," he snapped, looking up at her.

"The walls are not *that* thick!" she explained, turning her head to find her wand.

"Fine," he snapped and reached for his wand. "*Muffliato*," he said softly, however Hermione noticed a slight twitch of his wrist as he made the sweeping motion for the spell.

"But everyone will know! Harry and Ron are right next door!" Hermione scooted up the bed so that she leaned against the headboard. "Harry will hear...!"

"The spell muffles all sounds," he said, turning back to face her.

"But it fills a surrounding area with an unidentifiable buzzing Harry and Ron will know!" she insisted, but his brow furrowed as if he didn't understand. "The spell fills the ears of everyone nearby with buzzing so that the caster can talk with whomever he or she wishes without being heard..."

"Buzzing, what buzzing? I'm fully aware of what the spell does, and where you learned it, because I invented it." He pulled her down to him and leaned over her, and she was surprised to feel his bare legs against hers. "If properly cast, it muffles conversations, including the sounds you'll make in the throes of passion. Besides," he purred as his hand slid seductively up her thigh, "I believe that Ginevra is with Harry and Ronald is with his date. I doubt they will be paying attention to us."

He lowered down to her core again and slid a finger inside of her. Hermione grabbed the covers of the bed as he seemed to suckle and chuckle against her sensitive nub while simultaneously tapping and stroking her canal. Suddenly, her body reacted, exploding with a fierceness that made her arch her back and curl her toes as she screamed out incoherently. She actually saw stars.

Severus pulled her legs up to him and entered her swiftly before she even came down from her unexpected orgasm, her mind still whirling, her body still pulsing, her core pulsating with each forceful thrust. "Please, no, oh gods..."

He smirked but didn't relent, driving into her mercilessly, the friction keeping the pressure deep within her building and straining up and out, throughout her lower body. "Too much, oh, gods... Yes!"

She grabbed her breasts to keep them from bouncing so much and he growled in appreciation. "That's it, touch yourself," he demanded. "Pinch them."

She did, shocked by the way it created intensified jolts down to her core, and at the feral lustful gleam in his eyes.

"Gods, you're so beautiful," he said, between clenched teeth. "Come for me, Hermione, come."

She tightened rather than relaxed, and he laughed softly. "Let it go. I'm so close. Come with me," he said, leaning forward a bit more. The angle made him thrust deeper, seemingly to electrify that one spot inside her. She heard him growl out her name in blissful satisfaction as he came in her, and she came; her orgasm rolled through her in crashing waves, through every fiber of her being, even more intense than before, tingling, pulsing and throbbing, and she felt herself gush. She saw red. She saw stars.

Then nothing.

"Hermione?"

She opened her eyes slowly, her mind seeming to emerge out of a fog. She felt his hand on her face

"Hermione?" Severus asked, deeply concerned.

She looked up at him and he smiled at her. She was in bed, wrapped lovingly in his arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his hand brushing her hair.

Hermione nodded, enjoying the warm headiness she felt from his caresses. "Yes, I think so."

He kissed her temple, and she felt wetness on the sides of her face.

"Sleep," he said softly.

"What happened?" she managed to ask.

He laughed softly. "You passed out," he said as he nuzzled her hair and pulled her tighter to him. "Go to sleep."

Hermione exhaled slowly, relaxing and drifted into sleep.

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Author's notes:

I have art! Proulxes drew the scene of Ginny and Severus standing on the top steps that led to the Longbottoms' garden. The expressions in the picture are exactly how I imagined they would be. I hope you go see it.

<http://proulxes.deviantart.com/art/Severus-and-Ginny-383574321>

## Christmas Surprises

*Chapter 51 of 63*

Christmas is a time of giving and family, however, Severus stoically endures a Christmas with the Potters and the Weasleys.



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Christmas Surprises

Severus woke with a start from a deep sleep by a sharp pain in his ribs and an excited exclamation. As he pushed himself up on his elbows in baffled and groggy surprise, he realized that Hermione had inadvertently dug him in the ribs as she had jackknifed forwards to get to her Christmas presents.

One large pile of gaily, some garishly, wrapped shapes were at the foot of the bed. He pushed himself up to lean against the headboard as Hermione sorted through the gifts, passing his back to him as she did. Although she tried to keep herself covered as she unwrapped her gifts, her bare back and the tantalizing peeks and occasional slips of the sheet were a pleasure to watch.

Eventually, two piles of presents sat on the foot of the bed. As per usual, his pile contained a number of books and a few new Potions instruments, although Harry had given him a Merlin's Sangrail vial containing bright green Dragon's Blood Elixir and a Blood Arts Detection Shale. The Longbottoms had given him a pruning-harvesting kit and a blue-tailed skink in a magical wicker cage. Luna's note said that the skink ate something called Addleknots, whatever that was, that caused something called Muddleknots. He knew it would likely prefer eating flies, crickets, and other insects. Too bad he couldn't use it as a potions ingredient. Worse came to worst, he could feed it to one of Hagrid's creatures or his owl.



Ginevra had given him an Osiris cup with an image of a Bennu bird, that closely resembled a colorful lapwing or heron but with a more powerful body, like that of an eagle, with feathers of blues, reds and gold and a long tail. The Bennu was the mythological symbol of the Egyptian phoenix that represented creation, resurrection and renewal, corresponding with the rising of the Nile and the sun. The implied reference was not lost on him, nor the not too subtle reminder of a previous conversation that year regarding the bird.

Hermione had given him a nice pair of dragon hide gloves and two books, one on Chinese Herbology and another, *The Alchemical Philosophy of Transmutation of Elements of the Hellenistic Greeks* that he was looking forward to reading.

Hermione sat crossed-legged in front of him, the blankets wrapped around her waist, opening the last of her presents as Severus waited patiently for her to finish so he could pin her down and suckle her pert nipple. Oddly, he was enjoying watching Hermione fussing with the presents and felt a strange sense of fondness towards her. Aside from the physical attraction he felt for her gods! she was fantastically exciting in bed, exceeding his expectations, growing more confident and sexually adventurous with each passing encounter. Severus was finding that he was becoming ever more... contented... in her company.

She had three more: his: one, a book, *The Adaptation of the Greek Alphabet in the Old Italic and Anatolian Cultures*, a second, a Foe Detector worn on a neck chain, and the third, which was charmed to be the last one she'd notice.

Her initial attitude towards their Bonding had been frustrating to say the least. He was still struggling with the irritation that he had felt when she had refused to believe his explanation about the significance of their magical connection. But time had lent him perspective. Ginevra had mentioned once that Hermione's lack of comprehension was probably to do with her Muggle background. That because she was Muggle-born, Hermione couldn't fully comprehend the complexity or the expectations associated with the Bonding, nor recognized legitimate legal, social, libidinal aspect of the magical Bond.

Severus sighed. This revelation, and his growing affection for the infuriating young witch, was starting to make him think that spending a lifetime with her would not be so bad.

After carefully reading both sides of the small accompanying tag, Hermione set the Foe Detector pendant aside and picked up the last small present. She opened up the small box and stared at the slit in the velvet-covered padding.

"You have to say yes, in order to have it," he said softly.

She turned and looked up at him in confusion. Severus sighed as Hermione continued to stare at him as if not comprehending what he'd said.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I'm not sure what to say?" she replied, sounding more like a question than an answer.

*She asked me only last night if I intended to marry her, so what is the problem?* He used a wandless Summoning Charm to pull her back so that she was sitting next to him at the head of the bed and placed his arm around her, holding her close. "Well, how about yes. Will you?" He was beginning to think that maybe Ginevra was mistaken. *Maybe she isn't ready.*

Hermione bit her lip as she regarded him, the box held open on her palm in her lap. "Will I what?"

"You know what," he said with an exasperated sigh. *Is she just being difficult on purpose or am I wrong in thinking enough time has passed?*

"Actually, considering the myriad of possibilities that it could be, I think I'd like you to be a bit more specific."

She was smiling, and either she was playing with him or she was clueless to his intentions. He was reasonably certain it was the former. "I was rather hoping you'd be inclined, but if you aren't, then it's inconsequential." *There. Two can play this game. Stew on that.*

"Well, it's a lovely box, thank you," she replied, closing the lid with a snap.

*Is she kidding?* He quickly concealed his surprise at her comment. She leaned forward to put the box on the pile of her other gifts *She can't possibly be this dense.* He grabbed her hips and forced her back into place beside him. "That's not an answer."

"I wasn't aware that there was a specific question," she said cheekily.

He exhaled in exasperation. "I asked if you would marry me," he growled out.

She giggled. Actually giggled. "No, not quite."

He pushed her so that she fell over, and he leaned over her. "I quite clearly *did* ask you," he growled out, pinning her. She stretched out under him, her leg rubbing on his groin. *Saucy witch.* "So, yes or no will you or won't you?"

"Hmmm," she hummed, her eyes rolling up as she considered his proposal. "I might need convincing you're serious about marrying me."

He pushed back, leaning above her, both of his arms fully extended as he stared down at her. *Convincing? Haven't I been convincing enough over the last six, well, technically four months?* He studied every aspect of her expression, the way she bit her lip and the sparkle in her eyes, realizing she was teasing him. "All right, I'll give you time to consider it," he said and rose off her, giving her every indication that he intended to get dressed.

"What?" she screeched as she sat up abruptly.

Now he was going to play her game. "I do believe your holding up breakfast, my dear."

She scrambled across the bed, dragging the sheet with her, kneeling beside him as he shoved his feet into his pants and stood up. He was amused by her modesty. "What was in the box?"

"I'm sure you can guess," he said as he pulled on his shirt.

"Severus! Stop being ridiculous!" Hermione balled her hands into fists, still clutching the sheet to her.

He could almost feel her magical energy crackling around her and almost hear her thoughts, 'Why was he being so aggravating? Why couldn't he just ask her properly with the ring, and not a stupid empty box...?' He could not help the smirk that crossed his face at her frustration. But that bloody book of Narcissa's, *Consigliare ab Hector Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac*, had mentioned the idea as one of its suggestions.

She jumped off the bed and moved over to him, her focus on him while wrapping the sheet around her body. "But I want it!"

"Do you?" He caught her by the waist and pulled her to him roughly, making her lose her hold on the sheet. "How much?"

Her eyes went wide. "How much?" she parroted his question in response.

He grabbed her quickly and turned them as he backed her against the wardrobe door, pinning her. "How much do you want it?" He covered her mouth with his, stifling her comment, inaudible, as his tongue sought hers. His one hand pinned her hips, the other entangled in her hair as he plundered her, ravaged her hungrily against the wardrobe, and she responded. He stopped long enough to say, "Because it comes with certain conditions and a serious commitment," gruffly in her ear as he lifted one of her legs, rubbing himself against her, creating a friction that made him fully engorged and her whimper.

"How much of a commitment?" she asked as her leg wrapped around his waist.

"The rest of your life," he replied as he lifted her other leg, pinning her to the wardrobe. He thrust against her, feeling her wetness soaking into his cotton pants. She gasped, trying to meet him with each thrust to increase the contact. "Forever mine."

"That's what you said about the Bonding," she said saucily.

Grinning against her lips, he reached down and yanked his pants down below his bum and entered her, pushing upwards hard, making the wardrobe wobble slightly. She gasped again, her head rolling back, then forward, her lips crashing back onto his. He tightened his hold on her hair and jerked her head slightly, controlling her, grinding into her with each thrust he made. She whimpered, her nails sinking into his shoulder and arm as he moved inside her. She was glorious, responding back with equal ferocity.

Physically, they were perfect for each other. He knew it; she had to know it. He reached down as he sunk into her and clasped her bum, holding her tightly to him before he turned and dropped her on the bed, never falling out of her. She'd yelped, her legs tightening around his hips and her hands clamped down on his biceps as she clung to him. He grasped her legs, pushing her up as he brought each ankle to rest on his shoulders. With magic, he moved her forwards with each thrust until his knees were on the bed by her bum. Now she was trapped under him, completely exposed to his gaze. Her breasts bounced with each forward plunge he made, the bed rocking under her. Her hair spread out framing her face, her eyes riveted on his. She was glorious. For him, the deep penetration increased the sensations around the head of his cock, added with the erotic appeal of his testicles banging on her vulva with audible slaps.

She tried to squirm, each attempt making her sheath tighten around him increasing his pleasure. Her eyes, staring up at his, showed complete abandonment, as she gave herself fully to him, and he loved it. She closed her eyes momentarily, her lips opened, lost in her own sensations as he ground himself on her with each thrust, his pubic hairs raking her clitoris. "You like this don't you?" he asked, his voice thick and husky.

Her head bobbed with each thrust, so he couldn't tell if she nodded or not, but her muddled stutter of, "Yes-yes," was enough. She looked at him, straight at him, her eyes so expressive and open.

"Gods, you're beautiful," he purred as she smiled, using the fingers of one of her hands to trace her breast. She squeezed her buttocks, attempting to meet his thrusts, each time molding her velvet warmth into an exhilarating counter... it was driving him on, urging him to move harder and faster. She inhaled and rolled her head back, her eyes fluttering closed, and then opening, her gaze locking on his.

His testicles tightened as an intense pressure built up at his base, his release imminent. She was moaning and squirming, her hands tightening on his arms so that her nails nearly hurt. He didn't care if she drew blood, she was in throes of pleasure and just that thought alone made the pain heighten his own. Spasms began to roll from the base of his penis. She stiffened, her legs now pushing on his chest.

"Will. You. Be. My. Wife," he said each word as he plunged into her.

Her head rolled back against the bed as her inner muscles clamped down on him. "Yes, yes," she chanted. Her mouth and eyes opened, and he smirked as he felt a gush of warm fluid eject from her, hot and warm on his skin, and his testicles relaxed and loosened in response, increasing the tension building within him. She shuddered, pointed her toes, her head rolling side to side and she cried out.

"Say my name," he insisted feeling her orgasm rip through her. "Say it."

"Sever...rus, oh gods, Severusss!" she cried out her head thrashing side to side. "Oh, Severus... gods, Severus... Severus..."

His own orgasm broke, tearing through him, the rushing release of warm, jetting pulses down his penis shaft, made him thrust one last time into her, burying himself as deeply as possible into her wet canal. He growled as he spilled his seed, his hot come jetting out into her.

"I'll hold you to this, witch," he said, still breathing hard. "You're mine." He rested his forehead against her neck, feeling her chest rise and fall with his. He smiled as he inhaled slowly, enjoying the smell of her heated flesh, the sweat in her hair, feeling a sense of satisfied completion as he braced himself above her.

He smiled contentedly watching her recover as well. When the pounding stopped in his chest and she was breathing normally, he smirked at her. "Now, how about breakfast?"

"I want my ring," she said, leaning up on her elbows. She looked utterly ravishing with her hair falling around her flushed face and her lower lip caught deliberately in her teeth.

He reached under his pillow, summoning the ring to his hand and rolled to his side so he lay stretched out next to her. He hoped she liked the ring, but then, she'd rarely worn jewelry while at school, and she seemed to like Narcissa's jewelry, but he had no idea what her preferences were.

She watched as he slid it on her finger with a look of excited anticipation. The reds and greens of the large stone and the surrounding diamonds glittered in the light. Her brow furrowed in confusion. "What stone is this?"

"Magical bloodstone, *Dragon Heliotrope*, Hermione, from a dragon's lair, a very magical stone," he said, examining the ring on her hand. "It derives its name from Greek words meaning sun and turning. I'm told that bloodstone is used for the circulation of all energy in the body and helps to remove energy blocks. It can enhance your healing powers by increasing the flow of your life energy."

"And it's red and green," she said with a smile. "Slytherin and Gryffindor."

"Life and blood," he corrected her. He wanted to be more than opposing houses to her.

"I love it!" she cried out and hugged him.

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Hermione and Severus finally climbed out of bed, at nearly eight o'clock, after a lovely lie in. She opted to wear her new chocolate brown Weasley jumper, a lovely shawl-necked cable knit, and her favorite jeans. As he reached for his usual attire, Hermione handed him the new charcoal Irish jumper that Pomona had knitted for him, asking, "Why don't you wear this?" much to Severus' apparent chagrin, if she read his expression right. "Don't you like it?"

"It's a fine jumper, but I prefer my usual clothes," he said, putting the jumper back on the bed.

She picked it back up, loving the feel of the soft Irish wool. "It's going to be a casual day, and the Weasley's all wear their jumpers each Christmas," she said, not going to give up that easily. "Besides, I think you're quite handsome when you wear jumpers." His eyebrow rose as he angled his head downward, glaring at her as if she were mocking him. "I like the way you look in your trousers and a jumper. More relaxed, approachable, comfortable." *And sexy*, she added to herself.

"You don't approve of the way I normally dress?" he asked as he buttoned up his shirt.

She grabbed her jeans, sliding her legs into them as he watched. "It's fine at school, but we're on holiday. Besides, you will be dressed in your formal attire this evening. Don't you want to relax until then?"

"Being around Mr. Potter and the Weasleys is hardly relaxing," he said.

She had hoped that he'd be less formal with her friends and use their given names.

"One should never let one's guard down around George or Charles Weasley."

She looked up at him as she fastened her fly. "Charlie was a troublemaker like Fred and George?"

"Yes, Fred and George took after their older sibling, although their penchant for mischief was uniquely bothersome. Charles Weasley was quite inventive as a student, experimented all too frequently, and liked being in places he should not have gone such as the Forbidden Forest. Professor Dumbledore placed warning wards on the edge of the forest, and he still managed to find a way in. From what I remember he had quite a rapport with the centaurs as well as a friendly association with the merpeople, although I don't believe he became fluent in Mermish."

"I never knew that," she said as she donned her blouse and then picked up his jumper. "Please."

"Since you insist. However, in quid pro quo, then I will likewise be able to make such demands," he said with a smirk.

"As long as I can say yes or no to the request," she said, eyeing him suspiciously.

He laughed at her and donned the charcoal jumper and his black trousers. "You are beginning to bargain like a Slytherin, Hermione."

"Am I? Well, then I have you to blame," she said cheekily.

"You have a long way to go to match me," he chided her back.

Together they descended the stairs to the kitchen, Severus following Hermione with an air about him as if he were descending into the Pit of Despair. Hermione turned to say something to him, and he smiled at her, making her chuckle softly at its insincerity. "It will not be that bad, Severus," she said softly, hoping no one heard her.

He leaned forward and grumbled softly, "Speak for yourself," apparently so as not to have anyone overhear him either as they continued down the stairs. "Whom do you suppose is making our breakfast, the house-elf that calls you a Mudblood in the *kindest* regard or Potter? I recall that he can burn beans and toast with the best of them. Or Ronald? I happen to know he is utterly hapless in the kitchen. Ginevra perhaps? From what I've heard, she has never quite learned her mother's skills in the kitchen. Or perhaps you are going to whip up some of your famous mushroom soup?"

"How did you...?" she stammered, wondering how he'd heard about her mushroom soup or Harry's and Ron's cooking inabilities. Well, that wasn't fair; Harry was a fair cook, although the first few months in hiding had been challenging because they she hadn't packed much in the way of food.

"Professor Phineas Nigellus Black, of course," Severus said smugly. "He wasn't only your spy on me, Hermione; he relayed everything he heard and saw to me as well. More so as he felt an affinity to Hogwarts' *second* Slytherin Headmaster."

"Second Slytherin Headmaster..." Hermione parroted in surprise. "But I thought..."

He nudged her to keep walking. "Yes, I'm the second Headmaster from Slytherin house. Although there are always at least one or two Slytherin alumni professors on staff, since the Head of House must be a Slytherin alumni, there have only ever been two who have risen to the seat of Headmaster."

"But why? I thought that Slytherins are ambitious?"

"The Board of Governors are not unbiased, and the house affiliation is strongly slanted toward Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. There are usually only one or two Slytherins voted onto the board, and Lucius held the honor of singular Slytherin for eight years."

"Really?" she asked. That was another injustice she would have to look into. She'd always assumed that there were three representatives of each house. "But *in* *Hogwarts: A History*, the seats should be even."

"Should, but are not," he replied. "Or don't you believe me?"

"Oh, I believe you, I'm just astounded, that's all."

When Hermione entered the kitchen, Ron was already seated at the table, nursing a mug of tea with a small bottle of hangover potion sitting next to him. "Morning, Ron," Hermione said softly as she sat down across from him. Severus leaned against the doorway with his arms crossed. "Happy Christmas."

Ron glanced up, his ears turned red, and he turned his focus back on his cup as if the remains of his tea held the answer to the universe. "Morning, Hermione." He glanced at Severus without turning his head. "Snape."

Hermione looked quickly at Severus, and one side of his mouth twitched. "Ronald," he intoned politely.

Ron looked at Hermione without moving his head, peering at her from under his sleep-messed hair. "Happy Christmas, 'Mione."

Kreacher set a mug of tea on the table near Hermione. "Thank you, Kreacher," she said, receiving a grumbled reply as he carried another over to Severus. She took a sip and made a small smile. "Did you sleep all right?"

Ron glanced up as if she'd asked the most incredulous question.

"Where is Amelia?" she asked, trying again at conversation.

"Went home," he said, drinking his tea.

Footsteps on the stairs made them both turn to look at the doorway. Harry ambled in, followed closely by Ginny, both greeting Severus as they shuffled by him. "You had a lively morning," Ginny said with a stretch, then added quietly in Severus' direction, "Trouble with the wardrobe this morning?"

Severus glared at her, but she hardly flinched. "Why not join us for breakfast?" she asked and walked over to sit next to Ron. "Happy Christmas, Ron."

He only mumbled inaudibly in response. She placed her hand on his back, but he shook his head. "It's all right. Happy Christmas, sis. Harry."

"Happy Christmas, Ron," Harry said, reaching for the milk as Kreacher set a mug before him. "You too, Hermione, Severus, Happy Christmas."

"The same," Severus replied.

"Amelia gone?" Ginny asked as Kreacher placed dishes of toast, marmalades and poached eggs on the table.

Ron nodded. "Can't blame her," Ginny said as Kreacher added dishes of sausages, fried mushrooms and black pudding. "Are you going to be okay?"

Hermione reached for the toast and eggs as Severus sat down next to her.

Suddenly, Ginny jumped up, asking, "What is that?" as she reached across the table for Hermione's left hand just as Hermione was about to take a bite of her toast. "Is it? It is! Oh my congratulations!" She looked over at Severus with a huge grin, still holding onto Hermione's fingers. "You've asked her?"

"Hermione has consented to be my wife," Severus said as he helped himself to some sausages.

Harry watched the exchange with an odd expression. "Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked, finally freeing her hand. He simply shook his head and took a long drink from his tea.

"Well, that's brilliant," Ron spat and got to his feet.

"Ron," Hermione called out to him as he stormed from the kitchen.

Ginny sat back down. "Let him go. It'll be okay. He just has to get used to the idea, that's all."

"It's been months," Harry said sadly. "You'd think he'd be okay with it by now."

"One would think," Severus said softly.

"So, did you get it last night or this morning?" Ginny asked, and Hermione smiled abashedly, nodding, feeling her face warm up.

"This morning? So, when is the date?"

"June," Severus stated and both girls turned to look at him. "As soon as Hermione finishes school," he said with absolute finality.

"We haven't even discussed this," she replied in shock. "And my parents are still in Australia! I can't get married without them there."

Severus regarded her steadily. "And I can assume you know where in Australia?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "I assume they're in Melbourne?" she said with a shrug. "My father always spoke fondly about the time he served in Australia. He took my mum to Sydney before I was born, but I thought Melbourne would be safer."

Severus was looking at her but she could tell that he was deep in thought. "I simply planted the suggestion and suppressed all memories of me that they had a daughter."

Ginny covered her mouth, Harry nodded in understanding, having heard the story before, but Severus frowned at her. "Explain," he said in a low inquiring tone that made Hermione uncomfortable.

Hermione held her mug with both hands. "I read up on every type of mind alteration spells I could; I even bought a few books on the subject by leading witches and wizards in the field."

Severus nodded slowly, as did Harry, only Harry's expression was much more open and encouraging.

"I didn't want to just Obliviate them, I wanted to suppress the memories, bury them deep so that they could be revived someday, but most of the spells removed or altered memory, not suppressed them. I found one that segregated memories so that they could be bound, like being boxed up or contained, and when added to the Forgetfulness Charm was supposed to..."

"Binding your parents' memories to what?" Severus cocked an eyebrow at her. "Let me get this straight, you read about the spells and applied them without knowing precisely what you were doing?"

"I researched this very carefully! It was very clear in the book how to do it, and the execution, the wand movement, the after glow effect before the memories were blocked... the radiant glow around the ears was a dim yellow, which I suppose is a butter soft glow like the book said..." She slumped a bit in her seat. "I know it sounds horrible, but I needed to do something!"

Severus exhaled as he shook his head. "When we get back to the castle, you will pull out all the memories you have of the spells, which books and exactly what you did, and I'll review it in the Pensieve. Memory binding spells are to lock certain tragic events and memories within you, by binding them to your magical core, thus creating a type of magical shield. Your parents are not magical, Hermione, you could very well have eliminated all memories of you irrevocably."

"I'm sure that the wizards in the Oblivator's office can sort it out," Harry said, looking hopeful. "It sounds like the spell worked."

"Once I have the memories pulled, maybe we can consult with the Obliviators," Hermione said, and Severus nodded once, but he looked skeptical.

"Perhaps," he said softly. "Once we see the sources and the incantations, I'll know more. For now, let's not worry about it."

"So June, then?" Ginny asked. "Do you know what type of wedding you want?"

Hermione shook her head. "Simple, family and friends no Rita Skeeter."

"I can assure you she will not be in attendance," Severus stated firmly. "And that nosy wench at the Ministry will hear about it after the fact as well, if I have my way."

"Won't your engagement show up on the magical register?" Harry asked. "It did for Neville and Luna, apparently. Maggie Whitmire sent us more forms, demanding that we set our wedding date."

Severus smirked. "That bothersome witch sends me notices weekly. So we can expect that old gossipmonger to alert the ~~Prophet~~ the day after Boxing day."

"Do you know where you want to have the wedding?" Ginny asked, ignoring Severus' comment.

Hermione shrugged. "I dunno, a small church wedding, possibly. I don't know much about wizarding weddings, only Muggle ones."

"My great-grandfather offered his house," Severus stated, "and you have accepted."

"I've what?" Hermione gasped, nearly spitting out her eggs, and even Harry looked up in surprise.

"He has offered and you accepted," Severus stated.

"I did no such thing," Hermione said, putting down her fork. "I mean it's a lovely offer, and I appreciate him doing so, but we've not discussed it."

"Yesterday you didn't decline," Severus stated. "Neither did you accept, but by not answering you've conceded to his request."

Ginny shrugged, smiling at Hermione. "It is tradition to have the wedding at home, unless it's a huge, formal affair; then there are the Corneille's botanical gardens and ballroom, the Hertford-Wintringham Court, or Thurkell Park... So what's his house like, Severus' great-grandfather?"

"You could have it here," Harry suggested, then shrugged when Ginny gave him an odd look. "I was merely suggesting... I'm sure that it would be all right. If not, we could have it at our house whichever one you pick, Gin."

Hermione smiled at Harry. "Still deciding, are you?"

"It's a big decision," Harry said, stabbing his eggs with his fork.

"Scotland, on the Western Coast up near the Kyles of Bute is absolutely gorgeous," Ginny exclaimed with a smile, "but the house is smaller. I want kids, and so does Harry, only we can't agree on how many."

"Four," Harry stated firmly. "Maybe five..."

"Three maybe four," Ginny quipped back, "and not all right away. I want to wait a year or two."

"She wants to play Quidditch," Harry replied.

Hermione nodded. "Professionally?"

"I'm going to try out for the Holyhead Harpies, Kenmare Kestrels or the Wigtown Wanderers," she said happily. "If not, I thought I'd take Healer training like my mum."

"You'll have to work at least three years at St. Mungo's if you chose their program, although five is preferred. The Ehrenreich School of Medicine for Women has a four year, accredited Healer and Midwifery program as does the Elizabeth Blackwell School for Midwifery and Healing in Salem, Massachusetts," Severus stated, obviously aware of the programs from giving career advice as Head of House for sixteen years. Harry frowned at him for that suggestion, making Hermione chuckle inaudibly. Ginny would not leave England, even to attend the best Healer program in the wizarding world.

"If you want, I can write you a letter of recommendation," Severus offered.

"Thank you," Ginny said with a huge smile. "I'll let you know if I decide on applying." She turned to face Hermione. "So, you never said what Mr. Prince's house is like."

"I suppose you want to go see it?" Hermione asked, then smirked. "I could take you sometime."

"Not without invitation and not without my permission," Severus said sharply. "And you will not leave the school grounds without notification."

Hermione rolled her eyes and emitted a frustrated sigh at his overly protective attitude.

Harry pointed his fork at Hermione. "He's right, don't go wandering about without telling someone. You're still a target, Hermione. We haven't apprehended all of the rogue Death Eaters."

"How many are there left?" Hermione asked, wondering if Dragen had been caught. But then, she hadn't read anything about him in the papers, just a few suspected occurrences and an occasional robbery.

"Enough," Harry said. "The problem is that we don't know who they all are, and there are still five in hiding that we know of. Also, there were supporters who have slipped by unnoticed, and there are people missing or in hiding ones we're not sure about. It's not safe."

"But if you're having the wedding there, we'll need to see the place, discuss where you want things and where to have the reception. And we'll have to make a guest list," Ginny said. "That's if you want my help. June is only six months away, and we still have NEWT projects to do."

"Of course I want your help," Hermione said, thinking that she should ask Mrs. Weasley as well if she'd be inclined to help her. She turned to Severus. "Is that what you want, to have it at Mr. Prince's home?"

He set down his mug. "Where we marry is of little matter to me. However, having the wedding at his home would follow certain traditions and is to be expected. If you don't like his home, we can consider other venues, but a decision should be made soon if you want to rent one of the formal gardens."

Ginny clasped her hands together in glee. "So you and I get to make a list of all the details you want to have and whom you want to invite. Severus, we'll need your list..."

"Naturally," he replied, although Hermione was certain he would not be involved in the details.

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The Weasleys arrived shortly after breakfast. Hermione tried not to think about the situation with her parents and focused on the pleasure of seeing all the Weasleys under one roof. Even Charlie had used an international Portkey to spend Christmas with his family, and Harry had invited the Tonks since he'd wanted to see his godson, Teddy.

The morning was going along pleasantly. Mrs. Weasley had congratulated her and Severus on their engagement politely enough, but her smile didn't exactly reach her eyes, which made Hermione second-guess asking her help on her wedding. Mr. Weasley and Bill had congratulated them as Fleur complimented Hermione on her ring and offered her wedding tips, for which Hermione thanked her politely, quickly changing the subject. George offered to help with decorations and entertainment, which made Severus narrow his eyes at him. Hermione thanked him, promising to discuss it, but she was apprehensive about accepting anything that wasn't approved by Severus first. Ron stayed at the back of the room by the fireplace, sipping on hot-spiced cider.

Hermione and Ginny were playing with Teddy on the carpet while Mr. and Mrs. Tonks spoke to Severus. George, Fleur and Angelina were talking with Mrs. Weasley while Bill bounced Victoire on his knee, talking to his dad and Percy. George, ever the prankster, had brought trick wands for Victoire and Teddy, which changed the color of whatever the children touched into its complimentary color, such as changing the parts of Bill's blue jumper orange wherever Victoire tapped him. Teddy was having fun watching the space on the carpet before him, changing the greens to red, the black to white, and the beige to purple and back. Ron, Charlie and Harry were talking about Quidditch.

George got up and walked over to Harry, then said something to Ron and Charlie. Hermione watched the guys, trying not to give anything away in her expression, lest Ginny get suspicious. Harry nodded, summoning a gold box with a red ribbon out from under the tree with his wand. Ginny looked up, smiling as she rose to her feet, and Bill jerked his head at Percy, who excused himself to join his brothers.

Harry walked across the room holding the box, the Weasley brothers standing behind him, all smiling. Hermione expected him to hand it to Ginny, but instead he handed it to Mrs. Weasley as Ginny clasped Harry's free hand. "Mr. Weasley, Mrs. Weasley, this is for the both of you," he said with an odd smile on his face. Ginny looked lovingly at Harry, holding his hand in two of hers, then looked at her parents. "It's from Ginny and me."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley both looked at him: Mrs. Weasley with apparent joy at the anticipation, while Mr. Weasley's gaze flickered over each of his sons with curious suspicion or looks of speculation. Mrs. Weasley opened the box, folded back the multiple layers of tissue paper and withdrew an elaborate tassel with a large, gold key on the cord. "I don't understand?" she asked, holding it and turning it to make the strands swing.

Hermione watched Harry and Ginny, their twin expressions a mixture of mischief and conspiracy. "Ginny and I talked it over and, well, we decided to gift you this house," Harry said proudly.

Mrs. Weasley's hand dropped to her lap in shocked disbelief while Mr. Weasley gaped in shock for a second, then quickly recovered. "Harry, we could not possibly accept this house from you. Where will you live?" he asked.

Harry's grin changed into a modest smile. "Well, in light of Sirius' innocence and his contribution to the war Minister Shacklebolt..." Bill nodded to Harry to which Harry

answered in kind, then turned back to Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, "reinstated all of Sirius Black's former property to his estate as well as retribution for all rents and interest made on his property. Apparently, Sirius had another house besides this one one that he inherited from his Uncle Alphard in Scotland, on the Western Coast up near the Kyles of Bute."

Hermione looked at Severus, but she couldn't read his expression, and wondered what he was thinking.

Harry ducked his head and smiled a little ruefully, running his fingers through his hair. "It looks like I have got two more properties," he said and blushed. "I've got my mum and dad's house in Glasbury, Grimmauld Place and this other place called Wyvern Hallow, too."

Hermione looked at Harry and Ginny with a sly smile. The house they had found in Glasbury over the summer had been the wrong house. The Potter's home had still been under the Fidelius Charm. In true wizarding fashion, the old envelope had said, *James Potter, Drake Cottage, Olde River Road, Glasbury-on-Wye* However, Harry had told her that, following the floods in the mid seventeenth century, the River Wye had changed course, and the road that followed the River Wye had been washed away, a new road had been made, and the old one apparently forgotten by the Muggles in the area.

Ginny smiled broadly at Harry, then turned to her parents as Harry added, "So, we are giving you this house Grimmauld Place to live. Besides, you have a large extended family of which you've made me a part of and need a house. So, this one is yours."

The sounds of shock and confused joy filled the drawing room. "Harry, you can't be serious?" Mr. Weasley asked in awe.

"We most certainly can," Ginny stated. "Besides, Uncle Alphard's home is quite large five bedrooms and the Potter's home, Drake Cottage, has, erm, quite a few, so we have to choose which home to keep."

"Seems Potter forgot someone in these plans of his," Severus said softly. When Hermione turned to look at him, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye and grasped Severus' arm.

Kreacher was standing in the entry, shaking like a leaf, his ears folded back, and his huge eyes wide with worry. The plates of Christmas biscuits on the tray in his hands were rattling, making some of the biscuits fall onto the floor.

"Harry, there is someone you haven't considered," Hermione said softly.

Harry and Ginny turned around.

Harry walked over to Kreacher, gently took the tray from his hands and passed it to Ginny. He guided the worried house-elf to sit on an ottoman and then sat on the chair facing him. "Kreacher, I don't know how this works. I know you are bound to serve one family and you've been serving this house for longer than I care to know. The thing is, it's well, Ginny and I prefer a smaller home, one with enough land around it to have a garden and a crup... and the house in Scotland fits us as does my grandparent's house. I'd understand if you didn't want to leave this place, so I propose this to you my gift to you. You may choose. You can stay here in your home and serve out your years here looking after my friends, well, my in-laws, or come with Ginny and me where we chose to live."

"Kreacher is to be given to new masters?" The house-elf looked utterly stricken. "Kreacher has not pleased his new Master?"

"Kreacher, you *have* pleased me. You've protected my home during the war, and you've been a loyal servant and a great house-elf," he said.

Harry pointedly ignored Ron, who'd rolled his eyes, mumbling, "After he got the locket," and George's muffled cough behind his fist.

Hermione glared at them and then looked at Harry and Kreacher again.

The house-elf looked devastated, conflicted... his ears twitched, his lips trembled... he looked like he was about to have a nervous breakdown. "Kreacher does not haves any home but my mistress' home," he croaked, his voice gravely.

Hermione knew that he meant Mrs. Black the portrait of Mrs. Black the one Harry had removed during the renovations.

"My grandparent's house in Glasbury is nice, as is my home on the Kyles of Bute," Harry said sympathetically as if to a child who didn't want to leave his friends. Hermione's heart ached for the elf. "Nothing is set until Ginny finishes school. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley will be moving into the master suite, and Ron and I will be staying..."

"*Here*," Mrs. Weasley insisted firmly. "We can't live in this huge house all by ourselves."

"Molly, it would be no different than if the Burrow was still standing," Mr. Weasley said kindly. "But you know as well as I do, the kids will all come and stay with us from time to time."

Mrs. Weasley would not hear it. "Besides, you've put so much into the house I couldn't possibly..."

"Mum, you have a few sons, remember?" Charlie said with a smile, and both Percy and George grinned proudly. "I've known since the end of the war; Harry intended to give you this house all along."

Bill nodded. "When the Re-compensation and Confiscated Property bill passed, Harry approached Kingsley, Percy and me about the houses, and we discovered the location of the Potter's home as well."

Charlie touched Percy's shoulder. "Besides, it's a historical wizarding site, so it also qualified for the renovation funds from the Ministry for property damage caused by the war."

"Mung had ransacked the house the summer of 1996," Harry stated, "and Yaxley and friends had blasted the walls of the place during the war when he'd tried to bring his Death Eater pals inside. The downstairs needed considerable repairs."

"Then all of us started helping him fix this place up. It's to be called Phoenix House in memory of the Order of the Phoenix," George stated. "So, we all pitched in."

Hermione was both proud and overwhelmed by the boys' thoughtfulness. She looked over at Severus, but he was simply watching the scene with a bemused expression.

Mrs. Weasley rose and hugged each of her sons, Harry included, and Ginny as Mr. Weasley shook each of their hands, thanking them sincerely.

George nudged Harry gently in the ribs. "Go on now or never, mate."

"Might as well, since it seems to be the day for it," Ron said, looking down at the carpet, but making not so sly glances at Hermione.

"The day for what, Ron?" Ginny asked.

"I was going to, but..." Harry blushed as he turned to face Ginny with his hands in his pockets. "I...erm, Gin..."

"What is it, Harry?" she asked, glancing at Harry, then her brothers.

Harry stared at her, his hands still firmly planted deep within his pockets. George looked at him expectantly, and even Mr. Weasley had a pleased look in his eyes.

"Do what?" Ginny asked, looking from Ron to Harry to George and back to Harry with a hard glare.

Harry looked at Mr. Weasley, who in turn nodded his head once with a tightly controlled smile. Ginny turned to look at her father, and Hermione noticed that Harry was pulling something from his pocket.

Severus smirked and leaned in close to Hermione's ear. "Looks like I'm not the only one. I wonder if Ginevra will get cheeky with him?"

Ginny turned sharply to look at him at the mention of her name.

Hermione nudged Severus in the ribs as Harry, looking every bit as being put on the spot, knelt down on one knee. "Gin, I know you and I have, well, I know we've wanted to, and all, but..."

Ginny gasped as he opened up the box to show her the diamond ring inside.

"Will you marry me?"

Ginny squealed, and Harry barely had time to stand up before she threw herself at him. He hugged her tightly as several of the Weasleys all clamored to congratulate the couple.

"She didn't say yes," George shouted over his family.

"Yes she did," Ron snapped back, shaking Harry's hand.

"Squealing like a stuck pig is not a yes," George stated.

"I quite agree," Severus said. "But then, there is something about this house and a woman's inability to answer properly."

Hermione scowled at him as Ginny shouted, "Yes," hugging Harry again. "Of course I will. Yes."

"Well, that affirms it, Harry," Bill said, laughing, balancing Victoire on his hip with one arm as he slapped Harry on the shoulder with his other hand. "Welcome to the family."

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabelbloodgood, my alpha-reader, to Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Malfoys Christmas Ball

*Chapter 52 of 63*

It's the ball we've been waiting for, the Malfoy's Annual Christmas Ball and Hermione, Ginny and Harry are invited!  
Hermione sees a few friends from her past, two especially that Severus is... well, not all that happy about.



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Malfoys Christmas Ball

The car made another leap forward, arriving on another country road, speeding past a quaint village, eventually driving along a stone wall with trees and high hedges on one side of the vehicle and rolling country with lush, green farms on the other.

When a musical car horn had been heard from out on the street, Severus had said it was time to go and indicated that they go out the front door. Hermione had been amazed to see the gorgeous, black Rolls-Royce Phantom IV limousine parked in front of number eleven, the driver looking quite relieved when their party had emerged out onto the pavement.

Hermione had always loved the historic car, which had been made exclusively for royalty and heads of state and, of course, featured in a few Muggle movies such as the James Bond movie, *Octopussy*. As she walked to the door held open by the chauffeur, she smiled at the silver dragon stretching his wings and neck, which had replaced the Spirit of Ecstasy that would normally adorn the hood. The Rolls-Royce Phantom had obviously been heavily enchanted. Once out of the city, the drive to Wiltshire took only minutes. Although the ride was luxuriously smooth, the succession of jumps the driver made confused Hermione's sense of direction. For the most part, they hardly spoke, Ginny and Hermione both trying to guess where they were after each jump before the car leaped forward again.

The car slowed as they approached a wide drive that passed through a gorgeous stone gate. "Are you sure this is the right place?" Hermione asked, looking around for the lane bordered by the high, neatly manicured hedge, shaded by overhanging trees, which they'd used the last time she'd come to the manor. And her first time, but she was not going to dwell on that day. Not today.

"Yes, Hermione. The other entry is used for Apparition," Severus said, placing a hand on one of hers. "It was the one the Death Eaters and Snatchers used because they didn't want to be seen by the Muggle villagers."

Hermione nodded, accepting his explanation.

"It's not uncommon," Ginny said, leaning around Harry to look out the window next to Hermione, "especially for the wizarding homes in Muggle villages and towns. My Aunt Muriel has a secluded spot behind the garden gazebo that the family and her friends use."

The large, hand-forged gates swung open as the car approached, and the guard at the gate waved them forward. Hermione peered through the front window and was amazed at the sight: the house stood out at the end of a long drive that stretched before them through extensive grounds of wide expanses of lawn interspaced with dense ornamental coppices. Every window of the house was aglow with light, creating a welcoming sight even from a distance.

As they drew near to the manor, perfectly manicured, hedge topiaries interspaced with outdoor lanterns lined the drive, and the open lawns gave way to lovely, elaborate knot gardens either side. Ginny pointed out three peahens, their white plumage stark against the dark greens of the gardens. Hermione fidgeted with her bracelet, a simple double strand of pearls that was once her mother's, while she stared at the handsome manor.

Severus put a hand on Hermione's arm, and she sat back in her seat to look at him. "Nervous?" he asked softly.

"A little," she admitted softly.

Harry gave her a lopsided grin and clasped Ginny's hand. "How bad can it be? It's just dancing."

"It's dancing as long as you dance with me," Ginny said with a cajoling smile.

His smile instantly faded. "It is a ball, Harry. You had to know it was expected," Hermione said, trying to contain her mirth. She knew that he hated dancing in public. "It will be a lot like the Ministry Ball, I think."

"Hardly," Severus said, staring out the window. "It will be like the Moncrieff's party; the music will be variations of the waltz." He glanced quickly at Harry. "You should be able to get by with a simple box-step."

"Brilliant," Harry muttered, turning to look out of the window as another car, a Ministry car, drove past them in the other direction. Hermione grimaced in understanding to Ginny, but she shrugged and looked down at her hands.

"Ginevra, I'm sure that you'll have partners if you want to dance," Severus replied smoothly, before the other car vanished with a loud bang. "If you'd like, I'd be happy to dance with you."

Ginny looked up smiling as Harry looked at Severus in surprise.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I can dance."

Harry turned to the window again, muttering something under his breath; however, Ginny squeezed his arm and whispered something to him.

As their car entered the courtyard, the driver followed the drive around a huge marble fountain, featuring Poseidon surrounded by adoring water nymphs, dolphins and hippocampi, in the center of the circular drive. Hermione saw two more elegant cars circle the gorgeous fountain as a classic bronze and dark blue Bentley Mark VI stopped to let out its passengers. They stopped behind the Bentley, and a footman opened the door, offering a hand to assist the girls out of the car.

Hermione smoothed her skirts and looked up at the imposing house. Severus offered her arm and smiled down at her, and she smiled back, hoping it didn't come off as a grimace. She squared her shoulders and let him guide her up the stairs, Harry and Ginny right behind them. Ahead of them, Mr. and Mrs. Hammond, who Hermione remembered from the Moncrieff's party, were greeting Mr. Ingoldsby and his wife as they entered the house.

When she walked through the front doors, Hermione's breath caught for a moment at the magnificent sight of the Malfoys' Grand Foyer. Two sweeping, gilded stairs, similar to the grand staircases at Buckingham Palace, curved along creamy-white walls decorated with gold wainscoting and ornamental plaster wall flourishings. Huge portraits hung around the upper part of the stairs, each nodding serenely to the guests as they ascended, which were interspaced with large, porcelain pedestal vases with hand painted white peacocks. Above her head, at least three stories up, the Tiffany style glass dome depicted vines of wisteria blooms and a pristine blue sky.

At the top of the stairs, guests mingled in the Grand Corridor as they strolled toward the right where the music flowed. Along the walls were magnificent landscapes in ornate frames and tables holding exquisite urns and vases. Two winged cherubs waved at the guests from the curved lunettes on either side of the doorways, some cherubs holding harps and others, small bows fitted with miniature arrows.

Severus guided Hermione through the first doorway. Grinning with glee, Ginny clung to Harry's hand as they followed them. The large room was mostly red with a huge, white quartz mantelpiece, white stone pillars, and heavy, red velvet curtains. Even the ornately carved chairs and lounges were upholstered in red velvets. A long table stood to the side, holding a banquet feast of delicately prepared foods and sweets, with two swans sitting majestically on either side of a tiered tray of edible flowers and fruits. People in their finest greeted each other, helped themselves to the tidbits from the table, or sat in small clusters along the wall. Although they stuck together, Ginny and Harry staying close to Hermione, they did mingle with some of the people in the drawing room, mostly with people Severus knew or whom Hermione had met at previous parties. That, and several people, including the Burkes, Oswalds, and Lodwicks, had wanted an introduction to Harry Potter, much to Severus' chagrin. Even the formal Mr. Byron Ingoldsby had sought out the group, to make introductions.

A wizard in a white coat and gloves offered their small group champagne. Severus pulled out a flask from his pocket, pouring a bit of the pale taupe potion into Hermione's flute. "To keep you from getting too inebriated tonight," he said softly, adding some of the potion to Ginny's.

"Thank you," Hermione and Ginny both said as Severus held the flask up and looked pointedly at Harry, who nodded and held his flute up to be filled. Hermione took a long sip and crinkled her nose at the peppery aftertaste of the Inebriation-Inhibiting Potion, remembering Severus warning from last time. She recognized the Moncrieffs as they entered the room; Mrs. Moncrieff greeted a small group of ladies as her husband approached two wizards standing a few feet away.

A group of younger men entered from the other doorway and laughed, one of them boisterously, making a few of the occupants, including Hermione, turn their heads in their direction. One of the young men tapped the arm of another, and Hermione smiled as she recognized Kazimir Maschke when he turned, his gaze sweeping the room. He smiled when his eyes met hers. Kazimir excused himself quickly and crossed the room to greet her.

"Sdrasti, Her-mi-oninny!" he said with a huge grin. He swept Hermione up in a big hug, lifting her off her toes, then set her down and kissed her soundly on the side of the mouth. "How have you been?" he asked, looking at her fondly, ignoring Severus' scowl. "You look... krasavitse – beautiful. Why have you not come to see me?"

Hermione blushed at his compliment. She liked the way Delphinia's pearls looked with her royal purple, taffeta dress robe. The earrings framed her face nicely, the lovely tiara was pretty in her upswept hairdo, but the way Elbee had done her makeup was so thick, her eyes and lips were so dramatically enhanced, she knew that she barely looked like herself. "I've been in school and haven't had the chance," Hermione said, suddenly aware of Severus' stiff posture. "Kazimir, may I introduce you to Severus Snape, my—"

"Affianced Bonded mate," he finished the sentence before she could, placing special emphasis on each word, as a warning to the grinning sportsman, and holding her upper arm tightly against his.

"Da, I read of your Bonding. Posdrawlenia!" Kazimir said, holding out his hand. Severus clasped it, both men curling their fingers in a firm handshake. "Headmaster Snape," Kazimir said, looking Severus directly in the eye, "I am proud to make your meeting."



"Mr. Maschke," Severus said formally, his gaze locked boldly on the younger man.

Kazimir nodded briefly, let go, and turned to smile at Ginny and Harry. "Dobar wecher, Ginny," he said warmly and kissed her cheek. He looked at Harry with a friendly smile. "Your... how you say... fiancé, neh?"

"Yes, Kazimir, this is Harry Potter," Ginny said as Kazimir shook hands with him. "My Bonded mate and fiancé."

"I remember. Posdrawlenia to you, too! Sdrawei, Gospodin Harry Potter," Kazimir stated as he released Harry's hand. "You vere Hogwarts other champion, I remember."

"You were at Hogwarts then?" Harry asked, somewhat thrown by the Bulgarian's friendliness.

"Da, I vos a Durmstrang candidate, but Viktor von the honor. He is here tonight," Kazimir said, turning, looking briefly behind him. "He may be in the Ball Room." He turned back to Hermione. "I know he is vantoing to see you, too."

Hermione smiled as she drank more of her champagne, glad that Viktor may have forgiven her for not writing to him when she was in hiding with Harry and Ron. "I'm looking forward to seeing him, as well." Severus' hand tightened slightly on her lower back, and she turned to give him a reassuring smile that was apparently being ignored. His carefully guarded expression, while not stony, was not exactly friendly either.

"You will allow me a dance?" Kazimir asked, glancing between the two girls, thankfully unfazed by Severus' coolness.

"Absolutely," Ginny said, clearly delighted.

"Of course," Hermione replied, carefully avoiding Severus' eye in case he showed any signs of disapproval. He had little reason to be concerned about Kazimir. Although they'd written to each other since the end of her fourth year (with the exception of her seventh), his letters had always remained friendly, not flirty as Viktor's had. And until recently, he'd often written about Tatiana, a witch whom he'd been seeing, sometimes allowing her to add a postscript greeting on the bottom of his letters. Hermione even had a picture of the pair taken at a victory party when Bulgaria made the semifinals.

Kazimir made a click of his boots as he bowed slightly. "Than I shall look for you inside. Headmaster Snape, Gospodin Potter."

"Wait until I tell Ron I got to dance with the Chudley Cannons' new Chaser!" Ginny said as he walked away.

"When did you two become friends?" Severus asked, drawing Hermione's attention as he urged her to finish her champagne.

"Shortly after the Yule Ball," Ginny answered before Hermione could. "He and his friend, Mario, approached us in the library to ask Hermione if he could borrow a book she'd checked out."

"Seems the Durmstrang students were in our library more than we were," Harry said with a grin.

"So you would think," Severus said, making Hermione want to roll her eyes. A waiter appeared as soon as the girls emptied their glasses. "Shall we?" Severus asked, indicating the door that led to the ball room.

"Oh yes, please," Hermione answered, eager to dance. Harry dragged up the rear as they walked to the doorway.

Hermione and Ginny both stopped as soon as they entered the Ball Room. It was immense. The creamy white walls were decorated lavishly with gold wainscoting and ornamental wall flourishings, like the Grand Foyer, with large mirrors in heavy, very ornate gilt frames and gold and crystal candelabras. The ceiling was decorated with elaborate frescos between three large crystal chandeliers. Couples whirled, turned, slid and glided on the hardwood dance floor to the music of the chamber orchestra that played at one end of the grand room.

Severus laughed softly and leaned down close to her ear. "Shall we dance, or do you want to just stand here and stare?"

"Dance," she replied, laying her hand on his proffered hand and followed him out to the dance floor. They danced for a while, Hermione enjoying the assured way he led her around the floor. A few times Hermione saw Ginny dancing, first with Harry, then with Kazimir and again with Harry.

When the music paused, Hermione pulled back, intending to leave the dance floor, but Severus' hand on her waist tightened slightly. "Going somewhere?"

"No, just needing a break," she replied, and he dropped his arm. She saw Kazimir on the side of the dance floor talking to Draco, Theodore Nott and a lovely brunette, she assumed was Larissa Roqueewood.

Severus growled softly as the Bulgarian stepped away from his friends as they approached. "I thought you wanted a break," he said in a low tone so only she'd hear.

"Be nice," Hermione hissed and then smiled as Kazimir stepped up to her.

"Her-mi-oninny, you honor me a dance," Kazimir said, holding out his hand.

Hermione placed her hand on his, saying, "I'd be happy to," and allowed him to lead her back onto the dance floor. Kazimir was quite a competent dancer. Hermione knew that he preferred the Viennese style of dancing, turning them either toward his right or his left, interspaced with little changing steps, and occasionally swaying her dramatically, grinning mischievously when he did. It was fun dancing with him and somehow, Merlin knew how, she managed to keep up with him and not trip. When the dance ended, Kazimir insisted on another, a fun little line dance that had her twirling and turning with each wizard in the line, until she finally faced Kazimir again. Hermione was winded, but happy. "Thank you, priiatel," Kazimir said and kissed her on the cheek. "Hope your fiancé is no mad at me."

"It will be fine. I enjoyed the dance, thank you," she replied softly. She turned, realizing they'd ended up on the other side of the room.

"You look for your fiancé?" Kazimir asked, and she nodded, not seeing Severus from where they stood. The last time she'd seen him, he was standing where she'd left him, watching her with that intensity that gave her either thrills or chills.

"Either you dance with me again or we find your man," Kazimir said.

She turned to smile at him. "I should find him," she replied. He nodded in understanding and, holding her hand on the crook of his arm, guided her through the guests towards the place where she'd seen Severus last.

Kazimir halted when Theodore Nott and the brunette young lady stopped in front of them, having left the dance floor as well. Apparently Kazimir and Theodore were friends, because the Bulgarian greeted Nott personally, calling him Theo.

Nott looked at Hermione and inclined his head as he said, "Mrs. Snape." He turned his head toward the girl at his side. "We were in the same year," he said. "Mrs. Snape, may I introduce my wife, Larissa Nott." The girls exchanged greetings, and Hermione's first impression was that Larissa was a very sweet girl.

Kazimir asked Larissa for the next dance, and Nott shyly extended his hand to Hermione.

When the music stopped, Nott walked her to the edge of the floor where Kazimir and Larissa were, Larissa laughing at something Kazimir had said to her. Larissa repeated the comment to Nott as Draco and Astoria approached them, but Hermione was looking about the room as slyly as she could and missed the comment. "Already looking for your next partner?" Draco asked.

Hermione turned sharply to face him. "No, I was looking for Severus," she replied, then blushed under Draco's smirk.

"He's across the room talking to the Boatrights and Wertheims," Draco said, looking past her and jutting his chin slightly. "You were doing all right out there, Hermione."

Hermione quickly glanced back, spotting Severus, and cringed slightly at his emotionless expression. She shrugged as she faced Draco again. "Thank you, Draco."

"You look lovely, Hermione. I love your dress robe," Astoria said, smiling warmly.

Hermione felt her cheeks flush. "Thank you – you too."

Astoria asked Hermione if she'd met Larissa, while Draco, Nott and Kazimir exchanged a few words. Before the music started up again, Draco turned, saying, "May I have the honor?" offering his hand to Hermione. Stunned, she nodded and let him guide her to the dance floor as Kazimir asked Astoria. As Draco led Hermione around the dance floor, she saw Larissa and Nott dancing, and Ginny paired with a tall, dark-haired wizard, and she wondered where Harry was.

"Are you having a nice time?" Draco asked Hermione, drawing her attention from her friends.

"I am," she replied, allowing Draco to lead her briskly and easily about the dance floor. When Draco turned her, Hermione saw Severus watching them while talking to Lucius Malfoy.

~S~

"She dances well," Lucius said as his eyes followed Hermione dancing with his son.

"Apparently," Severus said, never taking his eyes off his fiancée. Hermione was, surprisingly, quite light on her feet and relaxed enough to follow Draco's lead, never trying to direct or anticipate the moves as some ladies would do. Not the accomplished ones, of course. She was looking intently at Draco, allowing him to turn and sway with her to the music, and Severus wondered what the boy could be telling her that was so enthralling.

He realized that her proficiency on the dance floor was making him uncomfortable. Perhaps she was so confident now because of her partner – Lucius had ensured that Draco had learned from an excellent dancing instructor. But then, with another savage jolt of bile, he remembered how she had also danced with the Bulgarian, her eyes shining, her face alight with pleasure and enjoyment. He realized that he was gripping his wine glass so hard his knuckles were beginning to hurt. He turned and saw Lucius regarding him with high arched eyebrows and a damnable smirk on his aristocratic features. Refusing to give Lucius the satisfaction of a response, Severus schooled his face into a blank mask and watched his beautiful... fiancé... continue to dance with the Malfoy whelp.

Hermione laughed, smiling as Draco turned them, and Severus gritted his teeth.

"I thought that things were going better," Lucius said as he rolled his wedding band around on his finger casually while watching the girl and his son dance. "Rumor is that the girl wears a ring."

"She does," Severus replied, controlling his reaction to the fact that Lucius knew already. "We made it official this morning."

"Congratulations. Narcissa saw the ring on her hand when you entered the room," Lucius stated, the slight twitch of his lips enough of a smirk to make Severus raise his eyebrow. One side of Severus' mouth twitched and his eyes narrowed for a second. The Dragon Heliotrope was large, a lovely oval shape, and the setting had cost him a fortune, but it wasn't *that* large. Hermione's ring fit nicely between the knuckle and the joint of her finger. Other ladies had larger rings.

"When have you set the date?"

"June," Severus said. Draco and Hermione had progressed further across the dance floor so that they were obscured by the other dancers. Draco wasn't a problem, and seeing her dance with Nott had surprised him, but that Bulgarian was paying Hermione much too much attention.

"June?" Lucius asked as he looked at Severus. Severus turned to excuse himself as Lucius added, "A whole month – long wedding. Have you decided where this extended event will take place?"

He gave his friend a confused glance as he sorted out the nonsense he'd just heard. "The date in June hasn't been confirmed, but Mr. Prince has offered to host the wedding," Severus said.

"Narcissa was going to offer for you to have it here," Lucius stated, nodding politely to the Burkes.

Severus barely refrained from snorting aloud. "A generous offer, but as you know, Hermione is still reserved where you are concerned."

"She'll come around," Lucius said, nodding, quite aware of the fact. "Still, the guest list would have been entertaining. Narcissa was hoping that by sponsoring the girl, she'd allow her to coordinate the wedding as well." Severus glanced sideways at Lucius, his eyebrow cocked questioningly. "Narcissa loves planning formal events – she's been planning Draco's wedding since the day he was born."

This was something that Severus was well aware of. The music stopped and the couples were thanking their partners. He saw Draco incline his head to Hermione, then offer his arm to guide her from the floor. Hermione glanced at Severus nervously as she accepted Draco's arm, following Draco off the dance floor, thankfully in his direction. Not too far away, Astoria and the Bulgarian came in view, the pair turning to follow Draco and Hermione.

"Speaking of which, here comes my son and daughter-in-law now," Lucius said with a proud grin.

"I shall convey your suggestion to Hermione," Severus said politely and moved forward, intending on procuring the next dance with his wife. Behind him, Lucius chuckled softly and greeted one of his guests.

~H~

Hermione was winded, happy, but a bit too warm. She'd danced nonstop since arriving, not that she was complaining; she was having a wonderful time. She only hoped that Severus wasn't as upset as he seemed. As Draco led her from the dance floor, she caught a glimpse of Harry, Ginny and Viktor talking with a tall, dark-haired wizard with broad shoulders and thick arms, a few feet away from Severus and Mr. Malfoy.

"Hermione," Severus said as she turned to thank Draco.

Smiling up at him, she said, "Severus," in response and turned to see where her friends were. "Do you know him?" she asked, indicating the dark-haired wizard talking with Ginny, Harry and Viktor without pointing.

"No," he said, watching her instead.

"I'd like to get a punch," Hermione suggested, ignoring his curt reply. He nodded and indicated they leave. After quenching her thirst, Hermione saw Ginny, Harry and the dark-haired wizard near the doorway, and she walked up to her friends.

"Hermione," Ginny exclaimed as she approached. "This is Bartholomewo Gonçalves, the Chudley Cannons new Beater. Bartholomewo, this is my best friend, Hermione Snape, and her Bonded mate and fiancé, Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts."

The tall wizard said, "Olah," to them both, and faced Severus. "You are Headmaster of the school. We have written," Bartholommeo said, extending his hand, his manner reserved, yet polite, and his English heavily accented.

"We have," Severus replied as he shook his hand. "Is your brother still intending on taking the O.W.L. exams?"

"Sim, he is," Bartholommeo said, looking Severus in the eye. "He is wanting to take his O.W.L. exam and is concerned that he is no prepared."

Severus smiled at him assuredly. "It would behoove him to take placement exams to assure he's ready for them, and to show the staff where your brother may need additional tutorials, or if he should wait a year."

"I thought that the students take O.W.L.s in their sixth year in Portugal?" Hermione asked. She knew that Beauxbatons did, so she was uncertain.

Bartholommeo turned, looking at her squarely when he answered, "Não, they sit their exams in their fifth, like you do, but, my brother, he is wanting to know that he has learned the right spellwork. We lived in Spain for a year. He said the school was ahead in some spellwork but behind in others."

Hermione understood, changing school midterm was hard enough, moving from country to country could mean going to a school where the education may not have been fully equivalent. She had been surprised at what Viktor and Kazimir had learned at Durmstrang; in some areas Hogwarts was more advanced, such as Potions, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, in other subjects, such as the Defense Against the Dark Arts, they were a bit behind. Durmstrang taught DADA as two courses: The Dark Arts and Curses and Principles of Hexes and Jinxes, that taught not just spells but identifying the spells, the theories, defense and reversing techniques. She wondered briefly how Hogwarts compared to the Portuguese and Spanish schools.

"Professor McGonagall is looking forward to acquainting him with the school," Severus stated.

Ginny looked up at him expectantly. "He will be in Gryffindor!" Bartholommeo's forehead creased in confusion as Ginny clasped her hands, smiling like a clabbert. "Hermione and I could always help him if he needs help," Ginny said, and Hermione's and Severus' eyebrows both shot up at the offer. "Does he play Quidditch?"

"You just want him to play on the house team," Harry chided her softly.

"Obrigadu, that is kind of you," Bartholommeo with a knowing smirk. "He likes Quidditch, but does not play much." He looked up at Severus as the chamber orchestra started a quadrille. "May I have the pleasure of a dance with your fiancé?"

Severus nodded reluctantly. "If she consents," he said, stepping slightly to the side.

Hermione gladly accepted, following the tall wizard to the floor. She and Bartholommeo squared off with another couple. Hermione tried to follow along, stumbling the steps occasionally, but enjoying herself. Copying the motions of the other ladies as best she could, turning about with women opposite her with her right hand held up, barely touching, and then turning about to her left with the other woman's partner in the same way, progressing up to the head of a double line with Bartholommeo. Bartholommeo spoke to her occasionally, asking her simple questions, mostly about school and England. At one point she was faced with turning with Lucius, Mr. Hammond, who greeted her warmly, then with Viktor. Viktor stared at her, his gaze snapping from her hand to her face, his gaze becoming intense as if wanting to say something but refraining.

When the dance ended, Bartholommeo thanked her formally and escorted her back to Severus and her friends. Harry, Ginny and Kazimir had engaged Severus in a discussion of Quidditch, and Bartholommeo stayed to join in the conversation. When the music changed again, Severus graciously excused himself and Hermione, claiming the next dance. Unfortunately, they'd only walked a few steps when they were waylaid by a wizard. Severus introduced him as Lawrence McDonough, Administrative Officer of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and his wife, Louise. The man inquired about how things were between them, and Hermione got the impression he wanted details about their relationship. Louise made a few veiled attempts to ask if they were sleeping together, which Severus handled smoothly if not utterly cryptically.

Severus excused themselves from the couple and drew Hermione out onto the dance floor. "The nerve," Hermione uttered as Severus guided her to the music.

"Yes, some women have little tact where gossip is concerned," he replied softly.

"But why is she concerned as to where I'm sleeping?" Hermione asked.

Severus chuckled as he turned her. "Mrs. – and thus Mr. McDonough – do not approve of me being Bonded to a student. So, I answer those inquiries about our relationship frequently," he said with thinly veiled chagrin.

She simply nodded in understanding. She supposed the Board would question him, but still, the woman had irritated her.

She danced the next few dances with a few men she'd met at previous parties.

Needing something to drink, she and Severus went back to the drawing room for some refreshment, and after accepting a glass from a waiter, Hermione led them over to where Ginny and Harry were sitting, plopping down next to Ginny as Severus stood, his arms crossed, slyly surveying the room. Ginny, Harry and Hermione talked about the people they'd met and whom they'd danced with, while Severus listened in, yet appearing to be inattentive.

Mrs. Diederich, a woman who'd been friendly with Hermione at the Burke's and Moncrieff's party, spotted them, and as she and Mrs. Robards approached, Hermione and Ginny both rose to their feet. "Headmaster, Mrs. Snape, how good to see you," Mrs. Diederich said, quickly introducing her friend to Ginny and Harry, who'd stood to shake hands as well. "I've been meaning to ask you how the validation of the Headmaster's potions are going. Why, Abigail Burkwald and I are so excited about the project."

Hermione smiled; Mrs. Diederich and Mrs. Burkwald were both on the Friends of St. Mungo's Hospital Philanthropy Committee, and Mrs. Diederich supported the Hector Dagworth-Granger Foundation that promoted scholarships for both Hogwarts students pursuing a career in Potions and the St. Mungo's Healer's Training program. "We've validated fourteen so far," Hermione said proudly. "Ginny and I should have four more papers finished before school resumes."

Mrs. Robards' hand flew to her chest as she stared at Hermione, then at Severus. "That's – eighteen? Good Lord, girl, how many are there?"

"Nearly every potion in *Advanced Potion Making*," Hermione said proudly, then turned to smile at Severus. He looked down at her, his lips in a neutral line, with a slight warning to his gaze as if he was embarrassed that she'd told these women of his accomplishment.

Mrs. Robards' eyes widened in shock at the pronouncement. "Each – as in *all* of them – but that's over a hundred... Oh my."

"One hundred and forty-six, I believe. Wasn't Abigail telling you only a moment ago that Healer Elena McMullen holds the Headmaster here in the highest regard," Mrs. Diederich said, smiling at Severus.

"How is Elena?" he asked, his tone one of deepest respect, and Hermione looked at him wondering who she was that he respected her so.

"She's here tonight with her husband. I know they are looking forward to seeing you this evening, to congratulate you on your recent validations of the Astuteness Draught and Anamnesis Potion," Mrs. Diederich said. "It is so amazing how a simple color variation can change a potion's efficacy."

Hermione tried not to grin at the woman's assumption. Even Ginny was fighting back a chuckle, Severus' variation on the Anamnesis Potion was still morning turquoise blue, but the sunrise glow was more pronounced. But mixing the mucus secretion from the hypobranchial gland of a Phoenician sea snail with raw, sour Gruinard goat milk *before* adding it to the Astuteness Draught turned the potion a sea blue-green instead of lime green and did in fact greatly enhance the potion.

"And Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Snape are validating them all?" Mrs. Robards asked, looking at the girls.

"Yes, Professor Reynolds and Severus are monitoring our progress," Ginny said, smiling with pride. "We've had ten of our validations published so far."

"Four were submitted for review to the Academe of Potion Masters and Brewers at the end of term, and we are still waiting for confirmation from the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers on the other four we submitted last week," Hermione said as Severus smiled at her, his dark eyes showing both pride and gratitude.

"I know Adrien Abderhalden, I'll send him a letter on your behalf," Mrs. Diederich said. "He doesn't like publishing too many innovations in his publications at the same time; he thinks it will only lead to more potion mishaps."

Severus inclined his head once. "Sound thinking; it's hard enough to prevent students from experimenting at school," Severus stated. "Master Abderhalden is only being cautious, I'm sure."

It wasn't that, in Hermione's opinion, the old wizard was simply being a stick in the bog. Adrien Abderhalden didn't like Severus much simply because of his past associations, and the wizards in the Academe of Potion Masters and Brewers paid him too much heed. It didn't help that he was also head chair of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers, either.

"So, girls, which potions are you going to validate next?" Mrs. Diederich asked.

"Icterus Draught and Reduplicative Uncion," Hermione said the same time Ginny replied, "Roussinoff Potion and Lethargy Potion." They turned and laughed softly at each other. "Well, we generally do brew two at a time," Hermione admitted.

"We're doing those four the first week back at school," Ginny added.

"My, at the same time?" Mrs. Robards asked, making Hermione flush and Ginny chuckle.

"Hermione and Ginevra are quite ambitious," he said, and Hermione blushed. She loved following his directions, and many of his changes actually made the potions easier to brew.

Mrs. Diederich turned to look at Severus. "I hear you're working on improving the Medullaoblongata Potion?" she asked.

"A variation on the potion, yes," Severus stated cryptically, yet politely modest.

"Well then, I look forward to hearing of your success," Mrs. Diederich said as her husband approached. "If you girls have any difficulties with Adrian, let Leopold and I know." Hermione was momentarily distracted by a round woman in exquisitely tailored robes of a soft, floaty material who waved at them, and although she didn't know the woman, she waved back. "Oh there is Miranda," she said, smiling. "You youngsters go dance."

"Severus, I do believe you promised me a dance," Ginny said, adding, "in the car," when he raised his eyebrow at her. "You said you'd dance with me if—"

"You had no partners," he said with a subtle smirk.

Hermione smiled at her friend. "Yes, you must," she said, then turned to Harry. "That gives me an excuse to dance with you, at least once tonight."

Harry reluctantly agreed, and they followed Severus and Ginny to the dance floor. "Are you sure about this, I don't really know how," Harry said softly as he put his hand on her waist.

"We'll be fine, Harry," Hermione urged him. She saw Severus and Ginny waltz off, joining the flow of the other dancers with ease. "Just stay on the side and then the others can pass us. Think one-two-three to the music and take small steps – just like I showed you our fourth year."

"And like we did in the tent that one time," he said, relaxing a bit. They didn't progress very far, only going about half way around the dance floor, but they had a good time of it, laughing softly at each other's mistakes. When the music stopped, she thanked him. "Hope your toes survived," he said with a smile.

When she turned, Viktor was standing right in front of them. "Dobar wecher, Herm-own-ninny," Viktor said and then greeted Harry. "May I have the honor?" he asked.

"Er, sure," Harry sputtered, looking from Viktor to Hermione and then away. "I'm going to find Ginny."

Viktor straightened from his normal slouch, placing his right hand slightly beneath her left shoulder blade, and began to glide with her about the dance floor. Even back in his seventh year (her fourth year), Viktor had been a fair dancer, despite being slightly splayfooted. "You have been avoiding me," he said, looking at her from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"No, I haven't," she denied, although in part it had been true. "I didn't get your letters from last year until after the war was over."

He became downcast for a moment then looked at her intently. "You vere vith Harry and Ronald, hiding from You-Know-Who," he said, the tone of his voice implying that maybe he'd spoken to Harry about it.

"Yes," she said, hoping that he'd see the truth in her eyes. "I was helping Harry find something – things that helped us win the war – Dark artifacts that Vold-e," he cringed as she almost said the name, "Tom Riddle – You-Know-Who's artifacts. Once we found them and destroyed them, Harry was able to defeat him once and for all."

He became very quiet and his movements reserved. They stopped dancing, and he drew her aside to a quiet alcove between a pillar and a curtain but still within full view of the other guests. "I read about you in the papers. You have become famous," he said. "I read about these objects. I think I know vhat it vos you had to find." She cocked her head and he smirked at her. With his dark eyes and hooked nose it was quite similar to Severus'. "Horcruxes."

She gasped. "How – but it was – you couldn't," she stammered, looking around to see if anyone overheard him.

He cocked an eyebrow and his smirk became more pronounced. "I vent to Durmstrang. You vere very concerned about this Tom Riddle and asked me if I knew of him. You said you think he came to my school in the late 1940's, so I did some research. Ven I find out that he had, this Tom Riddle, I rote to you."

She shook her head, saying, "I never got a letter saying anything about this," sadly.

He nodded. "Professor Lewgorski vos killed shortly after your Tom Riddle vos introduced to him," he said. "Professor Lewgorski taught the Dark Arts and Curses until 1947 ven he died under suspicious circumstances. The boys who introduced them vos Boyko Vujanović and Dimitar Mihaylov. Boyko Vujanović, he became a Knight of Valpurgis and died in the first var, but Dimitar Mihaylov vos killed by You-Know-Who in 1948. He vos marked on his arm – a snake and skull – You-Know-Who's mark."

"To protect his secret," she said, impressed by his discovery. "But how did you know he learned how to make the Horcruxes from this professor?"

The music had stopped, and he leaned closer to her as the other guests mingled and walked by. "I looked for any book that these boys had checked out of our library, dealing vith Dark Curses and Dark Arts. Dimitar Mihaylov checked out three books that mentioned the Horcrux; and the two books he vos charged vith losing, I find copies of these books. They tell how to make one."

"Have you told anyone else about this?" She felt relieved when he shook his head. "Oh, Viktor, and here I thought – I'm so sorry."

"It vould hav' helped you, but I could not..." He became sullen. "My owl kept returning. I thought you vere upset vith me. I vos vorried for you."

She touched his arm, looking up at him in earnest. "I was not upset with you! I couldn't allow owls to find us, so when I made our hiding places secure, I added

enchancements that hid us from owls as well. We were hiding for our lives... I'm so sorry. Forgive me?" Couples began to walk onto the dance floor and the music started up again.

"Herm-own-ninny," Viktor said, pulling into a hug and kissing her temple. "Dobre, I forgive you, mi priiatel." He backed away and smiled at her. "Ve finish our dance now?"

"Yes," she said, laughing as she followed him back onto the dance floor, and they blended back into the dancing couples. When the dance ended, Hermione could hardly wait to tell Harry and Ron what Viktor had told her.

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Hermione danced the last waltz of the night with Severus; however, he was rigid and stiff while dancing. At the end of the evening, she wanted to say good night to her friends, but Severus told her that Ginny and Harry had already left, and that her Bulgarian friends would be staying in the guests' suites. She walked with him down the stairs and through the Grand Foyer to the Great Hallway and through the corridors to a smaller foyer, one she'd been in before, and up the stairs that led to the family suites. When they entered his rooms, Hermione noticed that the bed had been turned down, a fire blazed in the fireplace and two dressing robes lay out on the bed.

Severus threw his robes into a chair as he strode into the room, ripping at his black waistcoat as he went.

"What is wrong?" she asked, slipping off her shoes.

"Nothing," he snapped at her, untying his bowtie.

His tone alarmed her. "No – not nothing, what's wrong?" she asked and cowered under his angry, dark stare. "Maybe I should ask if I could sleep in a guest room," she said, and he scowled at her.

"You will not," he snapped while unbuttoning his shirt. "You're staying right here."

She watched him, feeling hurt and confused. "You're obviously angry about something – what, I have no idea – and you're snapping at me, for what you won't say, and I'm to assume—"

"I'm not angry with you," he said, crossing his arms as he stared at her. "Please get ready for bed."

She stood her ground, her hands on her hips. "I'm not going to bed with someone who's angry with me."

He stopped and turned, his expression coolly indifferent. "I told you, I am not angry at you." He breathed in deeply and resumed undressing. "Get ready for bed, Hermione."

"Then what is it?" He didn't reply, and she sighed heavily as she sunk down on the bed. "Why won't you just tell me? We're not going to make it if you won't talk to me."

"I didn't like you prancing around with that wizard," he said, sitting on the other side to remove his shoes.

Hermione turned on the bed to face him. "Which wizard – I danced with quite a few tonight," she implored, hoping he wasn't upset about Viktor pulling her aside.

"Exactly," Severus said sharply.

She swatted the bed in frustration. "It was a ball – people dance at balls."

"I still didn't like the way he was with you," he said, dropping his shoe on the floor.

"Whom?" she persisted, needing to know if he was upset about Viktor's kiss. It was only a peck on the temple, but considering how he'd reacted to Ron's the night before, it was possible...

He turned to face her. "Kazimir Maschke."

She leaned back in shock. "Kazimir? He's *engaged*," Hermione replied defensively, flabbergasted that he was so concerned about her friendship with Kazimir. Severus' forehead creased nearly making his eyebrows meet.

"Yes..." *This needs to be set straight right away*, she thought. *But how...?* "House-elves can come when you call them, right? Will Mispy come if I ask her?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" he snapped, then growled out, "Yes."

Hermione called Mispy. The house-elf arrived, bowing lowly. "Thank you for coming. Would you be kind enough to get something for me?"

"Mispy serves the Bonded mate of the Headmaster," the elf said, smiling curiously at Hermione. "Mispy will bring what Miss asks for."

She was immediately relieved. "There is a box in my trunk at school, made of red cedar with a heart-shaped lock. Would you please bring it to me?" Mispy bowed and vanished.

"Now..." he was interrupted as Mispy popped back in handing Hermione the small chest.

Hermione thanked Mispy and pulled out a stack of letters tied in an old, well-worn white ribbon. She handed the top letter to Severus. "I wrote to him after the Hogsmeade weekend when you told me that he was going to play for the Chudley Cannons. This is his reply. Tatiana, his fiancée, wrote a postscript at the bottom of his letter."

Severus took the letter. He paced the room as he read the letter while Hermione searched for one in which Kazimir had written about Tatiana. "Boys don't allow their girlfriends to write a postscript if they're hiding something or are hoping to have a relationship with you..." She found one in which Kazimir had expounded on how much he liked the girl, and she held the letter up for Severus to read. "Here."

Severus snatched the letter, and she scowled at him, hoping he hadn't torn it.

"You know this relationship won't work if you can't trust me," she said, imploringly.

"Trust is earned," he said, still reading the second letter.

"Trust is *given*, Severus – *respect* is earned. And what have I done – why can't you..." A tear threatened to fall from her eyes. She was exhausted and beyond tired. Her feet hurt. She was lightheaded even though she'd had his potion.

"I know you don't respect me – you said you do, but it's not there." She got up to walk to the door. "We don't talk."

He stopped pacing and faced her. "*We* talk," he snapped.

"No, you jump to conclusions without asking me. You did the same with Ron on Christmas Eve, just as you did with Blaine and Lawrence at school – and with George... You don't trust me even though I've done nothing inappropriate with any of them since our Bonding." His eyebrow rose. "Not that I had ever done anything before – oh, what's the use!" She sat on the bed with her arms crossed and her back to him.

"Misinterpretations and assumptions lead to misunderstandings," he mumbled, almost inaudibly in the quiet room.

She turned to look at him. "What was that?"

"Nothing," he said and then sighed. "Something Ginevra said." He held the letters out for her to take. "It's immaterial where – Hermione, it's evident he has feelings for you."

"We're friends. We've been out of touch for a while. We wrote to each other because he's a nice guy, and he wanted to improve his English," she said, taking the letters. "I even sent him oral letters so he could hear the words as well as read them. He's engaged to Tatiana, and there isn't anything more to it than that."

"And Krum?"

"He was a boy I saw for a brief while in my fourth year," she said as she carefully folded the letters. "We wrote to each other for a while, but when I went into hiding with Harry and Ron, I had to stop writing," she admitted. *Best to get it out in the open.* "I know he was hurt when I stopped writing. He wrote to me a few times last year, but I had my parents' post sent to a postbox that I'd applied an Undetectable Expansion Charm on and a Disillusionment Charm so it would appear empty... I tried to write to him over the summer to explain, and to explain my Bonding, but he didn't return my letters. He was a bit sullen tonight." His letters were tied with a red ribbon, but she didn't really want him reading Viktor's letters.

He stood unmoving, staring at her.

"What did I do to make you not trust me tonight? Was I in any way inappropriate with either Kazimir or Viktor?"

He didn't answer.

"I can't help it if they have feelings for me, I have not encouraged any... and I wrote to both of them to let them know of my Bonding. I even told them which spell was used and..." She was too tired to argue. It was apparently pointless. She picked up the dressing robe and ran the silky fabric through her fingers.

"Well you should have understood! You're my soon-to-be-*wife*, by your own machinations. I don't like these sorts of affairs – I tolerate them."

She looked up at him, surprised by his admission. "But you fit in so well!"

He shook his head, looking away from her. "I don't make friends easily, Hermione, and I find social situations like that to be... stressful." He looked at her. "But having to spend hours in *chit chat*, exchanging social niceties with vapid sportsmen and their *groupies*, is *not* my idea of a pleasant way to pass the time – nor is being the one left to make introductions for Potter – Harry – to the social elite. Did it not occur to you that many of the people in that room are related to people that I betrayed and abandoned?" he asked as he turned his head again, then looked at her and continued before she could answer him. "And beyond all of that is the fact that, having spent the evening dancing with all and sundry, you should choose your final dance to be with that... club-footed Bulgarian... *gorilla*, who it is plain to see still has feelings for you – well, that just put the tin lid on it!"

"Severus, I did not behave inappropriately! I danced my last dance with *you*," she said, ignoring his disparaging remark about Viktor. She covered her face with her hands, then dropped them and looked up at him. "I'm sorry that you had to make Harry's and Ginny's introductions. I'm sorry that the Quidditch players sought out Harry – but he's famous – even in Bulgaria. However, I thank you for doing it. I thank you for putting up with my friends – but why get angry at *me* about it? They are just *friends*. And even if Kazimir and Viktor have feelings for me, I'm *your* Bonded mate and," she held up her left hand, *your* fiancée. And they know this." She dropped her hand and looked down at the green silk she held clasped in her lap. "They even congratulated you..."

She sighed heavily and felt the bed dip as he sat down next to her. "Should I have declined to dance? I could've stayed with you, made the introductions myself?" She looked up at him. "But I don't know everyone. I remember some of them, but not everyone."

His fingers brushed her cheek, smearing a wetness she hadn't realized was there. "I've made you cry. I'm sorry," he said softly. "No, you were right to dance. I'm glad that you enjoyed yourself." He pulled her into a hug and kissed the side of her head.

"Well, I suppose that I should be glad that you feel enough to get jealous, but your jealousy is only going to hurt our relationship," she said softly, hugging him back and burying her face against his shoulder, understanding his admission and forgiving him for it. He didn't say anything, and she sighed heavily.

"I can't... change how I am," he finally replied. "I'm a possessive man. What's mine, I keep."

"I suppose that's good to know." She pulled back to look up at him. "You are going to have to trust me at some point."

"I know," he said as he tipped her face up. He kissed her tenderly, one hand gently stroking her scalp as he held her head, the other tracing lines on her side, increasing the lightheadedness she already felt. This wizard really knew how to excite her desires. She pulled back slightly to say something, but he leaned forward, never losing contact, only deepening the kiss ardently. "I love you," he whispered against her ear. "Come to bed with me, Hermione."

She nodded, turning in his arms so her back was to him. "Undo me?"

"My pleasure," he said smoothly, his voice soft, low and silky, sending thrilling chills down her spine.

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*Author's notes:*

I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, to Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, DuchessOfArcadia, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

For those who don't know, a hippocampi (plural for hippocampus) is not just a seahorse, it's a magical Mer-horse with the head and forequarters of a horse and the hindquarters and tail of a giant fish. A rather elegant fountain creature, I thought.

Ready to learn some Bulgarian?

*Sdrasti* or *Sdrawei* means hello

*Da* is Yes, *Neh* is No

*Dobar wecher* is a formal way of saying hello

*Dobre* means good, as in 'I'm good'

*Priatel* is friend

*Gospodin* is Mr.

*Krasavitse* means beautiful

*Posdrawlenia* means Congratulations

How did you do? Some of them will be used again in the chapter with the Malfoy's New Year's Ball.

[http://www.linguanaut.com/english\\_bulgarian.htm](http://www.linguanaut.com/english_bulgarian.htm)

How did you do guessing the Portuguese?

*Olah* is hello

*Sim* is yes, *Não* is no

*Obrigadu* - how to express your gratitude in Portuguese

## Boxing Day

Chapter 53 of 63

Hermione finds out that a day at Malfoy manner is not as bad as she'd feared and even makes a few surprising discoveries. Severus, although ready to hex a Bulgarian or two, likewise learns something interesting. And Narcissa has an opportunity to evaluate Hermione and her relationship a bit closer.



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### Boxing Day

Severus woke the following morning, thinking he really should have pulled the curtains closed about the bed as the early morning light streamed in glaringly bright through the gauzy drapes over the windows. *If the sunlight is already this bright, it's after eight* he thought, trying to move. *We're going to be late for breakfast.* Hermione was stretched out along his side, her head on his shoulder and her arm draped across his body. His arm, which had become trapped underneath her, was numb. He flexed his hand to try to restore circulation, stirring the witch beside him. Severus preferred to sleep on his back, but it was nice how Hermione typically slept on her side next to him. She either curled up beside him or stretched out alongside him with one leg slung over one of his, her arm draped across his chest. He still had yet to get used to the way her hair tickled his nose, but he found that he no longer minded her warm breath on his skin.

He remembered their first night together in this bed with regret. He hadn't been at all attentive to her needs, simply using her for his own release, and he hadn't been any more attentive the following morning either. He was rather pleased that she no longer held that against him, although if the roles had been reversed, he might not have been so forgiving. Still, mornings like this were not as frequent as he'd have liked, waking up with her beside him, but that was something that would definitely change next term. Knowing that he didn't have much time to dally in bed, he turned and pushed Hermione onto her back. She stretched deliciously, inflaming his need for her. Deciding to make it a quick one, he slid his hand down to her crotch as he suckled her breast, easily making her squirm and her vulva moisten, and her eyes flew open.

He lowered himself to her groin, intending on bringing her to orgasm as quickly as possible. He knew she liked his ministrations as much as he liked feasting on her. He loved hearing the sounds she made as much as watching her body undulate in pleasure and the feel of her hands stroking every inch of him she could reach.

Her breath hitched, she gasped, her hands clutching tightly, arching her back to push herself more firmly against his mouth and cried out in stammered gasps.

He rose up, teasing her entrance with his tip and captured her mouth in a kiss, loving the salty tang of her juices on their kiss, but she tried to turn away from him.

"Severus, I have to brush my teeth," she protested.

He captured her hands and pinned her down. "I think you taste divine," he said, kissing her while pushing into her. Her legs wrapped around his, her heels on his calves, their bodies moving in a tandem rhythm, meeting each of his thrusts. He ground his groin against hers, never pulling too far back so he wouldn't slip out of her.

"Oh, gods, let me... Oh, yes, just like that," she stammered, her head tilted back with her eyes closed.

"Oh, fuck, Hermione, you feel too good! I can't last." He thrust harder, bucking against her, spurred on by her straining against him. "Oh, I can't last fuck, Hermione, come. Come with me," he pleaded, feeling his own impending orgasm come.

She cried out, her nails digging into his flesh, her back arching. It was too much, and he came, his seed shooting into her in forceful spurts. He moved within her a few more times, before he rolled off her, spent. He put an arm across his forehead. Even though he felt satiated, he wasn't sure if she had come, and he was unsure if he should ask her. *Well, at least I made sure she had one.* "If you wish to shower before breakfast, I suggest you do so quickly," he suggested. "Narcissa will send a house-elf to fetch us if we're late."

She kissed him quickly, said, "Okay," and scrambled from the bed, leaving him to lie in post-coital tristesse.

When he heard the water turn off, he reached for his wand as he rose from the bed and used two cleaning charms on his person. She padded out of the bathroom in only a towel. Severus joined her at the wardrobe, and the soft scent of her shampoo wafted up toward him. He chose the soft, black lounge jacket he normally wore for breakfast at the manor and then scowled as he watched Hermione pull out her black jumper and red blouse, neither of which would be appropriate for breakfast attire. "Why not wear your garnet robes?" he asked casually, selecting a pale cream silk shirt because the silk always felt better on his neck.

"I didn't bring that one," she replied, examining the clothes the house-elves had hung in the wardrobe for her, a few he didn't recognize, as he donned his shirt. "I suggest you wear robes, instead of anything Muggle. Considering present company and your hosts, it would be more appropriate."

She bit her lip as she nodded and put the Muggle items back, opting to wear her golden copper robes he'd bought her instead. Hermione made a soft shriek when she turned around, startled by Elbee standing next to the bed, and clasped the robe to her chest.

"Elbee is so sorry, Miss," the elf said, shaking as she bowed low. "Elbee will punish herself for scaring miss, but Elbee is only seeing if miss needs Elbee's help."

"No, no, don't harm yourself," Hermione said, scowling at Severus' smirk. "I can manage."

However when she'd asked for Severus' help with her buttons, he ran his fingers on her skin instead, enjoying the soft, velvety texture of her warm body, eliciting a soft squeal from her and making her shiver enticingly.

"Keep doing that and we'll never get down to breakfast!" she exclaimed.

He leaned down to kiss her neck, saying, "Promise?" before he slid his finger up her spine while casting his nonverbal charm to fasten all the tiny buttons.

Hermione's head tilted to the side, showing him the full curve of her delicious neck. "Someday you'll have to teach me that charm," she purred.

"No," he said as he kissed her soft skin, watching her chest rise and fall in the curve of the neckline of her robe. "I will fasten or unfasten your robes for you whenever you ask me."

She sighed. "And when you're not there?"

"Why wouldn't I be there to help you?" he asked, nipping her where her neck met her shoulder.

She reacted as if tickled. "When you have other things to do or I'm in my dorm room."

He reached for his coat on the bed. "That will not be an issue," he said, putting on the fine wool coat. "Of course, if something should take me away from you, Mispy will assist you. You only need to ask." He waited patiently until she was finished and escorted her out.

Several of the Malfoys' guests were already convening around the mahogany table. Some of the guests, such as the obnoxious Bulgarian, Kazimir Maschke and another boy Severus remembered from Hermione's fourth year, Konrad Vondran, were serving themselves from the antique Victorian silver breakfast dishes on the long antique sideboard.

Feeling particularly hungry, Severus filled his plate with sausages, eggs, bacon, black pudding and kedgeree, ignoring the kippers and deviled kidneys and the silver platters of sweet breads and fruits.

He smirked to himself at Hermione's comment, "These are really pretty," indicating the intricately detailed silver chafing dishes, not realizing that she was impressed by such trappings.

"Yes, they are. Narcissa has such exquisite taste, doesn't she?" Fanny Gabnold asked on Hermione's other side with a warm smile.

Hermione blushed, apparently only intending for Severus to have heard her and turned to look at the woman. "Yes, the entire house is lovely and beautifully appointed."

"And imagine, using her Dagonet Crown Derby china for a buffet," Fanny said, helping herself to the eggs. "She always knows how to make her guests feel special. Why each time we come to visit we're old friends, did you know?" Hermione shook her head and Fanny laughed. "For years now. I was her prefect in school. Did you know that the chandeliers in this room were produced by George Ravenscroft himself?"

"The man who invented the technique of adding lead oxide to glass to create lead crystal?" Hermione asked, as she gazed up at the two lovely chandeliers.

"Wizard, my dear, wizard," the woman gently corrected her, to which Severus smiled and nodded to the kindly witch. Hermione followed the woman, listening intently as Fanny droned on about the various art pieces that decorated the Malfoy home. "You should really ask Narcissa to give you the tour. It's quite an impressive collection."

Severus turned watching as Hermione seated herself at Narcissa's end of the table next to Viktor Krum.

"So how did Hermione fare in your quarters?" Lucius asked softly, drawing Severus' attention away from the fact that Kazimir Maschke filled the seat between Hermione and Fanny. "I didn't hear any sobbing or crashing of the furnishings, so I'm assuming she was agreeable to the arrangement."

"We slept well, thank you," he replied with a slight warning edge.

"Good. Narcissa was relieved; she mentioned last night that she forgot to put protection charms on the furnishings," he replied with a cocky grin, indicating that Severus sit next to him.

Severus scowled at him and flicked his fingers, indicating 'not funny' in their private code.

With so few ladies present, Severus found himself seated between Lucius and Draco at the opposite end of the table from Hermione. "Things are much improved," he said as he set his napkin on his lap.

"I'm glad to hear it," Lucius said casually as he placed his napkin on his lap. "So, apparently a reception is in order."

Severus's smile faded as he turned attention away from Hermione and saw Lucius finger his wedding band before he picked up his fork.

"Mother will be delighted," Draco stated as Harland Gabnold took his seat across from Draco.

Severus inhaled, glad that there was so little time before school started. With some luck, he'd avoid another of Narcissa's lavish affairs.

"I'm glad that things are going well," Draco said.

"What is going well?" Harland asked. "I read the report into the latest Potions accident... Has the boy recovered the use of his nose yet?"

Severus assured the newly appointed school governor it had, somewhat distracted when Hermione laughed, smiling warmly at the overly attentive Bulgarian buffoon next to her.

At his end of the table, Lucius, Leopold Diederich and Harland Gabnold spoke about school finances and health and safety issues of the school; to his left, Draco feigned interest as Katherine Diederich and Fanny Gabnold spoke on the activities of their friends while Astoria, sitting next to the Portuguese player, Bartholomew Gonçalves, spoke amicably about his plans for house hunting. None of which intrigued Severus at all. The three overpaid Bulgarian Quidditch Neanderthals, Viktor Krum, Kazimir



Maschke, Konrad Vondran, surrounded Hermione, monopolizing her attention at the end of the table near Narcissa. She was laughing, her head rolling back slightly like she used to when sitting at the Gryffindor table with her friends...

"Severus?"

"Yes?" he replied, diverting his attention back to the head of the table.

"I was just asking Harland if the Ministry finally confirmed the additional funding to replace the awning over the magical creatures' paddock, or will Hagrid be getting out his *umbrella* again?"

"The canvas awning is still in good condition and fully water repellent, regardless of how *certain students*," Severus said, his finger flicking quickly in Astoria's direction, "complain about the cold. I wasn't aware you were still involved with the affairs of the governors?"

"Of course I care about the welfare of the school and its students," Lucius stated, feigning effrontery. "Besides, as the board stands, only Harland here represents the proud house of Slytherin."

"One of two," Severus said with a shake of his head. When Willoughby Thawnton had announced his retirement at the end of term, Kingsley had accepted Severus' suggestion and appointed Harland Gabnold. It lessened the Gryffindor monopoly on the board, something Severus was grateful for. "Ursula Waddlesworth is a Slytherin alum, I believe."

"That still only leaves Slytherin two out of twelve," Mr. Gabnold stated. "And Ursula typically sides with the Ravensclaws, doesn't she? Perhaps, Lucius, we should see about getting you reinstated on the board..."

"Yes," Severus acknowledged the statement, his attention diverted by Hermione's laugh. It was only from three years of practice that he refrained from scowling as he watched Hermione place a hand on Maschke's arm, her eyes alight with excitement as she spoke to him.

"She is a lovely girl," Harland stated, drawing Severus' attention. "After all the stories I read about your Bonding, I'm glad that things seem to be settling down."

Severus inhaled. Skeeter's persistent annoyance at dredging up any information, real or fabricated, about him and Hermione was a constant thorn.

"The Headmaster plans to marry at the end of term," Lucius stated, and Severus glared at him.

Unfortunately both Katherine Diederich and Fanny Gabnold suddenly paused in their incessant gossip to turn in their direction. "A June wedding," Fanny gasped, and Hermione choked on her juice. "How delightful!"

"Where are you planning on having it?" Mrs. Diederich asked.

Severus was beginning to lose his appetite. "At my great-grandfather's home," he stated firmly, refusing to hold eye contact lest she want to 'discuss it'.

Lucius smirked, skillfully turning the conversation back onto more mundane matters, such as the new Hogwarts library requisitions of the magical portraits of Demetrius Theophrastus of Alexandria, son of Demetrius of Phalerum and the first wizard orator of Alexandria, and Jean-François Joseph de Sade, the wizard nephew of the infamous Comte de Sade, which was quite the controversy.

~N~

Narcissa watched the interplay at the other end of the table at breakfast with mild curiosity. Severus was absurdly jealous of her Bulgarian guests, particularly Kazimir Maschke. The conversation on her end of the table consisted of the easy banter of people well acquainted with each other: what each person had done the previous year and the plans of the young Quidditch players. It was all innocent and benign. Evidently, Hermione had developed a close friendship with Kazimir, as he'd asked to be called, but as far as Narcissa knew, it was Viktor Krum, not Kazimir that the girl had had a relationship with.

Besides, Kazimir sent a letter every other day to Bulgaria, keeping the owls that her family retained for long distance flights quite occupied. Narcissa was certain that the letters were for a young lady; when the owls returned, they occasionally carried letters to the Bulgarian addressed in feminine handwriting, and he'd smile warmly upon their receipt.

Konrad Vondran was also on a first name basis with Hermione, although his mannerisms were unquestionable. The normally reserved, yet formally polite but gracious young man was quite a bit more relaxed with Hermione and his fellow Durmstrang alumni than he'd been with anyone else during his stay. However from what Narcissa could see, the familiar interaction between the young man and Hermione appeared to be nothing more than a friendship.

Viktor, on the other hand, had been unusually sullen all morning, even for him, barely speaking at all during the conversation at breakfast. Although he was broody and intense, he could smile and normally had a certain rough charm. But his speculative glances showed that the famous young wizard still harbored feelings for Hermione, even if the girl didn't show any signs that the feelings were returned. She was polite and attentive to him when they spoke, but she was in no way inappropriate.

Nevertheless, Severus couldn't keep his eyes away from Hermione and the three young men that monopolized her attention. Each time he turned to look at her when Hermione laughed, there was a brief flicker in his eyes and a tightening of his mouth before his expression faded quickly back into his usual polite mask he wore around the more prominent members of wizarding society.

"We shall meet at the stables at ten for the hunt," Narcissa said kindly once her guest had finished eating, rising to go change for the hunt.

~H~

After breakfast Severus led Hermione back to their room. Hermione was shocked to see two sets of clothes all laid out for them, two riding habits and jodhpurs, two pairs of boots and two really fine quality lawn shirts. She'd thought that she'd be a spectator of the hunt when Narcissa had made the announcement, not a participant. The red garment she assumed was her jacket, of sorts, looked more like a floor-length opera coat than hunting pinks, and when she picked it up, she realized that it would come down to her ankles.

"It's a ladies hunting robe," Severus said, removing his lounge jacket as Elbee waited nervously with a brush and comb in her hands to fix Hermione's hair.

"We're going on the hunt?" Hermione asked as Severus deftly undid her buttons.

"Yes, you and I shall participate in the hunt," he said softly, the little brushes of his fingers on her skin sending chills through her. "I already informed Lucius that you're capable of riding, but I hope you don't mind, I requested a normal saddle so you could," he kissed her bare shoulder, "ride your mount astride."

"Thank you." She leaned against him as his arms slid around her, holding her tight.

She closed her eyes, her heart speeding up as he said, "It's a shame that we've only a few minutes to change. I'd really enjoy a repeat of this morning."

She swallowed. "Do we...?" Her breath hitched, and she almost lost her train of thought as he kissed her neck on that one spot that made her mind go blank. "Don't we have to change?" she asked, trying to break through the fog muddling her thoughts.

"Yes," he replied, moving away suddenly.

Still feeling a bit self-conscious changing in front of Severus, Hermione donned the fine lawn shirt, riding jodhpurs and boots quickly, keeping her back to him as he donned his. Her jodhpurs fit her as if a second skin, eliciting a smile of appreciation from Severus.

Elbee braided Hermione's hair into a neat plait and twisted it into a chignon, then helped her with her riding habit while Severus waited patiently. When Hermione was finished dressing, he stood up. His gaze raked over her, making her feel uncomfortable, but she had to admit, he looked quite grand in his red coat, riding jodhpurs and boots.

They joined the rest of the guests in the Grand Hallway and exited the house en masse for the stables. Hermione knew she shouldn't be surprised that the gravel walkways were clear of snow, but she hated to think of the house-elves shoveling snow and drying the path in bare feet. Fanny kept up a running dialogue with Hermione almost all the way to the stables, and she had to admit that she was becoming fond of the older woman.

The Malfoy stables were everything Hermione expected them to be, with several lovely, white, winged Pegasoi, two grey Graninas, a breed of winged horses apparently popular among wizards, and a few pure black Pterippi, which reminded Hermione of Arabian stallions with wings and were known to be very fast.

There were quite a few people already present: some people in riding dark blue coats and some in red habits, while others, who obviously were not riding, wore warm robes and cloaks. Some of the people were already mounted while some gathered about talking. Hermione was swept away by Narcissa to be introduced to people, many she'd met at a few of the formal parties, while the grooms matched up the guests who wished to ride the hunt with suitable mounts. Leopold and Katherine Diederich accepted the reins to their black Pterippus from a groom while Harland Gabnold mounted his own chestnut Aethonon. Hermione was surprised to see Romilda Vane with her parents Sophia and Karl Vane, the family already mounted on their grey, winged fast Granians, and Terrance Higgs with his father, Thaddeus, on their chestnut Aethonons. Lenora Robards, dressed warmly in red robes and dark blue cloak, was holding the bridle of Shane Robards dappled grey Granian as he spoke to Victoria and Sidney Burke while a groom finished saddling their chestnut Aethonons.

One very thin wizard in ducktail hunting pinks with a large hooked nose and a slicked down sweep-over with curls at the ends, wearing a monocle, turned to look down his nose at Hermione as if appraising her significance when Narcissa introduced him as Cecil Edgar Selwyn. His pompous attitude made Hermione refrain from laughing at his appearance. Hermione was already acquainted with his portly wife, Francis, who had warm eyes and rosy cheeks, from the parties she and Severus attended. She greeted Hermione and asked after her welfare and schooling. "Will you be riding with us?" Hermione asked.

"Goodness, no," Francis said, placing her hand on her chest. "I'll be joining Fanny, Mildred and Lenora on the lawns to watch."

Hermione wondered what lawns, since the ground was covered in snow.

Narcissa introduced Hermione to Gemma Farley, who greeted her back politely. "Gemma was a prefect when you and Draco started Hogwarts," Narcissa said and then introduced Hermione to her parents, Licorus and Magenta Farley, both very large stout people, who were keeping a tight rein on their two young Abraxans, gigantic, extremely powerful, winged Palomino horses, that fretted about, eager to be running. Hermione remembered Madame Maxime telling Hagrid that the Abraxans needed a 'forceful handling', which the couple seemed fully capable of doing.

Lucretia and Wallace Blishwick were standing next to a pair of silver hippogriffs, talking to Mr. and Mr. Lodwick, while Theodore Nott tightened the girth on his mount, and the Quidditch players were matched with suitable winged horses as well. Hermione smiled at the sight of Viktor and Kazimir sitting astride young Granians and Konrad on one of the Malfoys' black Pterippus.

One of the Malfoys' grooms approached Hermione, leading a lovely, white winged Pegasoi for her and a pure black Pterippus for Severus. "She's very gentle, Mrs. Snape," the groom stated, giving her a leg up. "But she does have spirit and plenty of heart."

Hermione noticed that Narcissa, Katherine and several society ladies sat sidesaddle, while Gemma, Mrs. Farley, Romilda, Mrs. Vane and Mrs. Higgs were all sitting astride like her.

Once those who were riding were mounted, the master of the hunt led them off. Riding with a bunch of wizards on winged horseback was quite different than any hunt Hermione had heard or read of. She had to manage both her wand and the reins as they rode through the forested areas of the Malfoy lands. She was hardly surprised that Draco stayed as far from the Blishwicks on their silver hippogriffs as possible, but Hermione thought the beasts beautiful, graceful and proud, reminding her of her flight on Buckbeak.

The hunting cruphounds, a hybrid mixture of crup and Muggle foxhound, ran about sniffing the ground and air for any scent to follow. Suddenly, two of the lead dogs barked, making the other cruphounds pick up the cry, and they raced forward through the trees and brush. The riders quickly responded, following in pursuit, dodging and jumping whatever obstructed their path. Severus stayed at Hermione's side, his focus on the hunt, but she could feel his observation as well, similar to when they were in the Great Hall for meals, watching her, aware of her every movement even though he seemed to be concentrating on something or someone else. Off a bit to her right, she saw Kazimir, Draco and Viktor.

Only when they reached a wide gorge did some of the riders falter. Remembering what the groom told her and knowing that the Pegasoi had probably been on a hunt in these woods before, she trusted her mount. She allowed the animal leeway to find her footing as she jumped down into the gorge, over the stream and up the steep embankment. When she looked behind her to watch Severus maneuver his black Pterippus, she smiled with pride as he spurred his mount to climb the embankment and join her. She smiled at him, feeling her face flush at the pride in his eyes before he spurred his mount to ride on. She caught up to him as Lucius and the Burkes joined them on her other side. "Well, done, Mrs. Snape," Mr. Burke said with a nod. "You've ridden before."

Hermione nodded. "A little, but not as much as I'd like," she replied, seeing a rock wall up ahead. The cruphounds ran straight for it, then jumped the high wall with amazing ease and kept going.

"Looks to be five feet, I believe," Mr. Burke stated, making Hermione nervous.

"It's five feet eight, Sidney, six foot at the most," Lucius cut in. "Trust your mount, Hermione, and don't be surprised if she takes flight over the wall."

Hermione braced herself as Lucius committed his Pegasoi to the jump. Many of the horses ahead of Hermione flew over it, landing with heavy hoof thuds and rode on. Hermione's mount spread her wings, making one strong downward flap as she leapt, clearing the wall easily, and landed soundly, jarring Hermione a little bit. On her left, Severus' Pterippus landed as it folded its wings and then sprang forward, lengthening its canter stride as they continued on. Severus looked magnificent on the animal; he had a good seat and, from what Hermione could tell, perfect balance, appearing as natural as if he did this frequently. She tried desperately not to lose focus as they galloped on, but staring at his form, the lean fit of his pinks, his buttocks in his fitted jodhpurs held above the saddle, his weight balanced on his legs and stirrups while keeping his head and shoulders up, his dark hair flowing behind him as he guided his horse, simply made her breath catch and her heart flutter.

They galloped through the trees, dodging and weaving through the trunks, following the cruphounds. Kazimir and Draco were seemingly to be racing each other with Viktor and Terrance close behind them.

The dogs started barking loudly and picked up speed as they ducked under a huge fallen tree up ahead, weaving and disappearing around some large boulders. Hermione's breath caught, and she fought back her fear that they would have to clear the huge obstacles. Severus was two horse lengths ahead of Hermione and Konrad with Narcissa and Mrs. Burke on his other side. Ahead of them, Lucius, Mr. Burke and Mr. Diederich had already reached the fallen tree, and their mounts all took flight, soaring over the tree and rocks effortlessly, followed by Severus, Narcissa and Mrs. Burke. Hermione inhaled, ready for her mount to take flight. The white Pegasoi spread her wings and lifted effortlessly, and Hermione tried to remember any of her equestrian training as a little girl so as not to throw off the animal's jump. She had to fight back the urge to close her eyes as the horse cleared the tree and flew over the rocks, forcing herself to look ahead instead of down. They landed firmly on the other side, her horse springing forward and following the others.

They continued through the trees, dodging and leaping, running as fast as was safe for the horses. Hermione tried to keep a proper seat so as not to throw off her mare, thankful that the mare was so sure-footed. As the riders ran down an incline toward a frozen streambed, the riders ahead of Hermione began to slow down. The dogs

divided, some crossing the stream, others running around in circles, sniffing the ground and air. "It's gone to ground," she heard Mr. Burke say. Mr. Selwyn, Kazimir and Draco spurred their mounts to cross the stream, aiming their wands as if trying to find the fox.

A horn sounded and the cruphounds quieted.

Romilda and Gemma came up to Hermione. "So, fun, hey?" Gemma asked, patting her Abraxan on his neck and holding him firmly.

"Exhilarating," Romilda said, but her Granian shied as the larger horse stomped his hooves, wanting to keep running. The brunette backed up and came about on Hermione's other side, quieting down her horse. "Did you have fun, Hermione?"

"Yes," she replied, searching through the gathering group for Severus. She finally spotted him. He'd dismounted and was standing with several of the riders that had been in the forefront of the hunt.

"You ride well," Gemma stated. "Do you ride much?"

"No. I mean I used to when I was younger, but I haven't been on horseback since I was twelve," she replied, watching Severus, his black horse bobbing his head until he took the animal by the bit.

"I heard that you rode a hippogriff in your third year," Gemma said, glancing over at the men Hermione was staring at. "He looks good in red."

Hermione looked up at Gemma, still breathing hard from the exhilaration of the hunt.

"Oh, don't tell him I said that!" the girl exclaimed. "The Head of Slytherin in Gryffindor red what would the students say?"

"Ex-head of Slytherin," Romilda said, chuckling. "He's Headmaster now. Besides, the Malfoys like the hunting pinks. In Nottingham, we wear the Royal navy blues."

Across the clearing, the riders were remounting. "So, we're off again?" Romilda asked, and Hermione could hear a tinge of regret in her voice.

The leaders set off at a slow trot. "Nope, we're breaking for lunch, it seems," Gemma stated, spurring her horse forward. The girls talked as the hunting party moved at a more leisurely pace.

Severus turned in his saddle to look at Hermione, nodding with a small smile when their eyes met, but he stayed with the men in the front.

"Who'd have thought," Gemma said, grinning.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"He's in love," she replied.

Hermione's brow creased as she looked at the older girl, making Gemma laugh softly. "I had such a crush on him in school. Several girls did. I mean look at him: tall, dark, mysterious, brooding. If you fancy the broody Byronic type, he's it personified."

Romilda rolled her eyes. "Snarky, mean, acerbic and intimidating as hell, you mean."

"You didn't know him like I did," Gemma said and then smiled at Hermione once again. "You're one lucky witch. I'd hate you, but my sister says you're really nice."

"Your sister?" Hermione asked.

"Kaitlin," Gemma stated. "She's Slytherin's fifth year prefect this year."

Hermione smiled as she nodded. She barely knew the girl, but yes, the few times Hermione had spoken to her she'd been friendly, if not rather shy towards her. It was probably the whole 'best friend of Harry Potter and saved the wizarding world' thing the reaction she got from several of the students this year.

As they neared the clearing, Hermione saw a huge white tent, like something from a Jane Austen novel, set up on the snow-covered grounds. The riders all slowed from the steady trot to a leisurely walking gait and even the austere Mr. Selwyn looked somewhat happy. When Hermione, Romilda and Gemma pulled their horses to a stop, grooms walked forward to assist them and to tend to the horses and the kennelman collected the cruphounds. All around her, the riders were dismounting, some with ease and others more stiffly. The women who had chosen to watch the hunt came out to greet the riders. The groom who approached the Blishwicks on their silver hippogriffs looked particularly nervous.

Severus walked up to her, and she smiled up at him. "Here," he said, slipping a vial into her hand. "In case you're sore."

Intrigued that the vial had already been uncorked, she took a healthy sip of the potion. "Thank you, it has been years since I've been riding."

"Not that long, I recall," he purred near her ear, a veiled innuendo that made her cheeks feel suddenly warm as she handed him back the vial.

He led her to the tent with the other guests. The warmth hit her the moment she stepped under the white fabric shelter. The long table in the center of the tent was laid out with all the appointments she'd have expected for a formal dinner. Hermione found herself seated between Harland Gabnold and Sidney Burke, across from, Lenora Robards, Cecil Selwyn and Mildred Higgs.

The first course, which appeared as soon as the guests all placed their napkins on their laps, started with live oysters on lemon ice on a icy plates, replaced with partridges and braised pears, mussels in a chardonnay sauce, stuffed mushrooms, and grilled baby asparagus spears.

Hermione peered down the table at Severus who was seated diagonally across from her between Lucretia Blishwick and Katherine Diederich. He turned, caught her eye and nodded at her with a slight smirk on his lips, then turned his attention to Francis Selwyn and Victoria Burke, who sat across from him on either side of Draco.

Down the table, Romilda was clinging onto Kazimir's every word as Fanny spoke to Konrad and Bartholommo, and Larissa spoke to Viktor. Viktor looked up, as if sensing her attention, and Hermione gave him a cursory nod, then looked away. Hermione turned her attention to the conversation around her, enjoying the light squash soup with a sour cream and basil garnish that had been served. The next course of sturgeon, smoked salmon canapés with apricots, crab croquet and julienned vegetables was equally as good, not that she expected anything less from the Malfoys' house-elves.

At a lull in conversation, Hermione congratulated Mr. Gabnold on his recent appointment to the School governors. "I know Severus supported your appointment."

"Why thank you," he said, surprised but proud for the vote of confidence, as a plate of melon slices, cheeses, dried cherries and glazed pecans on top of a rosemary brie on pastry shell appeared for each guest.

"One should not speak politics at formal affairs," Mr. Selwyn stated, stuffing a bit of his brie into his mouth.

Not wanting to voice a retort, Hermione tasted the warm brie instead, nearly purring at the wonderful balance of the dried cherry and rosemary accented cheese.

"And yet, politics frequently does come up in conversation to those who are players of the game," Mr. Burke said heartedly. "I know for certain that your wife, Francis, frequently discusses her causes at our formal affairs. Why, I've even heard Lenora here support her causes at social events."

"Why not, when all the influential members of society are gathered in one place," Lenora Robard said, her face flushed slightly as Mr. Selwyn frowned. "But never at one of your parties, Sidney; one would hate to interrupt your daughter when she's playing."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand. "Your daughter?" she asked Mr. Burke, remembering the concert at his Christmas party.

"Yes," Mrs. Robard said, smiling at the proud father. "The woman who played a harp is Evelyn Ashby, Sidney's youngest." She turned to look at Hermione. "She's almost blind, but she plays divinely, don't you think?"

Hermione noticed Mr. Burke stiffen. "I've never heard anyone play better. You must be so proud," she said to him. "Did she attend Hogwarts? I don't remember seeing her at school," she added, wondering how old Evelyn was.

"No," Mr. Burke said, his expression softening. "My Evelyn had private tutors. Her delicate condition and poor eyesight made it impractical for her to go to Hogwarts. She's played with the London Philharmonic and Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and has performed for the royal family at the Royal Albert Hall."

"I hope I get to hear her play again someday," Hermione said, and Mr. Burke smiled.

"We shall have to invite you and Severus over again, won't we?"

Hermione smiled warmly back. "We'd be delighted."

After lunch, the hunting party followed along the tree line of the Diederichs' property and back down to the edge of the Malfoy property, but the cruphounds did not pick up another scent. Lucius suggested taking a more scenic route back to his stables, leading the group around the large pond that bordered the Diederich and Malfoy estates, the horses taking flight over the open grounds, much to Hermione's chagrin, so the guests could see the extensive gardens from above. Once they landed, Severus helped her dismount.

"Are you all right?" he asked, holding her arms as she regained her composure.

"Just a little shaky after the flight," she replied, grateful for his concern, wishing she could lean into his embrace until her queasiness faded. He smiled at her, his hand taking the reins from her hand as the groom walked up to take the horses. "I'm fine," she lied, squeezing his hand slightly.

He cocked his head, staring at her, then nodded once. He stayed close to her as they followed the others to the house, his hand coming to rest a few times on the small of her back, warm and comfortably, as they walked.

~N~

Narcissa casually invited her guests to join her for tea in the music room, the smaller parlor, rather than her formal drawing room where Hermione had been so unfortunately treated her first time at the manor. No reason to upset the girl now that things between Hermione and Severus were going so well. Besides, the medium-sized room was lovely, decorated to feminine tastes with velvet upholstered lounges and chairs in small sitting arrangements, and a lovely grand piano and harp that could be charmed to play themselves. Lucius raised his eyebrow at her, but graciously supported her suggestion.

After a lovely hour with her friends, Katherine asked after Narcissa's collection of orchids and Cymbidiums. "I loved the number of *Cattleya* and *Cymbidiums* you had at the party," Katherine said.

Narcissa smiled at Katherine's use of the proper Latin names for the botanicals. "Yes, they are doing well. I was pleased to have such showy blooms."

"Were they from your greenhouse?" Fanny asked and then quickly turned to Hermione. "I love her orchids! And her Peruvian dragon lilies! Their fragrance! Hermione, have you ever smelled Peruvian dragon lilies? They have nothing on hyacinths blooms for fragrance. My favorite perfume is the Peruvian dragon lilies and Bergamot orange. Harland buys me some of Narcissa's perfume every year."

"You make perfume?" Hermione asked Narcissa, apparently surprised by the revelation.

Narcissa smiled, reminding herself that Hermione typically socialized with the middle wizarding class. "Yes, Katherine and I own a perfumery."

"Really, Cissy, you're too modest," Katherine said and turned to Hermione. "Yes, child, we own a perfumery *Romantique Parfumerie* and we occasionally work with Marion Verdier-Rigaud's *Madame Rigaud Parfumerie*." She held out her arm for Hermione to smell. "Our latest and best selling fragrance, *Isadora's Bouquet*."

Hermione leaned forward and inhaled, looking up at the woman with an approving smile. "It's lovely!"

"You should smell Narcissa's signature fragrance. She makes it herself, grows the flowers right here," Fanny said. "Her greenhouses rival some of the finest in the country. You must see her solarium while you're here."

Narcissa rose, knowing that Fanny would insist even if Hermione didn't. "This way, ladies."

"I had no idea you had a perfumery," Hermione told Narcissa as she led the way down the Great Hallway. "I've heard mention about your library, but nothing about your greenhouses."

"You haven't...?" Katherine gasped. "Why, we're famous, girl!"

Narcissa smiled indulgently. "Hermione's parents are Muggles, Katherine, and we don't advertise much outside of the elite boutiques." She looked at Hermione and smiled knowingly, stopping by a heavy, double wooden door. "Might as well show you this since we're here." She slid open the doors and stepped aside, allowing Hermione to enter first.

The girl literally gasped at the sight of the Malfoy library. "As our guest, you're welcome to come down here at any time, Hermione," Narcissa said. Katherine and Fanny waited accommodately as Hermione walked into the huge room and turned around slowly.

Their library was the pride and joy of the Malfoy family, an extensive wealth of magical books on all subjects. It was three stories tall (well, there was a fourth level in the basement where the questionable books were held). The ground level had comfortable seating and a large fireplace to keep the room comfortable. The first and second levels were likewise accessible through double, sliding doors off the Grand Corridor on the first floor and the Long Gallery on the second floor, and there were wide, spiraling staircases in each corner of the room. The exterior walls were covered in bookshelves, interspaced with magical windows so that the light wouldn't harm the books.

Narcissa watched Hermione; the openness of her expression showing her amazed delight at the immense collection of books and her obvious desire to peruse the library at leisure. Severus had responded similarly his first time in the room, although he was much more guarded at showing his emotions than Hermione. Narcissa could see what Severus saw in her; except for the way the girl openly displayed her feelings and thoughts, they really were quite similar in many ways.

"Well, we know where she'll be tomorrow," Fanny said with a soft laugh.

"This is amazing," Hermione said, walking up to the ladies waiting on her.

"And it's far larger than it appears," Fanny said. "The shelves must have magical extension charms on them, they hold so many."

Narcissa simply smiled. "Hermione, would you like to see my solarium now?"

"Yes," she replied, her eyes alight with anticipation.

The girl was delightful, her enthusiasm making her eyes all but sparkle. Narcissa raised her arm, indicating the magical glass doors at the end of the hallway.

Narcissa showed off her collection with a sense of pride. Her solarium was as much a garden as it was a work area for her orchids. The various water lilies in the large waterfall style fountain were still blooming, and the marginals of ferns, bog bean and taro were framing the waterfall nicely, although the irises and cannas were now dormant. The Morgana's lace and Aphrodite pearls were spilling over the rocks, their foliage lush and full. On the shelves, the Cattleya and Cymbidium orchids were still blooming nicely, quite showy considering they'd been moved from their usual spots. The Madagascar and African violets were in bloom. As she showed off her orchids, she was pleased that her magical Peruvian dragon lilies spouted small burst of flames, the *Dendrobium hippocampus* waved as if under water, and the banded *Bulbophyllum tigressia* was snarling playfully.

Her friendly, hanging *Dendrobium chameleons* reached out as the guests passed, the flowers changing colors to match the ladies apparel. Unfortunately, the playful plants snagged some of the small curls not contained in Hermione's chignon. "Here let me, help you," Narcissa suggested. The poor girl's curly hair was quite snarled up in the long stems.

Hermione remarked, "You're perfume is lovely," making Narcissa smile as she tried to untangle one stubborn curl.

"Thank you," Narcissa said, finally freeing her. "It's my own creation."

"It smells familiar, but I can't place it," Hermione stated.

"The obvious notes are Rudbeckia, amber and wood accents," she said as she handed her handkerchief. "Here, I'm afraid that my overly friendly plant left a smudge on your cheek."

Hermione sniffed the cloth, her eyes glazing slightly as if she were trying to identify the components of her perfume. Narcissa smiled; even connoisseurs of perfume who had become extremely skillful at identifying components and origins of scents had difficulty identifying the various elements of the fragrances notes of her perfumes.

"It's Narcissa's signature scent," Katherine stated. "Naturally, the precise formulae of our perfumes are kept secret. This is one of the premier perfumes and, as such, is carefully guarded."

"Someone sent me a Rudbeckia flower at school around the first of November," Hermione stated, wiping her cheek.

"That was quite thoughtful of Severus," Narcissa said, watching the girl for her reaction as she indicated a spot the girl missed. She knew it hadn't been Severus who sent the bloom, even though it had been one of her suggestions to him, but she'd wondered if he'd accepted the credit of the gift.

Hermione's lips twitched, but she shook her head. "No. I've no idea who sent it to me. Severus was disconcerted at first when he saw it, but he said it didn't come from him. He's not the flower and candy type."

*So no, he hadn't taken claim of my flower, the silly man.* However, Narcissa noticed a teeny glint in the girl's eyes and a soft wistful smile almost grace her lips as if Severus had in fact sent her flowers and candy. "I'm sure that he would, if given hints that you appreciated such gifts," she said, hoping the girl would accept the suggestion. Men like Lucius and Severus could be so obtuse.

Hermione smiled, shaking her head again. "I don't mind, really. If he doesn't think of it himself, then it's like asking for them and then they lose their magic."

Narcissa wondered. She'd mention it to Severus casually and see what his reaction was to the suggestion.

"Oh, I agree," Fanny said. "There is nothing like the shock of surprise when Harland forgets himself and brings me home gladiolas. Those are my favorites. Or dahlias, my front garden is full of dahlias and gladiolas in the spring."

"I love night jasmine," Hermione stated. "But if I ever have a home with a garden, I think I'll plant camellias."

Narcissa smiled indulgently knowing that Severus' home didn't have a front garden at all, barely a strip of dirt that ran along the front of the house, and although the back garden was small, he used to grow a few of his most common potion ingredients back there. Well, until he'd accepted the position of Potions master and Head of Slytherin at Hogwarts. Still, it wouldn't hurt to hint a little. Severus had listened quite intently, although masked as perturbed annoyance, the last time she'd made suggestions.

~S~

After a very long, formal dinner, the ladies once again withdrew to the music room while the men retired to Lucius' billiards room for after dinner brandies and Lucius' finest armagnac.

"Have you heard word from Kingsley?" Lucius asked as Severus sipped his armagnac. "I heard that the last... incursion in Wenvoe in the Vale of Glamorgan, Wales was successful," Lucius said casually over the rim of his cup as if discussing the weather.

"Thanks to your information," Severus said, nodding politely to Sidney Burke, Harland Gabnold and Wallace Bliswick, sitting in the corner of the room. "Cameron Dawson and his wife Olivia are now in custody," he said softly so his voice didn't carry far.

"She knows nothing; Cameron was always doing things on the sly." Lucius paused while Cecil Selwyn passed by them as he walked around the billiard table for his next shot.

Severus hooked his thumbnail under his fourth fingernail and made a subtle shake of his head, his eyes moving to the side where the male guests were gathered, a warning of prying ears. "However as an avid entertainer, Olivia would know of his friends and associates," Severus said softly as Draco approached Theodore Nott, Terrance Higgs and the three Quidditch players, all talking animatedly, most likely about the game, a few feet away from them. "This should be better discussed in private."

"What? Two old friends mentioning a few mutual associates," Lucius said with a twitch of his lips, "are hardly noteworthy."

"Except that those old associates are considered criminals wanted for questioning," Severus warned softly, lifting his glass up and extending the tip of his finger toward the four playing pool, "and Cecil Selwyn is still touchy about his brother's associations."

"Speaking of which, I had heard an interesting remark from Lemuel Sillerton Agathon Leffertz was seen in the company of Emerson Struthers and Philip Moeller at Miriam Margolyes' establishment."

"Madam Margolyes is back in business?" Severus asked, quite surprised. The gentleman's club had been a favorite meeting place for the Death Eaters, thus the Aurors had closed down Miriam's club after the war. "I thought the Moellers and Struthers had moved after the Dark Lord's fall to escape persecution."

"I believed they had as well. I do know that Leffertz still wants his girls to continue at Hogwarts," Lucius said with a subtle nod.

"Katie and Emily Leffertz were always quiet and fairly competent girls," Severus said, turning to his friend.

Lucius nodded. "They were friends with Astoria in school. But Leffertz is wanted for his associations. The fact that he met with Moeller and Struthers is of some note. When

Leffertz was picked up for questioning, he denied venomously that he had any connection the Dark Lord."

Severus had heard about the arrests. "The Aurors had also captured Adam Gibbon, the youngest of the Gibbon brothers, and Drummond Thatch the week before. Gibbon's arrest led to the arrest of Suzhanna and Ralph Torrington. They, in turn, gave evidence against Moeller and Struthers as well. It won't help Torrington any, but Suzhanna may be given a lighter sentence." Severus said, wondering how old Lucius' information was.

"Something else I heard, Norman and Bernise Wrentall are taking Katie and Emily Leffertz in. I've been asked to visit the Wrentalls with the pretense of offering financial aid for the girls on behalf of the Department of Magical Education. Wrentall has graciously extended an invitation. I thought it might be... *prudent* if you came with me under the pretense of setting up a partial scholarship for the girls."

*Wrentall.* The name struck a chord with Severus. He sipped his armagnac, trying to place the name. "Norman and Bernise Wrentall?" he asked, suddenly remembering that Aledora Wrentall was the mother of John Talfryn Osgood. He wondered if Norman was related to Aledora.

"I believe so," Lucius stated casually. "Is there a connection that I should know about?"

Severus smirked, mentioning the possible connection to one of the men arrested for attempting to kill his great-grandfather. "I'm sure that they'll be delighted to see me."

"There is more; Kingsley believes that they may have information on either Moeller or Struthers. Norman Wrentall, although quite insightful regarding the stock market, is witless and weak. Your *intuitive* ability of *reading* people might come in handy," Lucius suggested with a conspiratorial smile. "You are Headmaster of the school; it would be appropriate."

"When do you plan on going?" Severus asked.

"I'll let you know," Lucius said, moving away to speak to his other guests.

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, to Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my betas, DuchessOfArcadia and Phoenix, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*TPP: Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*According to Wikipedia: Lead crystal was originally discovered by Englishman George Ravenscroft in 1674.*

*When I looked up, 'What is a back winged horse called,' I got this: The name "pterippus" literally means "winged horse". A Pterippus is a horse with wings like those of a giant bird. The wings of a Pterippus normally mirror the coloration of the body's hair. Pegasus is an example of a Pterippus. :  
[http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Is\\_pterippus\\_the\\_name\\_of\\_the\\_mythical\\_horse#ixzz1y4loEEuR](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Is_pterippus_the_name_of_the_mythical_horse#ixzz1y4loEEuR)*

*A Pegasoi is a breed of winged immortal horses. Pegasides are connected with the term Pegasis, which means all that descended from Pegasus or originated by him. In this story they are white. <http://www.theoi.com/Ther/Hippii.html>*

*Abraxans, Aethonans and Graninas are canon creatures. The Granian is a breed of winged horse that are grey in color and very fast. An Aethonan is a breed of winged horse that is chestnut in color and popular in Great Britain and Ireland, but they have been seen elsewhere. An Abraxan is a gigantic, extremely powerful breed of winged horse closely resembling a Palomino. Sited from: Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them and [http://www.hp-lexicon.org/bestiary/bestiary\\_h.html#horse\\_winged](http://www.hp-lexicon.org/bestiary/bestiary_h.html#horse_winged)*

## A Magical New Year's

*Chapter 54 of 63*

Hermione finds herself still residing in Malfoy Manor, watching her friends with Draco and his friends playing Quidditch with the international Quidditch players instead of going to their home after Boxing Day as Severus had promised. But as the coming New Year approaches, things are looking quite promising for the year ahead, if they, well, Severus could learn to confide in her and not keep secrets.



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A Magical New Year's

Severus awoke with Hermione curled up by his side, making his arm, which had become trapped beneath her, numb. The thick navy duvet and matching quilt partially covered her face, leaving only her curly brown hair splayed over his shoulder and tickling his nose. He kicked off the covers and pulled his arm out from its entrapment as he rolled up onto his side and pushed the waking witch onto her back.

"Morning," he said and captured her mouth before she could respond, pull away from him or protest. He'd discovered during these last few days that, while Hermione was usually eager for his attentions in the evenings, she seldom allowed his early morning advances, wanting to rush from the bed to brush her teeth as soon as she'd waken,

even though the mouthwash he'd provided her lasted for a full twelve hours for each use. It really amused him that she felt the need to brush and floss her teeth five times a day, the good little dentists' daughter that she was.

He trailed kisses along her neck and down to her collarbone, his fingers stroking her skin, paying heed to those particular spots that made her inhale or moan deliciously and her body involuntarily react and arch into his touch. He loved eliciting those sounds from her, coaxing her body to respond to his touch, making her mind close down so that she was simply focused on the pleasure he brought her. It was utterly intoxicating.

She raked her fingers up his back, gasping as two of his fingers entered her. Her eyes were dark with lust, staring back at him expressively, and her mouth was open and inviting, her breathing hard enough to make her chest heave. He stroked the soft warm flesh of her vagina until he thought he felt a difference of texture, and then tapped...

Her eyes widened in shock. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed.

Smiling smugly, he kissed her while tapping her inside again. Her head fell back, her body arched off the bed, and she dug her nails into his back from the sensations he knew were shooting through her, if he was judging her reactions correctly. He laughed softly against her breast and repeated his tapping, pleased by her reaction. He felt her shudder, a convulsive spasm, and knew he was doing it right.

Gasping, she cried out his name, "Severuss," as her body stiffened.

"Ohmygods, what was that?!" she exclaimed.

"Haven't you ever come this way?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," she replied as he taped again.

Grinning as her body convulsed again, he replied with a simple, "Humm," and moved down to her core. Her fingers delved into his hair, stroking his scalp in a way he truly loved. He loved knowing that he'd rendered her nearly speechless, gasping and moaning uncontrollably. It was such a heady feeling. He licked her, from his fingers thrust deep in between her folds up to her clitoris, which quickly engorged under the manipulations of his tongue. "Nice," he said, taking the swollen nub into his mouth, making Hermione's hips buck up into his face. He pinned her down with a growl, making her struggle beneath him.

She propped herself up on her elbows to watch, then fell back on the bed, gasping, "Oh-god, no more... oh-god, no more," over and over, the soft walls around his fingers tightened and clenched as he stroked her moist canal roughly. She began to thrash about, beating the covers with one hand while clasping his head with her other as if to push him tighter against her clit. Not that her struggles were going to stop him from his purpose.

Her orgasm was a deep one, as far as he could tell, based upon her thrashing shudder, a convulsive shiver, the mewling pleas and gasping of his name. Gods, she was magnificent in the throes of passion and so expressive.

He rose up quickly, pulled her to him and entered her with a hard thrust of his hips. She gasped, still reeling from her orgasm as he pumped and thrust into her. "Gods, you're so fucking tight," he growled the obvious, well obvious to him as it was the only coherent thought he had at the moment, how utterly incredible it felt to be inside her.

"You feel good," she grunted as she met him thrust for thrust. "Oh, fuck. Harder. Please, harder."

Encouraged, he hardly needed to be asked twice, spurred on by her pleas. He grunted in response, complying with her request, and he heard her moan in satisfaction. He plunged in and out of her with full force, his own orgasm building as his gonads contracted tighter, and he felt the ejaculation coming in pleasurable spasms as it rushed upward and outward. He thrust himself as deeply into her as he could with each pulsing squirt. Her inner walls contracted and relaxed with each of his strokes as he spilled his seed into her, mixing with her wet juices. He held her tightly to him, locked together as his own body relaxed slightly, feeling the heady state of satiation and satisfaction.

Hermione mewled as her inner walls clenched down on his softening member as if to hold him in as he pulled back, mewling, "No, don't. Stay in," in protest for him to stay inside her.

"I can't," he said as he withdrew his semi rigid cock, the sensation somewhat painful. He lay down next to her as his racing heart and ragged breathing slowed down to a normal rhythm.

Hermione rolled over so that her chin rested on his chest and looked up at him cheerfully. "Morning," she said, grinning.

Severus bent his right arm and buried his fingers into her hair, loving the dampness in her soft curls. "I believe I already said that."

She rose up, her small hand pressing down on his body as she did, and she kissed his chin. He lifted his head, giving her a quick kiss and then lying back down, his left hand on hers where it still rested on him, the other stroking her hair. She was wide awake now, obviously, smiling much too eagerly, and he needed to recuperate. He reached up to adjust the pillow behind his head.

"So what are we doing today?" she asked, resting her chin on her hand on his chest.

"Traditionally, the social elite tend to their philanthropies today," he said, his pulse finally slowing to normal. "If you want, we can peruse the library after breakfast."

"Yes, I want to," she replied, scrambling quickly from the bed. He laughed at her enthusiasm as she scurried to the bathroom, giving him a lovely view of her backside.

~H~

Hermione had hoped that she and Severus would have retired to his their home after Boxing Day as he'd promised. But instead, he'd disappeared on some errand with Mr. Malfoy, leaving her with Astoria and Larissa Nott for company, watching the boys play Quidditch. Well Hermione was sitting in the stands with the other two girls, but her mind was on something else entirely.

She'd overheard Severus telling Mr. Malfoy after breakfast that morning that Kingsley and Hayward Blume were interested in knowing where Walsingham was while the women gathered to discuss going to see Narcissa's greenhouses. Mr. Malfoy had replied that if they found Moellers and Struthers at a Madam Margolyes... but Severus had cut him off midsentence to ask Hermione what she needed. Of course she hadn't needed anything; she'd wanted to know when they'd be leaving for home.

*Hayward Blume, isn't he Harry and Ron's training instructor? And he's interested in Walsingham* She wracked her brains. The name was familiar... she knew his face... she could visualize the man's deep-set eyes and barred teeth behind the moustache and beard... but where would she have met the wizard? She sat up, remembering where she'd seen the face as Kazimir flew by with the Quaffle, followed by Draco and Goyle. *The posters in Diagon Alley! The man was suspected of being a Death Eater.* But the other three names, Moellers, Struthers and Madam Margolyes, didn't mean anything to her.

Hermione was wondering what Severus and Mr. Malfoy were up to. She thought back to the brief conversation that morning. When she'd asked who Madam Margolyes was, Severus had said cryptically, "Madam Margolyes is of no import; Lucius and I are going to see Norman and Bernise Wrentall regarding Katie and Emily Leffertz. You should join the ladies for a tour of Narcissa's greenhouses. I'll be back around noon or so."

"Kasimir scored," Astoria said happily, drawing Hermione back to the game as Larissa clapped politely. Konrad tossed the Quaffle to Bartholommo, who handed it off to Draco, which made Astoria happy, and the players shot off for the opposing goal hoops, Golye and Bartholommo blocking Kazimir and Viktor to give Draco a straight run.

Naturally, the morning with the ladies was enjoyable enough, but two hours in the greenhouses, talking about Narcissa's flowers, hadn't really been all that exciting for Hermione, especially as she'd been so worried about Severus. Yes, the huge Victorian glass botanical greenhouses and the five octagonal conservatories, each one supporting different climate zones, were quite impressive and very beautiful in proportion and overall grace. But the large collection of aromatic flowers and plants had been

a little overwhelming for Hermione.

All Hermione cared about was where Severus was. He and Mr. Malfoy had missed lunch. When Hermione asked Narcissa, she'd said they were conducting business and would be back later. Hermione was worried that Severus was off on another Death Eater hunt, and he could be if Moellers, Struthers and Madam Margolyes had any connection with Walsingham. Surely whatever business he had with Norman and Bernise Wrentall wouldn't have taken all day. *Wrentall. Why is the name Wrentall familiar?* She wondered if they were associated with Voldemort in any capacity.

Hermione sighed in frustration. Too many questions, no answers, and she was stuck sitting in the Quidditch stands, watching four Slytherins fly with the famous Quidditch players. She wished Harry and Ron were here, because then she could ask them.

Hermione knew Katie and Emily Leffertz, but only vaguely; Katie was first-year Slytherin who Hagrid had caught trying to sneak into the Forbidden Forest a few times to find the unicorns, and Emily was a seventh-year Ravenclaw who occasionally teased, or tried to tease, Luna from time to time. Luna's serene disposition and strong sense of self meant that she tended to simply shrug off taunting with a whimsical off-handed reply about an infestation of Whormboles for which she wore a talisman repellant... her butterbeer cork which was coated in Dragon's Blood resin and Solomon's Seal.

Her attention was brought back to the game as Astoria cheered happily. Seeing Draco fly by with Viktor hot on his broomstick made her miss Harry, Ginny and Ron even more. They'd have really loved being on the pitch with the famous international players, even if they also had to play with Draco, Theodore, Blaise and Goyle. She wondered if Draco would let Harry play Seeker and Ron play Keeper.

"What is it, Hermione?" Astoria asked after a while.

"Nothing really, I was just thinking..." She smiled, hoping it was convincing. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude." She watched Viktor snatch the Quaffle from Draco and make an impossibly sharp turn on his broom. "I was thinking about my friends."

"Oh, right, Harry and Ronald," Astoria said, smiling. "They both played for Gryffindor, didn't they?"

Hermione nodded. "They are both enthusiasts; Harry was the Seeker, and Ron played Keeper," she said proudly. "Ginny, too; she played Chaser and filled in as Seeker once."

"Oh, that's right; you're friends with Harry Potter!" Larissa said with a feigned casual air and a huge grin. "It's too bad he was not invited to come play. Imagine, Harry Potter flying Seeker against Viktor Krum now, that would be fun to watch."

"Isn't Harry on friendly terms with Viktor? I saw them talking together at the party," Astoria said, watching as Viktor swooped by on his broom, followed by Draco and Theodore. Viktor passed the Quaffle to Kazimir. Konrad matched Kasimir's maneuvering as he went for the goal, left, up, right, left, down....

"I heard you dated Viktor Krum," Larissa said. "But then you like the dark-haired famous types, don't you?"

Hermione turned to look at the girl, and Larissa shrugged. "First Viktor Krum, then Harry Potter and now the Headmaster," the brunette stated.

"Harry and I are friends," Hermione stated, turning her attention back on the game as Konrad blocked the Quaffle. "We never dated that was a lie thought up by Rita Skeeter to sell newspapers."

"Viktor looks a little like Professor Snape, doesn't he?" Astoria asked as Viktor flew close by the stands. "Same nose and hair, and that intensity in their stare..."

Hermione grimaced at the comparison. Yes, they had the same eye and hair color and both men had somewhat similar noses, but honestly, there was little resemblance at all. "They really are quite different."

She looked up at the cloudy sky, wondering how long the game would go on and if Severus had come back yet. The area around the pitch was surrounded mostly by tall pines and dense oaks, so that the Muggles living in the area would not see anyone flying about on brooms. The pitch, although the length and width were standard regulation size, was not as tall as a professional pitch; the stands were only twenty meters or so, still quite high in Hermione's opinion, equaling the tops of the oaks, but well under the Scot Pines that reached well up to thirty or forty meters.

Behind where the girls sat, there was a break in the trees, revealing the slope leading up to the Manor. Hermione turned, staring at the stretch of white in the direction of the house. As if her desires conjured it, she thought she saw something up on the edge of the field. She sat motionless, staring hard at the spot, willing it to be Severus.

Moments ticked, and Astoria cried out, "Draco scored!" bouncing happily in her seat.

Up on the slope, the spot grew larger, becoming a silhouette of a man walking toward them, his robes billowing in the wind. "Severus!" Hermione jumped up and hurried from the stands.

She didn't notice Viktor coming to a stop mid pitch or hear Larissa's comment of, "She's really besotted isn't she?"

She ran out of the pitch, as the girls clapped and cheered above her, and out into the snow. Now that he was closer, she could see him clearly, his stride in the snow surefooted, his robes billowing behind him, his eyes locked on her even though the windswept strands of his hair across his face. She picked up her skirts and ran, closing the gap between them. "Tell me you're all right," she said just before flinging her arms around him.

"Why would I not be all right?" he asked as his arms came around her.

"You're tracking down Morgund Walsingham, aren't you? He is a Death Eater, isn't he?" she replied.

Severus leaned away from her and scowled, his eyes turning stony. "Morgund Walsingham is suspected of being a Death Eater. But what..." His expression morphed into the blank mask she hated. "You overheard."

"I overheard," she said, blushing, knowing she'd upset him, but she needed to know. "You even smell of smoke. Where did you go?"

His eyes narrowed. "Hermione," he said, his tone slightly harsher than before. "I told you, Lucius and I had an appointment with Norman and Bernise Wrentall."

"And that took all morning?" She tilted her head slightly as she gazed up at him, not fully believing him. "I heard Mr. Malfoy mention the names, Moellers, Struthers and Madam Margolyes, just before you cut him off. Why you didn't want me to know about them?" she asked. His expression hardened, she saw the tick in his jaw again, and she knew she was on the right track. "Are they Death Eaters, too?"

He dropped his arms and stood there, looking down at her, stiffly. "Hermione, I told you, Madam Margolyes is of no concern to you," Severus said harshly.

"And the other two, Moellers and Struthers?" Hermione persisted, wanting him to tell her, to confide in her. She laid a hand on his chest. "Are they Death Eaters? Did you go to Madam Margolyes to find them? Are they connected to Morgund Walsingham?"

His expression hardened, his eyes growing darker as his hands fell to his sides. "Hermione, this doesn't concern you."

"What do you mean, it doesn't concern me? Everything about you concerns me!" she said, almost shouting. "Stop shutting me out! I don't want you to lie to me!"

He crossed his arms, and his expression became relaxed, unreadable. "Don't you have any faith in me?" he asked, but there was a stony glint in his eyes.



"Of course I do," she said sharply. "I know you are assisting the Aurors, but I was worried. You've been gone all day."

"I am assisting the Aurors in capturing the last of the Dark Lord's followers, yes. Part of Lucius' parole is in giving them what information we know."

"I know that!" she exclaimed as she stamped her foot, her fists coming down to her sides. She was convinced that Severus was doing it out of some code of honor, but now she knew Mr. Malfoy was helping, too. "But I know of at least two times you've been hurt *helping* the Aurors," she said. She flung one arm up to her side. "I know that Katie and Emily Leffertz's father is on the suspect list, and that he fled the country it was in the *Daily Prophet*." She watched him turn his head to look away from her, feeling her rage grow.

She saw the tick in his jaw again before he turned to look at her again. "Not here," he said, taking hold of her arm and drawing her to him.

Without any warning whatsoever, she immediately felt the suffocating squeeze of Side-Along Apparition before finding herself faltering on the path somewhere in the gardens. Hermione gasped for air and grasped at Severus to try and steady herself. For Hermione, Side-Along Apparition was bad enough when she was expecting it, but when she wasn't it left her feeling dizzy and disoriented for a few seconds.

Thankfully, he'd held onto her arms until she stood more steadily on her feet.

When her breath steadied, she looked about to see where he'd taken her. They stood on a path lined with roses, which had been trimmed and bedded with mulch for the winter, and surrounded by tall hedges.

She turned her attention and ire to Severus. "I don't remember who the Wrentalls are, but that name's familiar to me, too. I just can't place it right now, but it *will* come to me eventually. And I heard Mr. Malfoy telling you that if you found Moellers and Struthers at a Madam Margolyes... before you cut him off so I wouldn't hear the rest of the statement," she told him as she pointed her finger at his chest, but he was scowling at her hand. "And I want to know what is going on."

"I said, not out here where we can be overheard," he hissed. Severus pulled on her arm, making her walk with him down the path, and she had to quicken her pace to keep up. Their shoes crunched on the snow-covered gravel as they walked, and the shadows from the hedges gave her a chill. "Severus, as you've pointed out, I was usually the one who found the answers to the puzzles Harry, Ron and I were sorting out in school. Just tell me what's going on..."

"You want to know what is going on?" he repeated angrily, coming to abrupt stop at what seemed like dead end in a maze. He cast his Sound-Dampening Charm on the hedges, then focused his attention on her. "I'm running a school. My meeting was with the guardians of two of my students to verify if they were capable of paying for the girls' education and the train fare. Lucius pays for several scholarships every year and has offered to subsidize the amount if the Wrentalls were unable to."

She inhaled, the sound of the water from the small fountain helping to calm herself down. Yelling at him would get her nowhere. "And the other... Did you go to Madam Margolyes in search of Moellers and Struthers?"

He indicated that she sit on one of the three benches in the in a ring of hedges that surrounding a small fountain. She stubbornly remained standing.

"Yes, Lucius and I paid a social call on Madam Margolyes in order to see if we could gain any useful information from her. I was not in any risk at all today, although your concern is quite touching." He sat down on the nearest bench, reclining slightly with his boots firmly planted on the gravel and his arms crossed.

Hermione's eyes widened. She turned around, taking in the clearing for the first time. "This place it's..." His pose on the high backed stone bench... the fountain... the hedges. It was all the same, except that it had been lush and green in her dream. Now everything the hedges, the path, the other benches, the fountain trickling away it was all frosted as if with confectioner's sugar. "But it was a dream it wasn't real?"

"Oh, this place is real, Hermione," he said, grasping her hand to pull her to him, "as was the dream. The dreams were the magical connection of the 'casting' phase of our Bonding. We were both here, if not actually physically."

She stood before him, shocked. "But the other places... the pergola." She looked down at him, sprawled out sexily before her. *You* controlled the dreams?"

He sat up, and his hands slid up her legs, bunching her robes up as he did so. "I was able to, yes, eventually." He pulled her forward between his knees. "If you're finished being annoyed with me," he said silkily in that smooth-as-melted-chocolate voice she loved, his fingers now raking her skin at her knees. "How about sitting on my lap and recreating that particular dream with me?"

Hermione's knees threatened to give, and even though she was still quite irritated with him, her ire was fading fast with each sensual caress. She allowed him to turn her around. "Won't we be seen?"

Both hands slid up her thighs, his fingers spreading them to his touch as she leaned back against him. "And pray tell, what fool would be wandering in the snow-covered gardens in the middle of December?"

"It's the twenty-seventh," she corrected him, scooting back onto his lap as he did incredible things with his fingers. "And, anyway, we did."

"Saucy minx." He tore her knickers, his fingers delving into her, and she gasped and moaned in pleasure, undulating on his lap.

"Hermione, turn around and straddle my hips so I can kiss you," he said smoothly.

She complied, watching him as he unfastened his trousers and opened his fly to release himself. "Well, come here, woman; its bloody cold out here. I don't want it to freeze off."

She stifled a giggle as she complied, smiling as she scrambled up onto his lap. He positioned himself and entered her, pulling her tightly to him. "Oh, gods, you feel good," she groaned. Sex outside like this was a heady feeling, knowing that anyone might see them: from a window or from casually coming upon on them from the garden. She rode him in a frenzy, imagining that they were being watched. His hands remained under her robes, touching her and grasping her hips to guide her. She threw her head back, clenching her teeth, knowing that she was tightening on him with her pelvic muscles. She leaned forward, kissing him, rubbing herself on him so that his pubic hair and his trousers rubbed on her clit.

"Yes, Hermione, use me," he said, his voice thick and deep with lust.

She moved more ardently, grinding herself on him, not caring if she was acting like a harlot in heat he felt incredible.

"That's it, fuck me."

"Severus, I I..." She didn't know she couldn't think of anything except for the throbbing hardness inside of her, the scratchy abrasiveness of the wool, and his hands helping her slide up and down on his penis as she rocked back and forth, up and down repeatedly, trying to keep a steady rhythm, even when her thoughts became unfocused, reeling in the sensations she was feeling. She gasped aloud, threw her head back and fought down the scream that threatened to break free.

"Come, witch, come for me," he said, his own voice harsh and strained. "Gods, Hermione, I can't hold out. Come for me," he pleaded.

She leaned back as her orgasm broke, feeling as if she might fall backwards off his lap save for his death grip on her as he thrust up into her. The waves of sensation swept through her, out and down over him where they were connected, and she thought she'd urinated on him as she leaned forward and captured his mouth again. His lips were quivering, not as normally responsive, and she pushed her tongue into his mouth to stroke his tongue with hers. As she started to come down, his tongue began to tease hers back, his kisses became stronger. Gods, but she loved kissing him.

When his penis slipped out from her, she laid her head on his shoulder in stated bliss. "Gods. Severus, will it ever be boring between us?"

"No, not if I can help it, my little minx," he said breathlessly, holding her tight.

She smiled, happily drowsy in his arms, uncaring about the cold winter around them.

~L~

Lucius walked to the library in the hopes of finding Severus; he was not out on pitch, watching Hermione's friends, Draco and his friends playing Quidditch with the four famous international players. But then neither was Hermione. So, since his friend and his Bonded mate were not out on the Quidditch pitch with all the young people, Lucius assumed he'd either be with his fiancée, brewing or reading. He opted for reading, Severus' favorite pastime when he wasn't brewing.

Cissy had been surprised that Draco had extended the invitation to the Potters and Mr. Weasley, but she could see the advantage as well as he could to his son finally making a gesture of friendship to the famous wizards. Alliances could be beneficial, and Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley were very well connected and highly regarded young men. Lucius had been following the young men's careers. It was already rumored that Harry Potter would rise high in the Aurory Department, already showing strong aptitude in leadership skills, a clever mind and a head for regulations, law decrees and diplomacy. Ronald Weasley was an equally adept trainee. So far they had both ranked very high marks in Organization and Strategy, Crime Scene Investigation, Collection and Preservation of Evidence, Magical Search and Seizure, Dark Arts Detection as well as Stealth and Tracking. Not that Lucius was at all surprised; both young men had been involved in detective activities since their first year at Hogwarts.

However, Lucius was certain that it had been Astoria who had talked Draco into inviting Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley to play Quidditch four days ago, but regardless who had initiated the idea, it was a rather nice gesture of good will on his son's part. The Potters and Mr. Weasley had returned the next day, apparently everyone having enjoyed the game, and Lucius had been pleased to see Potter and his son conversing amicably, even if the Potters had declined staying for dinner that first night. They had stayed for lunch on the second afternoon and accepted the invite to dinner the evening after that, so progression had been made. Lucius was even willing to overlook Mr. Weasleys rather boorish table manners, which had somewhat improved with Astoria's gentle guidance. But then, even some of the high-ranking people in the Ministry had interesting table manners which were usually politely overlooked.

Still, Lucius was pleased that Ronald Weasley and Ginevra Potter were beginning to get along with his family, considering the animosity that had existed between Lucius and their parents for years. Naturally, Lucius had thanked Astoria, but she'd graciously admitted that the idea had been Hermione's suggestion, although Lucius doubted it; Hermione wouldn't have been so presumptuous as to ask, and she'd been both surprised and delighted to see the two young men and Mrs. Potter come through the Floo with their brooms. Hermione was much too transparent in her feelings for the reaction to have been contrived for their benefit.

Even Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott and Gregory Goyle were making every attempt to bury their old animosity for a friendly truce with the Gryffindors.

Nevertheless, Lucius had been surprised that Hermione and Severus were not out on the pitch either playing or watching her friends; well, maybe not Severus. His tolerance for Potter had improved, but only by a certain measure, and he seemed to only be able to endure Potter in small doses. Hermione, on the other hand, was becoming quite a bit more comfortable with Lucius' family, though she preferred the company of Astoria and Fanny Gabnold or Kazimir Maschke and Konrad Vondran.

He entered the library and scanned the huge room. There, on a leather sofa against the far wall, Severus sat, book in hand, with Hermione tucked against his side also quietly reading. His friend's arm rested across the back of the sofa, his hand gently toying with the girl's hair, fully engrossed on the book he was reading. A small smile played on Hermione's face, either from the absentminded fondling of her hair or the contents of the book. It was hard to tell which book she'd selected from this distance, but it was one of the older tomes. It was such a sweet, domestic scene, one he was loath to disrupt. Of all the plush, comfortable seating in the room, the pair sought out the solitude of a secluded leather sofa to sit and read together. *And Severus was concerned that their relationship wasn't as strong as he'd hoped.* They looked every bit the loving couple.

Lucius eased from the room without disturbing his friend and his fiancée.

~H~

The Ballroom was full of people, but even though the room seemed full to bursting, out on the dance floor among all the couples dancing, Hermione found that there was still plenty of room to twirl and spin to the music. There were so many people that the guests mingled in the Grand Corridor, the large, opulent Red Withdrawing Room and even in the Ladies Salon. Waiters, not house-elves, in pristine white coattails, carried trays of sparkling wines, champagnes and elf-made wine. Food tables were set up in the White Drawing Room on the east side of the Grand staircase with such a selection of savories, canapé hors d'oeuvres, fruits, seafood, fowl and sweets that Hermione could barely remember even half of the delicacies served that night. Everlasting Firework Fountains that sprayed harmless, colorful sparks and crackling sparklers had been placed in every wall sconce, and miniature Chrysanthemums fireworks erupted in the vaulted ceiling, spewing harmless sparkles and confetti into the air, adding a festive flair to the festivities.

Everyone who was anyone seemed to have been invited. Even Mrs. and Mr. Weasley were here, somewhere, mingling with the other important Ministry guests, Masters and Nobel laureates of their fields and the crème of wizarding society. Mrs. Weasley had gushed like a young girl in her lovely white and Christmas red dress robes when she told Hermione about Mr. Weasley's promotion, and Mr. Weasley, in new black tuxedo dress robes with a matching cummerbund and bow tie, had danced with Hermione, telling her about some of the new changes in the Ministry: the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects had been reallocated, and his new title was Head of the Department for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit, Illicit and Dangerous Spells and Objects. Kingsley Shacklebolt had been made official Minister of Magic, just in time for the New Year. New laws protecting werewolves were being proposed, although Dolores Umbridge was trying fervently to block them.

Hermione had been thrilled that Alestra, Wendlynne and Veronica had been invited as well. The girls had all arrived together in one of the Malfoy's Rolls-Royce Phantom IVs. The last she'd seen her friends though, Alestra was dancing with her boyfriend, Thornton Bronte, and across the room, Veronica and her boyfriend, Jeremy Watson, were talking to Kazimir, Bartholommeo and the Canons ex-Beater, Derrick Molyneux.

Konrad had Hermione spin out away from him, making the light layers of her gown swirl and swish wonderfully. Hermione paused, arm extended and tilted her head with a slightly cocky smile, making him smile in return, before spinning back to him, and lightly placing her hand back on his shoulder. His arm went to her back, and he dipped her slightly, just enough to let her head tip back, but not enough to dislodge the garnet diadem Narcissa had lent her to match her garnets. Hermione opted to wear the garnets that had belonged to Severus' grandmother that Mr. Prince had given for Christmas, hoping that Narcissa wouldn't mind too much. The strapless cut of the gown set off the necklace wonderfully, and the bracelet glittered on her elbow-length white gloves. Unlike the previous affairs, when Elbee showed up to do Hermione's makeup and hair, Hermione told the elf how she wanted her hair, which had delighted Elbee.

*"Miss is telling Elbee how to makes her hair happy!" the elf squeaked, clasping her hands. "Elbee can do curls like miss is wanting."*

But when Hermione said she wanted to wear less makeup, to look more natural, Elbee had been utterly confused.

*"Miss does not like how Elbee does her faces?" the elf asked, her ears drooping so low they touched her shoulders.*

*"No, that's not it, you've always made me look lovely," Hermione tied to explain. "But I felt like a China doll each time, and the makeup was so heavy I didn't even look like myself. I just want to look like myself, only smoother, pretty, not so... glamorous, and not so thick it feels like my face will crack!"*

*"Elbee not does makeup so that it will crack," she replied, sounding more than a little affronted. "Elbee very good at makeup applying."*

The end result was a light, flawless complexion, her eyes shadowed glamorously yet tastefully to enhance her eyes, and her lips were garnet red to compliment her stones. Her hair was pulled up and back with curls cascading down her back and dancing on her shoulders. She had never felt prettier. Even Severus' appreciative smile, his smoldering look, seemed more realistic to her this evening. Each time she saw him throughout the evening, their eyes met and there was an intensity in his gaze as if she

was his, undeniably his, especially if she was dancing with one of the young men at the party. More so if it was one of her friends. It thrilled her.

Hermione explained preference of the gems to Narcissa when Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy came by to escort Hermione and Severus to the Grand Corridor to greet their guests. Narcissa had smiled warmly and surprised her by saying, *"No, this is quite appropriate, Hermione. They are lovely. I do have a simple diadem that would compliment these," she said, lifting a hand to admire the earrings, "if you'd permit me."*

*Hermione nodded, momentarily distracted by the scent of her perfume. "Of course, if it's the tradition."*

*"As a débutante, and especially as this is your last ball of the season, you should wear a tiara or a diadem," Narcissa explained, lowering her arm as Elbee suddenly appeared with the diadem in hand.*

Now Hermione was twirling and turning with the music, smiling happily with an energetic dance partner. She was utterly convinced that Durmstrang taught their students how to dance since all of them, Konrad, Kazimir and Viktor, were superb dancers.

The music ended, and Hermione thanked Konrad, smiling as he escorted her to the side of the dance floor. "You honor me, Her-mi-oninny," Kazimir said, holding her hand gently in his. "Mnogo blagodaria," he added as he kissed her knuckles.

"I enjoyed it very much, thank you, Konrad," Hermione replied, catching her breath.

"Blagodaria. You isvinete me, I see your Bonded fiancé come this vay." He clicked his heels. "Chestita nova godina, I vish you vell."

Severus approached, his scowl softening as he watched the Bulgarian ask another lady to dance. He looked resplendent in his black tailcoat dress robes, white pique' tie, and white double-breasted vest over his white wing-collar shirt and white gloves. He even wore garnet cufflinks and a white camellia on his lapel.

"Will you dance with me again?" she asked softly, hoping it wasn't too imprudent to dance with him as many times as she'd done tonight. She'd read that usually a married couple did not dance together in formal balls, it was considered a sign of unusual attention for a husband to dance with his wife more than once in the evening, but they could do so if he wished. Of course ladies were not supposed to ask a gentleman to dance either; they were to sit or stand passively until a gentleman came to escort them and could not even be seen to cross the dance floor unescorted or go anywhere unescorted even the loo or to get a cup of punch. Hermione had read Delores Kittrell's *The Social Advantage - Etiquette for Witches and Manners for Wizards* thoroughly, reviewing the codes of conduct expected for formal and informal events. She'd been amazed at the intricate and elaborate details, the exacting rules and expectations in regards to traditions, ethics and social mores and the hypocritical rituals of the magical social elite. It was daunting trying to remember all the fastidious proper etiquette and protocols, proper conducts of behavior and the social courtesies. And to think that Severus blended in with the social elite astounded her.

Mr. Malfoy, as well as Severus, had observed convention and had introduced Hermione to a number of dance partners throughout the entire evening, most of them older wizards, prominent in their fields or people who supported the school or held some office in the Ministry as well as influential people in society. She carefully repeated each name a few times in order to try and remember them, but as the night wore on, she was afraid she'd forgotten a few of their names.

Severus looked amused by her request, his eyes lightening up. "If you want," he said and escorted her to the dance floor. "Defying decorum, are we?" he asked as he turned to face her, taking her right in his left hand while placing his right hand on her upper back as she placed her left hand on his shoulder.

"I love dancing with you," she replied as he started the waltz. He was an amazing dancer: confident, a strong lead, and his movements were so fluid it was like floating around the dance floor. Even though she knew he was aware of everyone and everything in the room, his eyes never seemed to leave her face, and she smiled up at him, swelling with pride. Her powerful, black knight errant turned into a prince, if just for one night, and he made her feel like a princess.

The dance ended all too soon, and he led her off the floor. Harry approached with Ginny on his arm, which gave her a chance to dance with him as Severus danced with Ginny. She was pleased that Harry had improved somewhat, although she knew he was still a bit uncomfortable. "Are you having a good time?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's all right," he said, missing a step and quickly recovering. "Ginny loves all these parties."

"You're doing much better," she replied as he tried to lead her in a twirl.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "I've been practicing. Cho is teaching me to dance, and believe it or not, so has Bill and Fleur."

"Are Bill and Fleur here tonight?" she asked.

He shook his head. "He and Fleur are in France. She comes from a large family. They try to alternate holidays between her family and all of us."

She smiled. 'All of us,' meant the Weasleys, which was rather apt. She knew that Harry considered the Weasleys an extended family, something she'd always wanted with them as well, although there were times when she'd felt like an outsider. She loved them all nonetheless.

The music stopped and Harry looked relieved. "Well, hope your toes survived."

"Harry, you're a good dancer," she replied, and he gave her an incredulous smirk. "No, really, you're much better than you were at the Ministry Ball."

"Thank you," he said, blushing slightly. "But I would rather stay in the other rooms than dance, but don't tell Ginny. She loves dancing."

"I won't," she replied with a smile.

As he led her from the dance floor, Hermione watched as Astoria excused herself from an older gentleman Hermione didn't know. Astoria looked at Hermione, and she knew that the girl was trying to decline the man's continued attention politely, to no avail, but due to the codes of etiquette she couldn't just walk away. "Harry, do me a favor and dance with Astoria."

"Do I have to?" he asked, looking around. "Won't Draco mind?"

"Please, Harry. I know Draco won't mind. Walk me over to her, now," she said, taking his arm.

Harry shrugged and did as she asked, although she knew he hadn't a clue as to why he needed to do so. Astoria looked grateful at the intrusion.

"Astoria, you remember my friend, Harry Potter?" Hermione asked conversationally.

"Oh, of course. Harry, how are you this evening?" Astoria asked politely, extending her hand out to him. The elder wizard stiffened, but backed away gracefully.

"Er, fine." Harry looked confused, but he shook her hand. "Er, Hermione said I should ask you to dance."

"Harry, I'd be delighted," Astoria said with a warm smile. She gave Hermione a look that read *Thank you*, then smiled at Harry again.

"I'm not very good," he said to her over the music as Kazimir, who'd been standing behind them, excused himself quickly and walked over to greet Hermione.

"Sdrasti, Her-mi-oninny! It is my turn to have you, neh?" he asked with a huge grin. He looked up and added, "Headmaster Snape," with a polite but subtle nod.

Hermione turned, not realizing he'd joined them.

"Mr. Maschke," Severus said formally, his gaze locked boldly on the younger man.

Kazimir smiled, undaunted by Severus formal demeanor. "Her-mi-oninny says I should call you Sever-rus. Please, you may call me Kazimir," he said, looking Severus directly in the eye.

Severus' eyebrow twitched ever so slightly, and he nodded, but didn't reply, and Hermione fought back the laugh at his reluctance. He looked at her, then back to her friend. "Did she? Very well."

Well, it was a start.

If Severus' coolness bothered Kazimir, he didn't let it show. "Priatel," he said turning back to Hermione, "I get a letter. Tatiana, she is coming to London. I hope you to meet her."

Severus' hand on her lower back relaxed as she replied, "Really? When? I can't wait to meet her. Maybe the two of you can come to Hogsmeade." She turned to look at Severus. "When is our next Hogsmeade weekend?"

"February," he stated, then heaved a sigh and added, "The fourteenth Valentine's Day," as if acceding to seeing the Bulgarian that soon. "If you're in the area, you may join us for lunch."

"Mnogo blagodaria, Sever-rus, I do look forward to lunch with you and Her-mi-oninny." He turned to Hermione. "May I have this dance?"

She accepted, flashing Severus a grateful smile and allowed Kazimir to lead her out onto the dance floor. Dancing with Kazimir was fun. Like Konrad and Viktor, he was a competent dancer: a strong lead but he didn't take it too seriously. He loved to twirl and spin and dip his partners, some would say too lively, but all in all, enjoyable. And Hermione had managed, once again, to keep up with him and not trip over her own feet or step on his toes. He always forwent decorum and kept her out on the floor with him for two dances, but she didn't mind.

When the second dance ended, he led her off the floor. "Thank you, priatel," Kazimir said, and as he leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, Hermione quickly gave him a quick kiss before he pulled away. Kazimir looked at her with a pleased conspiratorial smile. "Mnogo blagodaria, but your vizard, he is vatching me, neh? He still thinks I sweep you away on my broom."

"He has been a little jealous of you, I'm afraid," Hermione admitted.

"Ven he meets my Tatiana, he will be jealous no more," he said emphatically. His love for Tatiana showed in his eyes whenever he said her name. "Not that I would not take you away," he added with a cocky grin, "but I hear the Headmaster is... how did Draco say vicket fast and knows more curses and hexes than my professors at Durmstrang."

Hermione laughed softly. "So I've been told. He is amazing in a wand fight." She quickly added, "Not that he would."

"Oh, da, he would. You should see how he vatches me." They both turned to see Severus approaching. Kazimir turned back to her. "I hope your fiancé is no mad at me. Chestita nova godina, Her-mi-oninny, my dear priatel. I hope to see you next year," he said with a quick wink. "Chao."

"We shall," she said as he looked up, nodded once and walked away, just as Severus stopped beside her.

"Having a good time?" he said drolly.

"The very best," she replied, happily.

Around the room, people started counting down the seconds.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

He turned to look at her, his dark eyes smoldering in the candle light and sparklers.

"Six, five, four..."

Hermione felt her breath hitch as he stared at her. Gods, she wanted him to kiss her.

"Two, one. Happy New Year!"

He pulled her to him with one arm, and his mouth met hers in a deeply demanding kiss, hardly what she'd expected, but it curled her toes and made her knees weaken as fireworks erupted in the vaulted ceiling, spewing more harmless sparkles and confetti over everyone. Her heart raced as she clung to him, and she felt a glorious sense of light headiness and giddy bliss. The cheers, fireworks and the salutes from all the other guests went completely unnoticed in the moment.

When he finally broke the kiss, she swooned in his arms, and she was grateful that he held her firmly until her knees strengthened enough to hold her weight. "Happy New Year, Hermione," he said with a contented smile.

She smiled lovingly back at him. "Happy New Year, Severus."

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, Phoenix, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

How did you do with the Bulgarian words? Some of them are the same from chapter 52, but there are a few different ones this time.

*Sdrasti* means hello

*Da* is Yes, *Neh* is No

*Mnogo blagodaria* or *Blagodaria* means thank you

*Priatel* is friend

*Chao* is goodbye

*Isvinete* is excuse me (as in to ask for something)

*Chestita nova godina* means Happy New Year

Did you guess the new ones right?

Here's my source. [http://www.linguanaut.com/english\\_bulgarian.htm](http://www.linguanaut.com/english_bulgarian.htm)

Sorry if you know or speak Bulgarian and I got the words wrong.

## Assaults and Misunderstandings

Chapter 55 of 63

Severus and Hermione return to Hogwarts, but little surprises lead to larger misunderstandings. Hermione turns to the advice of her friends, and Severus has to deal with more clues that lead to uncovering more of Dragen's men as well as a... a baby? Really? Thank gods, Ginny and Luna are around, well, accessible.



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### Assaults and Misunderstandings

Hermione was glad to be back at the castle. Staring up at the towers, turrets and high stone walls when she arrived, every window glowing as if in welcome, she had the feeling of being home. The old stone corridors and staircases illuminated by brilliant candles were quiet, not an eerie silence, but rather a peaceful and calm quiet. Even the moving staircases were still. The portraits they passed greeted Hermione and Severus by name, although they respectfully called him either Headmaster Snape or Professor Snape. Hermione was excited to resume her lessons and equally thrilled to see her friends, Ginny, Luna, Alestra, Wendlynne and Veronica, on Sunday night.

When she and Severus entered the Headmaster's tower, Mispie had tea set out for them in the sitting room and a fire blazing in the fireplace. Upstairs in the bedroom, Aideen trilled happily upon seeing them again, flapping newly feathered wings as she stretched her neck out toward them.

"Hush, you silly bird," Severus said softly, walking up to the phoenix's nest and gazing fondly down at her.

Aideen cooed contentedly as Severus stroked her head with one finger, and she nuzzled his hand affectionately.

The baby bird had grown considerably while they were away. Even though she was only four weeks old, the baby phoenix's plumage was changing; Aideen was covered with the new growth of her juvenile feathers still in muted darker shades of brownish-reds, varying hues of amber-oranges and dark gold, poking up through the mottled grey-browns and golden brown downy feathers, showing signs that she'd have the brilliant coloring of her sire. She was taller than Hermione thought she would be by now, about sixteen or seventeen inches tall, and she moved about the nest easily on steady legs, her wings wide and strong. But her eyes, beak and feet looked big in comparison to the rest of her, possibly because they had already fully grown to adult size.

Hermione watched the pair with a sense of awe. She knew that Aideen would most likely be ready to take her first flight in ten weeks, or so, according to what she'd read about phoenixes. However, Aideen's growth rate after her first rebirth would only be six to seven weeks to maturity, and the growth period after each subsequent rebirth would be sequentially shorter until her maturity rate became a staggering two weeks. "She missed you," Hermione said softly.

Severus chuckled soft and deep. "It's only been a few hours," he stated, still transfixed on the phoenix. Hermione tilted her head in confusion, her mouth opening, but he quickly added, "I came to feed her at least three times a day, the exception being the day we spent with your friends at Grimmauld Place."

"It's the Phoenix House," she corrected him softly, enjoying the sound of Aideen's cooing trill.

Severus turned to face her. "It will always be Black's house to me, regardless of the renovations or who resides there now."

"I suppose," she replied, cutting off the retort she wanted to make. He'd been very amicable, even friendly toward her friends, and she wasn't going to do anything to spoil that. Tired from all the activities and parties, she changed out of her clothes, actually looking forward to sleeping in the outlandishly, garish Headmaster's bed. When she reached for her nightgown, Severus moved close to her, and she could feel the tickle of the tiny hairs of his bare chest on her back as he yanked the gown from her fingers.

"I have other plans," he said deep and silkily next to her ear.

The heat from his body warmed her backside, making her front feel chilled. "Such as?" she asked in mock innocence and then shrieked in surprise as he suddenly swept her up into his arms.

"Just a little exercise to wear us out for the night," he said smoothly and dumped her unceremoniously onto the middle of the bed. She laughed as he pulled her to him, spreading her legs as he did. "Lovely."

"Hardly," she said with a giggle.

"Oh, yes, Hermione, absolutely divine," he replied as he bent down and licked her.

She inhaled sharply, closing her eyes for a moment as she gave herself over to the sensations he created with his incredibly talented tongue. He laughed softly as his tongue did deliciously sinful things to her, the vibrations increasing the tingle into an all out mind-blowing pleasure. The orgasm jolted through her entire body, and she stiffened all the way to her curling toes and clenched her hands on his arms as she cried out, real tears falling from her eyes. He rose up, looking down at her as his penis

rubbed against her moist lips, coating himself with her wetness as she held onto his arms. He pushed his tip into her and withdrew, little more than a teasing nudge. She tried to move her hips so that he'd impale her, but he chuckled, his tip teasing her entrance again.

"More?" he said in his deep, tantalizing drawl.

"Hell yes, more!" she cried, straining to push herself down onto him, to take him inside her.

"Eager minx," he said and pushed part way in, then pulled back.

"Don't tease me," she pleaded, arching her back so that she could feel him slip in a bit. "I want you in me."

"Oh, I intend to be," he said, smiling mischievously as he slowly entered her only to withdraw again.

"Please, Severus," she whimpered, managing to rub her entrance on his tip again, nearly crying that all she could do was feel the head of his shaft. "I need you."

He shoved into her hard, and she closed her eyes at the euphoric sense of him filling her. She looked at him, purposefully tightening her muscles in her groin and grinding against him so that she squeezed his penis inside of her. It was glorious, how he filled her so completely.

"Keep doing that and I won't last long," he growled softly, moving within her.

"You just feel so good," she purred. She tightened on him again, feeling him inside her, her breathing becoming hard and erratic. She was so close, so turned on, her body still taut from her last orgasm, that even the little friction of his thrusts on her overly sensitive clit sent wonderfully sharp twangs and shocks through her body, building an exquisite tension deep within her. He matched her movements as she undulated underneath him, angling her hips and tightening her butt cheeks with each forward move he made, trying to make the agonizingly glorious throbbing pressure move so she could come again.

He cupped her hips with his hands and guided her, deepening his penetration in the process, making her whimper in lustful need. She was so close, almost there... so very close...

"I can't... Oh, gods, I'm I'm sorry," he grunted slamming into her in ragged thrusts, grinding himself against her, catching her just right so that she thought she'd explode.

His forcefulness, pounding into her, made Hermione come undone. She fell back onto the bed her body rigid, her hands clenching the covers, as she literally cried out her orgasm, tears falling from her eyes into her hair. "Gods, Hermione... yes," he growled, his voice husky with his own needs as he came. "Oh gods, grrrrr!"

Her vision swam as he collapsed on top of her.

As her breathing slowly slowed and the erratic beats of her heart became deep rhythmic pounding, Severus rolled off her and pulled her into his arms. The last thing Hermione heard was Severus' warm breath near her ear and Aideen softly cooing at the moon.

~S~

As Severus expected, he received Lucius' letter with the morning post. Further down the table from him, Hermione sat with Pomona, deep in discussion about some magical plant or another, both engrossed in their conversation. He smiled, watching her. His fiancée. The thought still amazed him he, Severus, was Bonded to her, remarkable as it seemed. She was his. In six months, they'd be legally married. A formality, really, hardly necessary since they were magically Bonded, but he knew that Hermione wanted a wedding. So he'd suffer one day of inconveniences for her sake. He'd already decided to take her to the Mediterranean for their honeymoon.

The sound of Hermione's laugh made him smile, well, feel like smiling. He had a reputation to uphold. Whatever she and Pomona were discussing, Hermione had that radiant glow about her that she got when excited about something new or that fascinated her. He secretly enjoyed how excited she got in academic discussions. So far, Hermione seemed to have accepted his relocation arrangement of her living with him in his no, *their* room. It had taken him four months to make her move in with him, but at least she hadn't balked at it as he'd expected.

Severus opened his letter and read the contents. Inside, Lucius confirmed that Miriam Margoyles had finally admitted that Rabastan Lestrangle had come to her, cut badly from a curse that she couldn't heal, and he'd bled to death in one of her rooms. *That attack in Runcorn last month so he was the wizard that got away.*

It was confirmed now; he'd killed Rab. *No great loss*, he told himself, *he'd tried to kill Ronald and me.* Apparently, Rabastan had refused to allow Madam Margoyles to call for a Healer, fearing that the Aurors would arrest him, a justified concern, so she'd done her best. According to Lucius, Lestrangle had been turned into a bone and buried near the stone wall that separated her property from the river, his initials magically carved into one rock to mark the site. *The curvaceous witch did always have a soft spot for the Lestrangle brothers.*

The fight in Runcorn, a run down industrialized town near Manchester, had been a quick and fierce fight to the death. Ronald and Finnigan had organized the assault on the abandoned factory, supervised by Aurors Lorraine Matsuno and Darrel Cattouse, which had gone off surprisingly well; only two Aurors were injured, two wizards were dead, although it was unknown if they'd been Death Eaters or merely supporters, and another wizard had been captured but in critical condition. But a wizard Severus hadn't recognized at the time, because of his filthy coat, long, straggly hair and scruffy, matted beard, had tried to kill him and then Ronald. Severus had cast his Sectumsempra at the wizard but he had Apparated away before he could be apprehended.

Dragen had used Fiendfyre to allow him, Phillip Selwyn and another two to escape. William Rathbone, someone neither Severus nor Lucius had known was connected with the Dark Lord, had been captured, although he'd claimed to have been their prisoner, but he hadn't been able to sufficiently explain why he'd had three thousand Galleons in his robe pocket or the four large bottles of Essence of Dittany.

To gain some leniency, and avoid any of Severus' more creative potions, William Rathbone eventually offered the names of Hettie and Godfrey Chow and Agnetha and Rothery Bell as supporters, and the location of the hideout of Fergus Jugson, Wallace Jugson's brother, in Toxteth, Liverpool.

The address in Toxteth turned out to be a raid on a dilapidated house in a row of post-World War II social housing. Jugson, half starved and injured from gun shot wounds from a previous raid on some Muggle-borns, turned in the names of several more supporters of Dragen's cause, Reginald Scunthorpe, Charles Hackney, and Phillip Brixton, as men who'd joined the Dark Lord after the demise of Dumbledore. They now called themselves Dragen's men. Unfortunately, that brought the list back to eight.

Severus opened the thick envelope from the Ministry, surprised that a personal note from Potter Harry fell out. He opened the letter with trepidation. The Ministry horned owl stood imperiously on the headmaster's podium watching him.

Severus,

*I intercepted a message intended for Wallace Avery. It was unsigned, and there were a number of concealing charms on the parchment, which lead me to believe that it was genuine.*

*The message said that he should stay where he is. There was one line 'tell Walsingham he's to stay put and enjoy Immeliadora's hospitality', but I don't find any Immeliadora in my records.*

Severus immediately recognized Morgund Walsingham's name, and the only Immeliadora he knew was Graven's widow, Immeliadora Graven who'd gone by the name Amelia or Minnie since she was a small child. Madam Margoyles had mentioned that Avery had started seeing Minnie after her husband's incarceration, but he'd had his doubts as to the validity of the statements at the time she'd been much too forthcoming. *And now Harry has intercepted a letter indicating that Wallace Avery and Morgund*

Walsingham are living in Minnie Graven's house... interesting.

It also stated that he should ignore Walsingham's taunts. Being cooped up in the old house with two women would drive any sane wizard to stir crazy, but to keep their magic under control and stay inside the perimeter.

Severus was distracted from the letter when Hermione shrieked. He looked up, amused to see both a snowy owl and a tiny screech owl fluttering about in front of her, vying to give her their deliveries first. The screech owl won, only because of its smaller size, and circled about her head in pure joy as the white owl perched on the table and held out her foot. Hermione untied the missive and fed the bird a bit of sausage. However, neither bird flew away, both apparently expecting a reply.

He turned his attention back to Harry's letter, reading the last few lines.

The letter was signed, 'tell Antonia that I'm doing well', and 'those idiot Aurors haven't found me yet and they're not bloody likely to either'. Do these names mean anything to you?

Antonia, Antonio Dolohov's daughter, is living with Minnie Graven, Wallace Avery and Morgund Walsingham. Severus knew he'd been to the house, but it had been a long time ago. If he used a Pensieve, he might have a better recollection of the house... and its location. It was worth trying. He looked up at the owl. "I will have to send my response through another owl since I don't have his answer yet," he said, and the owl huffed in annoyance and flew off. Severus excused himself from the table, a bit curtly in his haste, and hurried up to his office.

~H~

Hermione wondered what news Severus received that would have him hurrying from the Great Hall in such a manner. She excused herself as soon as she could and tried to follow him. Severus had meetings today, to address those last minute details before the students all arrived tomorrow, so his abrupt exit at breakfast not only startled Professors Sprout and McGonagall but many of the other staff as well.

Severus was gone by the time she entered his office, but she did see a glimpse of the green flames in the Floo fading away. She searched his desk for a clue. His desk was tidy; there was a packet of material from the school governors... mundane things about finance and budget approvals, the minutes of the last meeting... and a notification of a sizable donation to the school choir and the Astronomy Club. She found a partial letter to Narcissa Malfoy underneath, which appeared to be the beginning of a thank you letter.

She turned to look out of the window. She had enjoyed her time at the Malfoys, but she'd felt like she'd been on display. Having to constantly be on her best behavior, trying to follow the exacting rules, rituals and expectations of the magical social elite had been exhausting. She'd returned all the jewelry to Narcissa with a letter of gratitude, and then sought out Astoria to thank her as well for her kindness, glad to have made a new friend.

Hermione put the papers back as she'd found them. The letter Severus received was not on his desk. Turning in frustration at once again being left in the dark by her fiancé, Hermione left his office and walked through the castle, heading to the library. She'd ask him about it later. But for now, she'd look up the books Professor Sprout suggested and get a head start on her reading for the next term.

~S~

Severus Apparated to the small town of Sturminster Newton on the River Stour, in Dorset in the Blackmore Vale. He knew that he'd recognize the Gravens' house if he saw it. He landed on the bridge and smirked at the nineteenth century plaque affixed to the bridge that read that anyone attempting to damage the bridge would be transported to Australia as a felon. Severus gazed at the old watermill on the south bank of the river. He Disillusioned himself, sprang into the air and flew over the village as he searched for the house he'd only been to twice as a teen.

He spotted the old stone farmhouse with its magical additions nestled in a grove of trees and an overgrown field. He landed and walked stealthily toward the building. He felt the perimeter wards before actually setting them off, thankfully, and stopped. He mumbled a little known incantation as he allowed his magic to blend with the wards before moving forward, a trick that he'd learned from the Dark Lord. Stealthily, he approached the house and peered into the windows.

He could see the back of a witch sitting in a parlor on the ground floor, working on some embroidery, her dark hair secured up in a neat chignon. Slipping his wand out, Severus cast a revealing charm to determine if there were any other residents. Other than a room to his right where the signature was strong but decidedly not human, he could only detect only one other magical signature in or around the premises, in a room on the far right. He moved cautiously toward the room on the right and peered into the window, seeing Antonia Dolohov sitting in a rocking chair, reading.

He slipped away from the house and took flight, landing on the old walking trail and removed the charm, becoming visible. Aurors Blume, Fairley, Ronald, and Harry sprang to their feet as Aurors Hobday, Brodes, and Duncan turned and walked over to them. All seven wizards were wearing long sleeve Muggle shirts and cargo pants with their dragon hide boots. *The new Auror Muggle uniform*, he scoffed silently.

"Nothing," Severus stated. "Minnie Graven is in the sitting room, and Antonia is reading in a bedroom, but they are there alone. I detected no other resident signatures in the house except a house-elf. Their signatures are different."

"So, if not there, where?" Blume asked.

Severus shrugged. "I cannot say," he turned to Harry, "unless there was more to the message?"

"Nope. Just what I wrote you; he is to stay put and not leave the house," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I used a Quick Quotes Quill to get down what I read before it exploded into ash."

*Good thinking.* The boy was finally thinking before acting.

"My guess is that they are out and will be back," Ronald said, looking at the others as if for confirmation. "Should we arrange a stakeout?"

Severus simply stood there with his arms crossed. *Where would they go? Madam Margoyles is being watched as is the Rose and Thorns and Knockturn Alley. The Green Afanc pub on the waterfront...?* "The Green Afanc in Newport is one of Avery's favorite places: old, seedy, plenty of dark corners and warm beer, and it has three exits. If not there, he also liked the Abraxhound Inn in Dorset...but the Abraxhound has become popular with wizards who like to hunt."

"The Green Afanc sounds plausible," Blume said. "Fairley, you, Ron and Harry come with me. Hobday, get Sparks and Chang to back you up and check out the Abraxhound Inn; Brodes and Duncan, stay here. If you see or hear anything, call in Matsuno, Cattouse and Finnigan." He looked up at Severus. "Your call coming or staying?"

Severus smirked. "Going. Although, I suggest changing clothes. The Afanc is a tough place, frequented by old sea dogs."

Harry smirked and quickly transfigured his clothes to those worn by deep sea fishermen.

Blume examined the knee-high boots, dirty jeans, camo fishing jacket and a cap, which Ronald copied almost exactly, but Fairley only changed his trousers.

"Right, let's go," Blume said, after matching his apparel to Harry's.

"Meet up at the wharf, south of the pub," Severus said. All four vanished immediately. *Gryffindors.* He shook his head, transfiguring his clothes to match those his Uncle

Snape used to wear and Apparated to the wharf in Liverpool.

~H~

When Hermione returned to the Headmaster's tower after lunch to get her books from her trunk, she couldn't find it. She'd even looked under the bed, not that the trunk would have fit under the massive bed frame, but she had few options. She set the books Professor Sprout had suggested she read on the bed and opened the wardrobe. All her clothes were hanging up or folded neatly inside even her shoes were lined up in a neat row and looked as if they'd been freshly polished.

She looked about, concerned and starting to feel agitated as she closed the wardrobe doors. She had essays to revise. She wanted to check Severus' Potions book to see what potions she and Ginny could do next term. She needed to check her study guide... But her stuff was gone: no books none of her school supplies even her Potions equipment was missing.

Suddenly, Kirch and a young female house-elf appeared and bowed lowly to her. "Does Mistress needs something from Dezzy?" the female elf asked.

"Where are my things?" Hermione asked, sweeping her hand to indicate the room. "Where is my trunk? My books? My parchment and quills?"

"Your trunk is where all the trunks are puts, Mistress," Kirch said, his ears folding back against his head. "Mistress' books are on the shelves in reading room. Kirch makes spaces for mistress' books. Mistress' school supplies is in mistress' bag in the wardrobe and ins the secretary."

*Secretary? What secretary? There is no secretary in here...* Hermione stared at the elf in disbelief. She hadn't seen her bag in the wardrobe, but then it could've been tucked back behind her shoes... and Sunday night she'd be returning to her dorm; she'd have to find everything, repack and... "Why did you unpack all my things?" she asked suspiciously.

"Mistress lives in the castle now," Kirch said with a big smile. "Dezzy and Kirch is to serves mistress while she lives at Hogwarts."

Dezzy grinned at her as she nodded, her ears flapping. "Dezzy is happys to serves miss! You is Dezzy's first witch to serves."

"While I lives *live* in Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, trying to piece together what was going on. *Live in Hogwarts. Not in Spinner's End? This is to be home?* She and Severus hadn't really talked about where they were going to live once they were married; she'd assumed they'd live in Spinner's End. *But as Headmaster, he'd have to be here, wouldn't he?* Was this another decision that he'd made without consulting her?

"Yous is the Headmaster's Bonded mate. You will lives in the Headmaster's apartments with the headmaster," Kirch confirmed, and Hermione gritted her teeth. "Mispy and Cracker serves the Headmaster, Kirch is to takes care of the family rooms, Dezzy serves you, Mistress, and Moppet and Dingle is learning how to do nappies and feeding and washing of babies..."

"I'm not having a baby!" Hermione said, her voice a few octaves higher than normal. "I'm not pregnant!"

"Yets," Dezzy said with a huge smile. "We is hopeful, Mistress. Kirch opens the nursery and the other rooms for you and the Headmaster's family."

*Nursery? Family?* "Other rooms?" Hermione asked. "What other rooms?" *What was he talking about? Nursery?*

"The castle makes rooms off the Headmaster's sit and read room for the needs of a family. Play room, family room, bedrooms, eating room, nursery whatever rooms mistress wants, Kirch cans ask the doors to makes."

Hermione could only stare at him. *He had!* Her head felt like it was spinning. She'd never really considered what the living arrangements would be but apparently it had all been decided for her, right down to which house-elves would take care of *her* children.

"Pacey is old miss, but she teaches Moppet and Dingle to takes care of babies..."

There was a noise downstairs. Hermione turned and hurried from the bedroom, finding Severus standing in the sitting room. She froze, staring at him. He'd been in a fight. He had on an old, muddy, double-breasted, navy blue pea coat with a torn sleeve and dark trousers with mud on the knees. There was a thin pink scar on his lip that hadn't been there before, and there was a long bloody tear on his trouser leg. "Where have you been?" He opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off. "You've been hurt again, haven't you?! You've been playing Auror!"

"I don't *play* Auror. I sometimes assist them," he said sharply, his eyes flashing with annoyance. "Now, what is going on?"

"They've opened the nursery! My things are gone and they're deciding who will take care of my babies!" she stammered loudly, indicating the two elves behind her. "Did you know about this? When were you going to inform *me*? I have a say in this, Severus, or I'm I'm..." She stamped her foot. "I have you're impossible!"

"*I'm impossible?* Will you make some sense, woman," he snapped.

"I want to be *asked* before you go and make life altering decisions that concern me that concern us," she snapped back.

"Before I make life altering decisions," he repeated. "What life altering decisions are you talking about?"

"This. Them. Babies. Nurseries," she shouted as she stormed by him. "I'm not I'm not... I need to go think."

Tears rolled down her cheek as she fled downstairs. She wasn't ready for this. She wanted to focus on her NEWTs! Hermione looked around the office. She needed to talk to Ginny, and she wasn't here yet. She saw the Floo pot on the pedestal by the fireplace. If she used the Floo, it would be the fastest way to reach Ginny, but she didn't know if the Floo was still connected to Grimmauld Place now it was officially called the Phoenix House. She grabbed a handful and stepped into the fireplace. "Ministry of Magic," she said, tossing the power at her feet and disappeared in a rush of green flames. Hermione hurried through the mass of people in the atrium, dodging and swerving to avoid knocking anyone down, and used the visitor's exit to leave the Ministry. From there she knew she could use the Tube to go to Grimmauld Place.

~S~

Severus turned and followed Hermione, watching the green flames swirl her away. He turned and glared at the two house-elves standing on the stairs. "What happened?" Severus barked at the two cowering house-elves.

Both of them looked like they were about to go scald their hands in boiling hot oil. The one named Kirch bravely stepped forward. "I puts miss' things away and makes room for miss' books on the shelves, Headmaster, master, sir," he said, still cowering as if expecting to be cursed any minute. "Dezzy introduces herself to miss, and Mistress gets angry about the nursery for the baby."

*Hermione's pregnant?* "What baby?" he asked sharply. *She took her potion regularly, didn't she?* Merlin's balls he wasn't ready to be a father ever!

His mind whirled as he half listened to Kirch explain that he'd opened the doorway and Pacey was teaching Moppet and Dingle how to do nappies. *Holy mother of... shite! I'm going to be a father? No wonder she is behaving irrationally it was hormones!*

He quickly cast a mending charm on his coat sleeve and trousers, then cast the Tracing-Revocalization Charm on the Floo. Hermione's voice repeated from the firebox, "Ministry of Magic," clearly and distinctly as he cast a quick charm to get rid of most of the mud.



Severus followed her because it was far too dangerous for her to be about alone. Even in a place as populated as the Ministry, accidents could happen, and she could lose the baby. When he arrived, the Atrium was swarming with people, but he couldn't see Hermione anywhere. He sent his large hawk Patronus to Potter for assistance and warning, but the hawk circled back and disappeared. *Bloody hell. Is Potter still at St. Mungo's?* Inhaling, Severus used his 'threatening menace' mode to make his way to the lifts quickly to seek out Weasley.

~H~

The Underground had been so full of people that Hermione opted instead to Apparate to the top step of the Phoenix House rather than take the Tube. She timed her Apparition with the arrival of the train and knocked on the door as soon as she arrived. Kreacher opened the door and told her that Ginny was out shopping with Luna. With a heavy sigh, she asked to be let in and sent her Patronus to the girls, asking if she could join them.

A minute later, Ginny's silver horse leaped into the Drawing room, and Ginny's voice broke the silence. "We're at the bakery the one with the amazing lemon cream patsies. Do you remember the one?"

Hermione smiled. Of course she remembered. She hurried from the house and Apparated for the small car park across the street from the bakery. Luna waved at her as Hermione ran across the street.

"Did you want a lemon-cherry pastry?" Luna asked, then cocked her head. "You had a fight with Severus."

"Yes, sort of... I'm..." Hermione stammered as Ginny exited the store, holding a crisp white bag. "It wasn't exactly a fight, per se."

"Well, if it wasn't a fight, what did happen, precisely?" the redhead asked.

"Do you mind if we go somewhere more private to talk?" Hermione asked, not really wanting to open up to her friends here in public.

"All right," Ginny readily agreed. "Let's go to your house. Luna and I bought tea down the street, and I've got pastries for all three of us."

"I'll have to take you with me," Hermione said as she took Luna's hand, and Luna smiled serenely. Hermione turned to Ginny and asked, "Do you remember where?"

Ginny laughed. "As if I'd forget."

Hermione shrugged. "Fair enough." She Apparated to Spinner's End, taking Luna with her, arriving only a moment before Ginny did.

"This is a gloomy place to live," Luna said as they exited onto the street from the dark alley between the two brick houses. "Why did they board up the windows?"

Hermione turned, seeing Luna point to a house across the way. "No one lives there anymore. It's to keep vandals and vagrants out."

"That's odd, I'd have used stone or planted a snapping dragon spurge," Luna said thoughtfully as they walked. "They grow really tall and have nice flowers, and it would protect the house with their thorns and teeth."

~S~

"When Hermione needs to think, she goes to the library," Ronald was saying.

"Unless she wanted to talk to her girlfriends," Miss Chang replied, turning to Harry and Severus. "Whom does she usually confide in?"

*Ginevra*, Severus thought the same time Harry answered, "Ginny."

"Hermione..." Severus started to say as he felt the stone in his pocket vibrate. He pulled it out and it vibrated again. "And I think I know where she is," he announced and turned to go. "Thank you."

"What's happening?" Harry asked, matching Severus' stride. He could hear both Ronald and Miss Chang hurrying to keep up behind him.

*Don't they have lessons or some training to do?* "I thought she came here to see you, but I was mistaken," Severus said, forcing his way between two women.

"Severus," Harry called out as he pushed his way to catch up to him.

"I told you; she said she needed to go think and disappeared through the Floo," Severus explained as he entered the visitor's exit. He wasn't going to tell Potter about the baby, not yet, until he sorted out exactly when Hermione had become pregnant. All three Auror trainees piled in to the phone box with him. *Bloody hell. Well, it is three more wands if there's trouble*, he scoffed to himself. "Do you remember where my house is?" he asked Harry as they stepped out onto the pavement.

"Of course," Harry said with a sharp nod.

"Good, you take Ronald; I'll take Miss Chang," he said and turned to look at her. Miss Chang nodded in agreement, so he continued. "I'll meet you by the Apparition point." He took Miss Chang's hand and Disapparated them away.

Harry and Ronald arrived a heartbeat later.

"Follow me," Severus said and took off running, scanning in all directions for anything suspicious. Hermione and he were still targets, and although the house was warded, his past associates might still be watching his house, especially since school hadn't resumed yet. There had already been three attacks and two raids in Manchester this month.

He entered the house, followed by the Auror trainees. He cast a spell at the bookshelf-paneled door so he could hear everything from the kitchen and heaved a sigh of relief; the girls were there, three of them by the voices he heard. He waved Harry off, silencing the boy so he could hear the conversation. Hermione, Ginevra and Luna were apparently having tea, and, from what he could make out thanks to the sound enhancing Charm, Ginevra was giving Hermione advice about him. *Good grief*.

He listened to Luna offer the advice of "wrap a jabberonll feather and a cannibus leaf in a bright orange yarn or ribbon and place it under his pillow...or you can lace his tea with salvia leaves..."

*Bloody hell?* Salvia in a tea induced a psychedelic-like 'psychotomimetic' episodes or experience. *As if I'd fall for that!*

Luna's next suggestion was equally as offensive "...or the Brazillian herb, Muira Puama, but he'd be able to taste that one."

*To drug me! Of course I'd detect it, you silly girl.* The root and bark of the Muira Puama plant were used in potions for its libido and desire enhancing properties. *Which is bloody ridiculous advice there is nothing wrong with our sex life.* On the other side of the door, both Ginevra and Hermione laughed, making him scowl. *You find that funny?*

He ended the spell and thought about what Ginevra had advised Hermione. He hoped Hermione was paying less attention to Luna's suggestions and more to Ginevra's. At least he was warned. *Narcissa is right; girls are far too vocal.* He realized that he would have to become more forthright with the girl if only to keep his personal affairs private.

"So, I'm guessing that this was merely a matter of misunderstanding?" Miss Chang asked.

"Apparently," Severus said, just as the hands on the old clock on the mantel began to move, indicating a triggering of wards.

"What's that?" Miss Chang asked, pointing at the clock.

"Intruder detection device that is keyed to my perimeter wards. The Dark Lord had a spell that only Death Eaters can pass through; he taught it to a few of us," Severus explained, drawing his wand. The long hand stopped on three, but the shorter hand bounced between foe and annoyance. Outside, the old bat that lived three houses down raised a ruckus with someone on the street. "With a few minor adjustments, I modified it and placed it on the perimeter surrounding the house to warn me of encroachment."

"How wide is this perimeter?" Ronald asked, turning to peer out the window at the commotion in the street.

"Over three hundred meters in all directions," Severus answered. He activated the complicated spell on the window.

"Excessive," Miss Chang said with a lift of her eyebrows.

"Necessary," Severus said as a map appeared. He cast a revealing spell on the map. The images all glowed a soft blue, nonmagical, except for three. "There, two on Unsilven Closure and one by the river." He opened his door. "Coming?"

"Right, Ron, you go with Cho and take care of the one by the river. I'll go with Severus," Harry suggested and the other two nodded in agreement.

Severus cocked his eyebrow at Harry, but the boy gave him a questioning look back.

"What? You can't dispense with two of them?" Ronald asked, and Severus frowned at the impertinence of the young Auror trainee, which he shrugged off. "They won't have the element of surprise, and you know the neighborhood," Ronald stated, and then he turned to Harry. "I'll signal you when the one by the river is apprehended."

"Right," Harry said and turned to Severus as Ronald and Miss Chang ran off for in the direction of the river. "So, it's you and me. Ready?"

Severus snorted. He assumed that they had already left Parkview Road and were most likely heading up Laxson Street for Moores Crossing. It was the most direct route to the house since he'd put a Fidelius Charm on the alleyway he used as an Apparition point. "Potter, go through the alley down there," he said, pointing at the break between the row of houses, "to Moores Crossing; that's the next street west of here. I'll go around here," he indicated the single lane street that ran by the side of his house, "and come up on the other side of the street. We should have them cornered."

"Right," Potter agreed with a nod and took off running.

Severus quickly changed to his Animagus form, a red fox, and ran the distance as fast as he could. He turned onto Moores Crossing and moved quickly along the houses for the Laxson intersection. His keen eyes caught movement down at the intersection, and he could smell Harry's scent on the breeze. He slipped behind some bins and transformed back. As Severus predicted, the men walked carefully along the pavement directly toward Potter. Both Severus and Harry sprang into action at the same time, making both men collapse on the ground, immobilized. He ran over to where the men lay, but Harry reached them first. Harry bound both men and raised his wand, sending an Auror trainee signal in the air.

"Moellers and Struthers," Harry said as Severus approached. Harry revived Moellers and forced a bit of water into the man's mouth. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Morgund said he was looking for us," Moellers said as he pointed to Severus. "So we thought we'd give him a visit. hey, you drugged me."

"Where's Morgund Walsingham?" Harry asked, clasping the wizard by the collar.

"By the bridge with. I ain't telling you anything, ya hear."

Harry let the man fall back face down on the ground. "This is the third set we've caught in this neighborhood. I think your house is a little too well known," Harry said to Severus.

"I'm realizing that. Pettigrew resided here for a while," Severus stated. "Damn that bloody rat, he had the address on an envelope in my handwriting." He snarled, "The Dark Lord insisted," when Harry raised an eyebrow. "Damn him."

"I think you should consider moving," Harry replied as Miss Chang appeared with her training instructor, Auror Raphael Sparks. "We got Walsingham, but one got away! Auror Blume and Ronald are taking Walsingham in for questioning."

"I see you're up to your tricks," Sparks said as he examined the two wizards. "Who authorized the Veritaserum?"

"It's mine," Harry stated. "Blume said we could use it, but that any statements given in the field might not be admissible in court."

"All right. Potter, grab that one," Sparks said, clasping the back of Struthers's robes. "I'll see you in the Aurory. Headmaster, you'll have to come give a statement."

"As soon as I escort my fiancée and her two friends home," Severus replied. "Harry, you may come by the castle tonight for dinner."

"I'd be delighted," Harry said, grasping Moellers by the cuff of his robes again. "See you tonight."

When Severus returned to his house and opened the bookcase to the kitchen, Luna was saying, "Yellow is a very good color, bright and cheerful."

"Ladies," he drawled out while staring at Hermione.

Hermione gazed up at him with a look that could only be called guilty. "I just brought them here so we could talk," she replied.

"I gathered that," he replied, "but there is a problem." He thought about it and decided to at least be honest with her. "Hermione, it has come to my attention that Peter Pettigrew informed others about this house, and therefore I have to ask you and your friends to leave."

"What?" she asked, looking about worriedly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he replied. "I will instruct Mispys to have everything in the house boxed and moved to the castle..."

"But my figurines..."

"The house-elves will take great care of them, I assure you," he said, trying to make light of the situation. He'd have to secure the house and collect his potion implements and Dark Arts things later. "Mispys has done this in the past," he said, remembering the fiasco last summer when the elf tried to organize the packing of his belongings. "But you must come with me now."

There was a knock on the door. Severus turned to answer the door and sighed as Harry, Ron and Auror Blume entered the house.

"Why are you still here?" Blume asked as Harry rushed into the kitchen.

"Ginny, c'mon, it's not safe here. We have to go," Harry told his fiancée.

Everyone started talking at once. Ginevra and Hermione demanding to know what happened while Harry and Ronald were trying to get the girls to leave. "How am I supposed to know what's going on if I'm always left in the dark?" Hermione asked, raising her voice.

"We wanted privacy," Ginevra said as Hermione added, "I had no idea it wasn't safe, Harry!"

"What did you think, we'd send you a message each time we went to apprehend a dark wizard," Harry snapped back as Ginny shouted, "But with mum in the house all the time, and dad and George coming in for lunch..."

Severus crossed his arms, counting to ten.

"It would have been safer," Ronald said as Hermione said, "You used to complain about Dumbledore keeping things from you. How is this any different? If I don't know..."

"That was different," Harry shouted as Luna asked Auror Blume something to do with Wrackspurts...

"ENOUGH."

Severus uncrossed his arms as everyone turned to look at him. "Hermione, two Death Eaters were captured on the next street over today and one was apprehended by the river. Please, come back to the castle with me," he said more calmly than he felt. "Harry and Ginevra, you may come as well. If you both want to sleep at the castle, I'll allow it. I will send a house-elf to collect Ginevra's school things tomorrow."

"Kreacher can do it," Harry replied as he turned to Ginevra. "Do you want to?"

Ginevra nodded. "Yes. What about Luna? Can she come too?"

"She may come as well," Severus said, agreeing with Harry, it would be safest. "Or, if she prefers, I'm sure Ronald would be happy to escort you home."

Luna shrugged. "I think I'd like to return to school. May I stay with Ginny and Hermione? It will be like a slumber party." She turned to Harry and Ronald. "Are you coming, too?"

"I suppose, if they wish, but the boys will sleep in separate rooms," Severus added with a stern glare. "I'll notify Mrs. Longbottom."

"Now that's been solved, I suggest that we all go," Blume said impatiently.

Severus made a quick glance about the room, his mind taking a quick inventory of all the things he had that could get into the wrong hands if he'd delayed. *Avery knows about this house, and now apparently Walsingham does. Had either told Dragen?* It was a real possibility. He warred with the decision of taking Hermione to the castle himself, to make sure she and the baby arrived unharmed, or securing the house from intrusion. He had little choice there were things upstairs that Dragen mustn't have. "Blume, will you please escort Hermione?" he asked the Auror, reluctantly. "I need to secure the house."

"All right," Blume agreed and then turned to hustle everyone out. "Everyone outside. We'll rendezvous at the gates in sixty seconds."

~H~

Hermione entered the girl's dorm with Ginny and Luna and stopped short. The room was already made up for the new term: the wardrobes, bedposts and bedside tables had been polished, and the beds all freshly made... but there was one missing.

"Oh, your rooms are like ours, only red and gold," Luna stated, fingering the red drapes. "Do you have Pigmy puffs breeding in your wardrobes?"

"Er, no," Hermione stated, realizing that here were only seven of each item, not eight. One for each of the girls... except her! As if the castle had erased her presence. The entire room appeared as if she'd never been here at all. Kirch's words flashed in her mind, *'You will live in the Headmaster's rooms with the headmaster.' Mispy and Cracker serve Severus, the Headmaster. Kirch takes care of the family, Dezzy is to serve me, and Moppet and Dingle is learning how to take care of babies for when I have one... and Kirch opened up the rooms... ohmygods!* "Why, that selfish bastard!"

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Ginny asked, standing up in front of her, blocking her path to the door.

She was going to give Severus a piece of her mind. "How bloody dare he!"

"He Severus," Ginny stammered, grabbing Hermione's arm. "Wait, calm down! What happened?"

"My bed and wardrobe are gone!" she shouted, indicating where her bed used to be. "And all my things are in Severus' rooms."

"Oh, that," Luna said as she looked up under the canopy of one of the beds, adding, "You don't have vines carved in the wood," conversationally in her offbeat serene way.

Hermione was suddenly perplexed by the odd statement. "What do you mean... vines? You have vines carved into your bedposts?" she asked, wondering what Luna was talking about. She thought all the beds were the same, only with different colored drapes and quilts. Slytherins' beds, although dark wood, were exactly like the ones used in the Gryffindor dorms, which were a warm oak: strong, sturdy and practical.

"Oh yes, it's quite pretty," Luna said dreamily, turning to face her. But then her voice had suddenly lost its whimsical quality when she added, "Why don't you want to live with Severus? He loves you."

Hermione was shocked at how quickly Luna managed to switch the conversation off topic and then back on again effortlessly. "Because I want to finish out my school year, here, with you," she said, indicating Ginny, "and go to my lessons like everyone else."

"But you're not like everyone else," Luna stated very seriously. "You're you and you're unique."

"I wanted *ordinary* this year: no drama, no mysteries, no Dark Wizards, disasters, catastrophes or wars," Hermione replied and sat down on a bed with a huff. "I just wanted one year that was *normal*."

"What fun would normal be?" Luna asked, clinging the bedpost beside Hermione. "I consider myself to be extremely lucky to have such exceptional friends as you and Ginny. Even Neville agrees."

Ginny sat down on the bed next to Hermione. "You do know how petulant and childish you're sounding, right?" Ginny asked, and Hermione looked down at her hands. "We did this spell to find our soul mates, and we have you, me, Luna and so far things are working out quite well, don't you think? Luna's happily married; you and I are engaged to wizards who love us. Do you know that I'd give *anything* to be living with Harry for the next five months? I will have to sneak out of the castle just to see him, and your Bonded mate fiancé is *right here*, wanting you to be with him, and you're still fighting against this?"

"Neville said he'd rent a room in the Three Broomsticks on every Hogsmeade weekend so we can be together," Luna said wistfully with dreamy smile. "Grandmother Longbottom has written a note to Professor Flitwick asking that I be granted overnight Hogsmeade privileges. I suppose I'll be informed if I can tomorrow. Neville will be using a Portkey in February because he will be on another expedition with Felix Marchbanks, but that's such a long time from now." She turned to look at Hermione and

Ginny. "I wish he were here tonight. I'd sneak into his room... if I could find it. It's up the other staircase, the one on the right, isn't it?" she asked, her finger flicking as if she could see the stairs from here. "Didn't Harry and Ron say they were sleeping in their old dorm room?"

"Yes, the one on the right. They're on the seventh floor." Hermione stifled a laugh at the thought of Ginny and Luna sneaking into the boy's dorm to be with their wizards. "Ron would feel left out."

Ginny smiled. "Besides, you know that Severus never stops us from visiting you in the Headmaster's tower, and you can always come up here and hang out with me," she said.

"I could show you the Ravenclaw rooms or we can use the Room of Requirement!" Luna suggested. "We can have revision parties or I can show you where we camped in the Alps last summer... Neville said the room could do that."

"The only difference is where you'll be sleeping, Hermione," Ginny said, gently bumping her shoulder into hers. "We'll still have lessons together; we're still working on our NEWT projects together and the Médousa Potion... So, you'll see so much of me, you'll be sick of my freckled mug."

"Never," Hermione said with a smile. Ginny was right, however much she hated to admit it.

"And when has Severus *ever* prevented you from doing your revision he's a bloody teacher!" Ginny said. "You were always telling me that he asked after your school work each time you saw him last term, remember?"

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed. Yes, Ginny was right. Severus always allowed her to put her school work first.

"Life doesn't always turn out how we want it to, but sometimes it's better than we expected. Aren't you happy with Severus?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, Severus makes me happy," Hermione said with a sigh. "He does try. I just wish he'd asked me or we'd talked about this."

"So... go and talk to him. Tell him how you feel about the change and let him apologize," Ginny stated, but Hermione gave her friend an incredulous lopsided grin with her head cocked slightly to the side. "Okay, let him make it up to you same thing."

"You mean makeup sex?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly! I hear it's the best kind," Ginny said with a grin and making her eyebrows go up and down.

Hermione laughed, and Luna joined in, her laughter becoming ebullient, making both Hermione and Ginny laugh even harder.

~\*~

Hermione stared at Severus in utter disbelief. Now everything made sense.

Severus had been overly attentive all evening. Not just opening doors, extending a hand to help her out of the school carriage, and taking her arm on the stairs, but he'd changed the benches at dinner into chairs, and then gentlemanly helped her sit. Likewise, he'd helped her rise as well. Before dinner he'd given her a purple concoction to drink, one he'd claimed was a vitamin enriched, nutritional supplement, high in folic acid, calcium, iron and omega-3 fatty acid for her *health*. After dinner he'd refused to let her drink butterbeers, giving her a delicious chocolate drink instead, something similar to Horlicks. A pleasant surprise, but rather odd.

"I'm not pregnant," she said again, for the third time.

"You're not?" he repeated, his brow creasing and his lips thinning. "But you said..."

"I said that the house-elves opened up the nursery; I never said I was pregnant," she repeated.

Severus sat down on the sofa and stared into the fire. "You were acting... oddly."

"I was angry because all of my things have been moved into your rooms without my consent. Imagine my shock to go up to my dorm room and find that not only has my bed and wardrobe been removed, there is one less window, and the entire room has shrunk to accommodate only seven girls not eight."

He turned his head to look at her. "I thought we'd agreed..."

She sat down on the chair closest to him. "I thought things would go back to the way they were once school resumed," she pointed out and noticed a slight tick in his jaw. Ginny was right, if she paid attention to the minute twitches and quick flickers of his mouth, eyes and jaw, and not just listen to the inflections of his voice, he did show what he was thinking and feeling... sort of. "And I still don't know where my Potions supplies are or any of my school supplies or my revision guide. All my books are here in this room, apparently, but my trunk has been put where all the trunks go wherever that is and my writing things are in a secretary desk somewhere."

He leaned forward, his forearms on his thighs with his hands clasped tightly. "This is the first I've heard of there being a nursery, let alone other rooms. I have no idea where the desk is."

"I'm sure Dezzy or Kirch will tell me." This was the first time they'd talked about something important without yelling at each other first. If you discounted the scene they had earlier today after lunch. "What really hurt was you making this decision without talking to me about it first."

"Would you have agreed?" he asked, more a challenge than inquiry.

She thought about it for a moment. "I... can't answer that. I don't know maybe." His eyebrow rose as he stared at her, and she laughed softly at it. It was adorable how he could convey so much with one eyebrow.

His face became stony. She probably shouldn't have laughed. "I'd have been upset, and I'd... This entire year has been difficult. Nothing is how I imagined or expected..."

"And that's my fault?" he asked dryly. He stared into the fire and the side of his mouth twitched almost indiscernibly, not upward, just back, so it wasn't a flicker of a smile annoyed. *Understandable*.

"No, it's my fault, too," she stated, thankful that after her talk with Ginny and Luna she could tell him this rationally and calmly. "I had expectations and certain hopes that were not... realistic given our circumstances. But this isn't the eighteenth century; you can't make all the decisions without me and just expect me to go along with it. We have to be a team, or this us isn't going to work for me. My parents discussed everything, but as the child, I didn't always have a say in the plans. I hated that. I don't want to be treated like a child." She looked at him pointedly, waiting for him to apologize.

He raised his chin subtly as he inhaled. "I have maybe been a little presumptuous," he replied softly.

She was surprised by the admission, apparently as close to an apology as she'd get. "I forgive you, but in the future, I'd prefer talking about it beforehand and not fight about it afterwards," she said, wishing he'd look at her. "We're soul mates, according to the spell, which means we fit together, but that doesn't guarantee we'll always agree on everything."

He nodded and finally turned to look at her, his gaze intent but there was a little bit of uncertainty in his eyes. "So, is this all settled? You're staying?"

The vulnerability of his uncertainty touched her. There was no pleading in his eyes, but she could feel it. He really did want her with him, even though they were not married yet. It really meant this much to him, to have her here, living here. His eyes darted away and back, and she smiled, realizing he didn't like being watched. Well, he'd just have to get used to it if she was ever going to be able to read this man and not set him off. "Yes, I'm staying," she replied and smiled as he relaxed. "But not tonight tonight I want to be with Ginny and Luna. But after that, yes, I'll live here with you."

He didn't smile, not exactly, but he seemed relieved. "Your slumber party."

"Yes, my slumber party," she said with a grin. "And after that, we'll see how long it lasts before you're ready to throw me out again."

"Yes, you can be pretty tough to take," he said as he reached out and took her hand, giving it a tug to make her go to him. "I'm not going to throw you out," he said and pulled her onto his lap. "I'm going to keep you. It's you and me, Hermione. You're mine."

She snuggled into his lap and fingered his buttons. "And you, Severus Snape, are mine."

He lifted her chin up with his finger. "Don't ever forget that," he said and kissed her.

"How could I possibly," she murmured against his lips. "No one else makes me feel like you do."

"I'm glad. Now shut up and kiss me," he growled.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*I chose Severus' Animagus form to be a fox because it's a beautiful animal, sleek and clever, but also because he can already fly, so he didn't need to be a hawk, which is his Patronus. So, in this story, your Animagus form is not always the same as your Patronus, a Patronus can change, but your Animagus form is always the same regardless of your emotional state or place in life.*

## Comeuppance and Surprises

Chapter 56 of 63

Someone gets their just due; someone gets their feathers cut. Hermione and Ginny start a new term at Hogwarts, and Severus gets quite a surprise, or two.

*The descriptions I used of the Chamber of Secrets are borrowed, alas without permission, from the book. I hope J. K. Rowling doesn't mind. Oh, lest I forget – nope, no money gained, only the enjoyment of writing and the happiness I get in sharing my writing with you.*



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Comeuppance and Surprises

~MoM~

Maggie had thoroughly enjoyed her extended Christmas holiday and the visit with her sister. The Boxing Day sales at Illuminations, Madam Malkin's, Dragonsilver Designs and The Imaginarium had been wonderful. However, today she sat at her desk, fuming, glaring slyly over her favorite horn-rimmed rhinestone-encrusted glasses at the woman in crisp red business robes standing at the table which held the magical registries. *My magical registries! They were my responsibility mine for over fifty years! Mrs. Shelton*, Maggie silently snarled the name. *Well the woman refuses to be on social terms or even on a first name basis, even though Mrs. Shelton is on a first name basis with everyone in the Auror office, the Oblivator's office and for that matter the entire MLE! She's even had lunch with the Minister three times since she'd moved in and taken over the Muggle and Muggle-born marriage and Muggle-born births announcements! Three times!*

*At least the accursed woman, nowitch, has allowed me to put the ledgers in the proper order!* Maggie fumed, watching Mrs. Shelton slide one perfectly manicured finger down the Birth Registration ledger. *How dare she! In all the years that I've done this job I've never had the audacity to actually touch the ledgers it's hardly necessary. And it could smudge the ink!*

The green quill that chronicled all magical births, Muggle-born and wizardkind, on the Birth Registration ledger had recorded three births this morning. Maggie had simply been waiting until eleven when she could have taken the information to Ermengene at the *Daily Prophet* herself. Ermengene was a delightful woman, and Maggie always enjoyed it when they could schedule lunch together and discuss business.

Mrs. Sheldon made a tap on the page, irritating Maggie all the more, and then wrote something, most likely some Muggle-born birth on the parchment on her clipboard. Maggie lowered the parchments in her hands as Mrs. Sheldon stepped away from the table to return to her desk. "So, do we have a new wizard birth to announce?" Maggie asked, hopeful that this time the witch would at least allow her to register the magical birth. Maggie never bothered Ermengene with the Muggle-born births; those announcements were kept quiet until the name appeared on the Hogwarts registry. At the end of each school term, the Deputy Headmistress or Deputy Headmaster checked the Hogwarts registry and sent a letter to all the magical children who either were eleven already or who were due to turn eleven in time for their first year at Hogwarts. For those children who were born into Muggle families, who had no knowledge of the magical world, notices were sent to the Administration of Education Student Recruitment Offices to assign Access and Admissions Appointees to meet with the Muggle parents. That's how it *had* always been done.

Mrs. Sheldon turned and smiled. "Do not concern yourself about it, Ms. Whitmire. I've already got the pertinent information. I'll notify the papers."

Maggie tapped the stack of parchments in her hands on the desk as if the already perfectly tidy pages needed better alignment. *It is my job to announce the wizarding births... was my damn the witch!* "Very well, Mrs. Sheldon, since you've taken down his information. Do tell Ermengene Cauldron I said hello," she said as sweetly as she could muster.

"I will," Mrs. Sheldon said with a smile and turned around, dismissing Maggie in the process.

*The impertinence of the witch.*

Likewise, the Marriage and Magical Unions ledger with its red quill had new entries this morning, but Mrs. Sheldon had beaten Maggie to the office and had already sent the notices, via *her* staff, to the *Daily Prophet*. Christmas was a wonderful time of year for engagements! It was common among the young to announce betrothals on Christmas Eve or Christmas day to their families. Maggie had already read in the *Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler* that both the Potters and the Snapes were officially engaged as of Christmas day. It hardly surprised Maggie that the *Prophet* would jump on the announcement, but Maggie fully suspected that the Snapes would likewise ignore her Engagement Confirmation forms. Still, she'd send them by owl later that morning anyway.

The Obituary and Life Termination register with its black quill had new entries that had been recorded over the holiday. This time of year was particularly hard on the old and infirm; the two deaths recorded on the Obituary and Life Termination register had depressed her.

She'd known Alpheus Newell Hyatt well. He'd been active in the United Kingdom Society of Magical Naturalists. His arguments for the theory that laws of nature, as opposed to supernatural ones, operate in the universe had intrigued her. His paper, *The Natural Wizard*, a commentary comparison on the natural magical world, such as pure-bloods and the accidental occurrences, such as Muggle-born witches and wizards, had once caused quite stir. He'd died in Azkaban last night of natural causes.

The other wizard was a very famous wizard, Master Frederic Penhallow. Master Penhallow had written the Laws of Method and Logical Transfiguration, which included validation of the principal exceptions to Gamp's Laws of Elemental Transfiguration. He'd died four days before his two hundredth birthday. He'd be greatly missed. He'd been an exceptional scholar and validated many Transfiguration discoveries.

Raymond Wood and John Thales had also died in a fight with the Aurors, although it was unknown if they'd been Death Eaters. Maggie didn't know them very well either, although they both came from fine magical families, and Mr. Wood's second cousin's son, Oliver, now flew for Puddlemere United.

And Rabastan Lestrange had died, but Maggie didn't have very many nice things to say in his obituary, so she stuck to the simple facts on his report.

At least she still had the privilege of writing to Hulbert Warrington of the *Daily Prophet* and Xenophilus Lovegood, editor of *The Quibbler* about the sad news. *They haven't taken that away from me yet.*

The Magical Licenses and Certificates Department and The Muggle Marriage and Magical Parenthood Assistance Program, as it was now titled, had grown significantly in the last four months, and it was apparently a very big project of the Minister's since Mrs. Sheldon's office space had been enlarged, again. Mrs. Sheldon now had a personal assistant, Leticia Puddle, an entire clerical staff, several Muggle Liaison Officers, and a team of counselors being trained in Muggle Psychology... all for Muggles who either married a witch or wizard or had a magical child. Even the entire Improper Use of Magic Office had been relocated to this floor, and the lovely Mafilda Hopkirk had regular interoffice meetings with Mrs. Sheldon if anything arose. In fact, Stamford Jorkins from the Ministry Public Relations office came by to speak to Mrs. Shelton at least three to four times a week! It was astounding. *All this for Muggles! Didn't that counteract the Mission statement of the Ministry itself to keep the awareness of magic and the general activities of witches and wizards hidden from the Muggles, as well as defy the International Statute of Secrecy?*

Maggie stood up and retrieved the file on the Snapes. She'd become so frustrated looking at the magically bound folder that she'd placed it in her top Pending Confirmation of Registration drawer under its own tab 'Invalidated.' The first file she'd ever had 'pending for an undetermined period of time' stamped on it.

The Bonding took place on the twenty-third of June, and here it was the second week of January! Six months and five days and still the couple failed to acknowledge the Bonding. At least there was confirmation that the couple was *finally* living together and engaged. Rita had procured pictures of the couple attending the Burke's Christmas party and the Moncrieffs' Winter solstice gala; Maggie herself had obtained a copy of the picture taken of the Snapes from the Ministry's Christmas party. And there was a confirmation filed with the school governors that Mrs. Granger-Snape had agreed to move into the Headmaster's suites; it was filed underneath the Failure of Obligation form she'd filled out months ago, which was on top of the Declaration of Infidelity forms that the Minister had refused to allow Allyson Richardson in the MLE to sign.

In fact, that insufferable Hermione Granger-Snape had multiple Declaration of Infidelity forms, which had all been returned stamped 'unfounded' by the Minister. *The Minister himself! Blast that man.* Maggie had filed several reports of her girl's infidelity: two accounts with her ex-boyfriend Ronald Weasley, two more with that insufferable George Weasley. They'd both denied the accusations, of course, even though they'd been seen with Ms. Hermione Granger-Snape on more than one occasion. Their photos had appeared in the *Daily Prophet*, looking suspiciously chummy, and when Rita had inquired about the affair, Mr. George Weasley had even had the audacity to send Dungbombs in his return correspondence! Why the girl had even consorted with that Draco Malfoy, Disappeared away from Diagon Alley *in his arms*, and she was still held above reproach. The Wizengamot hadn't even considered Maggie's filing on *that* impropriety, and it had been returned stamped 'unfounded' in bold red. Never mind the shocking photos of the girl and Mr. Dean Thomas that she'd attached to *that* Declaration of Infidelity form rejected as well.

She turned the page with an audible, *Humph!*

Maggie's attempts to point out the unsuitable cohabitation with Harry Potter had likewise been rejected twice! *She'd lived with that boy for two days shy of three months before she'd finally returned to school a week late at that certainly there had been something going on! They had been unchaperoned teenagers, for an augury's wail!*

The Failure of Confirmation and the Failure of Registration forms lay underneath; both properly filled out and submitted to the MLE and Wizengamot, now four times *Four times* and each time having been returned stamped 'hastily filed' and marked 'pending Minister's approval.' The last time she'd even received a warning to cease and desist from the Minister and her Department Head!

The file now had a tab designated as 'Severus Snape.' He had been declared dead, well 'presumed missing and dead' and recorded on the Obituary and Life Termination register as 'presumed dead,' until he'd shown up on the Marriage and Magical Unions ledger as 'betrothal pending' from a magical pairing-plight charm. Maggie had personally initiated his Proof of Life forms pending confirmation of his life status, which she'd been unable to have a Healer any Healer verify. His Bonding papers were properly filled out; of course, they were unsigned and marked 'pending Minister's approval.'

Severus Snape had a second Death Certificate since his name appeared in the Obituary and Life Termination register as 'practically dead' that had been amended two days later to read, 'Inferi.' Then one week later the ledger had proclaimed him to be 'deceased' yet again, which the black quill had scratched out actually scratched out the entry and pronounced him 'revived' moments later, which meant that the forms to have him reinstated as alive had to be filled out again. *The man just didn't stay dead.*

However, his second Reinstatement of Life forms, his second set of Proof of Life forms had been properly completed, and his consciousness had been confirmed by three very qualified Healers... as was his Magical Competency forms and his reinstatement as Headmaster... Never, ever, had a file become so thick.

And Maggie still had no idea which form to use for someone revived from being an Inferi! It had never been done before Ms. Hermione Granger-Snape managed to reverse Severus Snape's Inferi status, er, condition. But she had also revived, well, cured several other victims of the Inferi Curse this last September as well, and the Healers all claimed that the individuals were *cured*, not revived as the Obituary and Life Termination register indicated. So, Maggie had to create a new form specifically for these fortunate few: the Inferi Cursed Patient Reversal-Cured form, which accompanied a Healer verified Proof of Life and Magical Competency forms.

She shut the file, fixed the red ribbon binding it and tapped the ministry seal with her wand, sealing the file closed. She clasped her hands together on the edge of the desk and stared at the offending file. She hated loose ends.

"Maggie, have you a moment?"

Maggie looked up, pleased to see Stamford Jorkins, Head of the Department of Public Relations for the Ministry of Magic, leaning around the doorway. "Of course, Mr. Jorkins; what a pleasure to see you," she replied with a genuine smile. *Eat that, Mrs. Sheldon; I'm still a valuable employee of the Ministry.*

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," he said as he stepped into her office, er, office space. "I am really looking forward to having you as a member of the team."

"Team?" she asked in confusion.

"Yes, I couldn't wait to come down and tell you," he said with a pleased smile. "It's not official yet, but with so much reallocation going on, departments being reorganized so that those doing similar functions report to the right Heads..."

Maggie stared at him numbly. *What has that Shacklebolt done now?*

"You'll be working under Mrs. Sheldon starting Monday and sending your marriage announcements and obituaries through my office," he said without pause. "Come by to see me this afternoon at three. I need to introduce you to Evelyn Goodale, Head of Ministry News and our lead Ministry liaison for the *Daily Prophet*."

He left without waiting for her to say if she was available at three or to answer any of her questions, such as 'When was this decided?'

Maggie actually saw red.

She shoved the Snape file back in her cabinet and closed the drawer with a frustrated sigh. She returned to her desk and picked up her morning copy of the *Daily Prophet* and turned to the page with Rita's column.

But it wasn't there.

Jonathan Newell's Household Tips and Solutions column was where Rita's column had always been for the last sixteen years or so. She checked the next page and the next.

While on holiday, she had heard through a reliable source that the new editor of the paper, Lawrence McClatchy, had given her dear friend Rita Skeeter a warning: check your facts or find another occupation. *Of all the nerve! You simply didn't tell a journalist of Rita's caliber, integrity and popularity that she was misrepresenting or falsifying the facts. The woman is tenacious in her investigations. People simply didn't like having the truth come out, and Rita is one for ferreting out the truth! The woman is a marvel at finding facts!* She'd never once misquoted anything Maggie had told her. It was inconceivable!

She checked each page, searching for Rita's column, finally reaching the obituaries and saw that the obituaries for the five names on her list were already published. Maggie's fingers curled tightly, and she slammed down her fists, crumpling her paper. *Well, of all the nerve how dare they,* she thought looking at Mrs. Sheldon. Her new boss. The thought stuck in her craw like an Acid Pop. *Well, all right. If I'm not needed, I'll-I'll simply take an early lunch. Starting now.*

She got up and left the office without saying anything to anyone, least of all Mrs. Sheldon.

~H~

Hermione's first week back had been quite busy. It turned out that the gorgeous secretary desk where Kirch had put all of Hermione's school supplies was in her very own study: a nice room with bookshelves on two walls, a small fireplace, a comfortable wood chair by the desk, and a lounge and cushy armchairs placed by twin windows with beveled diamond panes. It was everything she could hope for, and he'd even brought her trunk in, but he'd decorated it to look like an ottoman with a throw blanket and two pillows.

There was a door on her left that opened to a lovely parlor and a second door on the right that led to a bedroom. The bedroom had a canopy bed with vine-carved posts, like the one Luna had described were in the Ravenclaw dormitories, and gold embroidered, burgundy drapes. There was a mirrored dressing table and single-drawer bedside tables with a space for books, and a double-sided wardrobe that when open she could actually walk into as if it were a room in of itself. The door on the opposite wall opened to the nursery, and beyond that one was another bedroom, a playroom full of baby toys, and a lounge that Kirch called a family room.

Hermione stood in her new study, listening to Kirch, her head thrumming from taking everything in. "Kirch makes door open from this room to Mistress' parlor room for entertaining friends and a powder room for visitors," the elf explained, pointing to her left. He turned to face the other wall, adding, "And across here is Miss' bedroom and bathing room and dressing closet and nursery and a baby room, a baby play room and a family room to sit as a family," his hand bouncing as he pointed, almost as if he could see through the walls.

"So I have my own bedroom with a walk-in wardrobe, bathroom, a parlor with an ensuite and this study, plus a nursery?" Hermione asked, amazed. The parlor had several comfortable chintz chairs, delicate side tables and coffee table in front of a small fireplace and two long windows that let in plenty of light. A table stood on either side of the room with bouquets of flowers in gorgeous French vases.

Kirch nodded. "And eating room. Unless Miss needs Kirch to add more rooms to the Round Room?"

Hermione turned and walked back to look at the odd Round Room, trying to fathom what he could mean by *more* rooms. From what Hermione visualized, the door to the mysterious room stood where the wall of the Headmaster's Tower joined the main castle walls, making the Round Room literally in or next to the junction. It wasn't really round at all, more oblong, and little more than a ring of doors. Each door opened to a room, and the rooms were not square either, but trapezoid-shaped with the windows in the far curved wall as if the rooms were in a round tower. "No, I think you've outdone yourself as it is," she said in awed disbelief.

Kirch beamed in delight. "Kirch is happy to please, miss," he said and vanished with a pop.

Not that Severus was at all pleased that she had her own bedroom and bath, but Professor McGonagall had been satisfied. "For propriety's sake," she'd said to Severus, ignoring his scowl. Nevertheless, Hermione had yet to actually sleep in her new bedroom. Additionally, she only used her bathroom if she wanted to freshen up and change before dinner, and poor Dezzy was constantly retrieving her clothes from one wardrobe to the other for Hermione, depending on where Hermione was dressing, something that bothered Hermione. She honestly thought she was abusing the sweet house-elf, regardless of how delighted Dezzy seemed to be when Hermione asked her for anything.

Hermione, Ginny and Luna met before dinner Monday night to coordinate their schedules. Hermione and Ginny also coordinated their revision guides to include the dates of their club meetings and set aside times to work on their NEWT projects and to work out brewing times, revision times.

After their last lessons on Friday, Hermione and Ginny got together again in their potions lab to finish that week's potions in their ongoing push to validate as many of Severus' potions as possible before leaving Hogwarts. So far, they had everything they needed to write up their report on the improved versions of the Verso-Quixotically and Polyjuice Potions from last term, and they had to brew Severus' version of the Wolfsbane Potion, hopefully proving his improvement of the efficacy on that one as well. Their work on their N.E.W.T. Transfiguration project, changing an inanimate object into an animate object, still kept hitting a snag, but Ginny was certain that they'd work out the problem sooner or later. Hermione was certain it wasn't a wand movement error.

Hermione counted to twenty-eight as she stirred her third batch of the Baby-Bonding Potion for postpartum depression. So far her other two potions were the perfect shade of baby blue.

Hermione set down her stirring rod. "Ginny, we need to work out the cognizance aspect in changing an inanimate object into an animate object," Hermione said, waiting for the potion to stop whirling in her cauldron, watching the color shift from deepest blue to soft baby blue. She turned to watch Ginny finish her third batch for mothers with a baby girl. "I've been trying to rework Arithmancy; theoretically I can make it all work; I can get the Arithmancy equations to balance, but I keep ending up with compound events both independent and dependent and I think... I think it will involve more than just the Transfiguration spell we've worked out we may have to charm the object as well."

Ginny put down her stirring rod. "Perfect, my strength is in Charms, and you're superb at Arithmancy together we should be able to do this," she said, looking up from workstation.

Hermione peeked into her friend's cauldrons, smiling at the pretty baby pink. "Or to have the traits of the animate object... Maybe we should concentrate on changing a rock into a dog and add in the traits we know a dog to possess."

"Like animating a toy?" Ginny asked, placing her stirring rod on the table. "I thought the idea was to have the inanimate become fully animate?"

"But each time we transfigure it, the animate object moves but it's not aware. It's like that little toy dragon Harry has," Hermione stated, bringing her hands up at her sides and letting them fall. "We can't create life, but we can't create the illusion of life either just animation of an object to do certain responses like spitting fire and flapping its wings or walking forward and barking. Ugh, I feel like Frankenstein."

"Frank Einstein? I don't know anyone by that name," Ginny said, utterly confused.

"A Muggle book that inspired several Muggle movies... Not important unless you want some light reading," Hermione said offhandedly in explanation.

"Maybe over the summer. I've enough reading as it is for school," Ginny said.

Hermione looked up, saying, "I was thinking, what if we infuse some of our magic while layering the charms for the behavioral aspects of a dog during the transfiguration? Maybe the resulting dog would behave in a conscious way."

Ginny looked thoughtful, but didn't say anything, so Hermione pressed on. "I was reading Alpheus Newell Hyatt's principles based upon the idea of natural magic his idea on natural laws and forces. He says that true magic is passed down from magical parents to their offspring, but *assumed magic* is absorbed by will, something like osmosis taken into the being like stealing or siphoning it from a host. I know, weird. But his definitions of real magic and assumed magic are intriguing. Not that I agree with him, but he raised some interesting points about the transference of magic and how magic works."

"You're mental!" Ginny exclaimed as she held up her hand. "His definition of the 'natural magical world' and the Muggle-born 'accidental magical occurrences' was the basis for the Muggle-Born Registration Commission imprisoning the Muggle-borns and half-bloods that couldn't prove they had proper magical heritage!"

"Yes, I know, but still, he was brilliant. His paper citing the philosophical assumptions of the twelfth century Renaissance wizards is fascinating if not disturbing but his explanation of accidental magical occurrences gave me an idea," Hermione said in her defense. "Maybe we should try and create the accident layering behavior charms to the transfiguration." She put Frederic Penhallow's *Laws of Method and Logical Transfiguration* on the table and opened the book to her marker. "I think that Penhallow's fifth principal exception to Gamp's Laws of Elemental Transfiguration applies in what we want to do."

Across the room, her second timer went off.

"Hermione, no one has ever been able to validate Penhallow's hypothesis but Penhallow himself," Ginny said, watching her friend as she walked to the other worktable.

"Yet," Hermione said with a slight smirk that twisted into a sly smile as she lowered the flame under the three cauldrons of Whymemerger Draught. "But what if he's right? What if transmutation in transfiguration conversion can be done?"

"Whoa! Wait? What? Oh my gods!" Ginny exclaimed, gaping at her. "You've already done it haven't you?"

"Done what?" Hermione asked, her attention diverted from her train of thought as she looked up from the third cauldron of Whymemerger Draught. "Proved his theory? No! Well, not really."

"You have in theory haven't you?" Ginny asked and then became thoughtful. "Do you really think it can be done?"

Hermione smiled as she walked back and reached for her bag. "I'll show you what I have so far." She pulled out her Arithmancy composition book and explained her equations and theory until their timers went off. They each lowered the flames under their Baby-Bonding Potions.

"So, when did you want to try this?" Ginny asked, turning her attention back to their discussion. "You already filled up all my free time with our brewing times and revisions. Thank you by the way for allowing me Tuesday for Quidditch practice."

Hermione chuffed a laugh.

"Don't laugh, I'm captain this year!"

"I still need to finish the calculations, and I'm a long way from finding a solution," Hermione said, looking at their list of potions. "Okay, these potions are done; we just have to write up our validations and turn them in to Professor Reynolds. So I was thinking about brewing these next week." She handed Ginny a scrap of parchment, which she'd already written a short list:

*Attentiveness Potion, which increases a person's attention span but can cause restlessness and hyperactivity*

*Lugers' Lethargy Draught, which counters fidgetiness and uneasiness*

*Reduplicative Potion for replicating fingers and the one for replicating toes*

*Impulsivity Draught for procrastinators*

"Then we could start brewing the Wolfsbane potion on the tenth, the first night of the moon's waxing crescent," Hermione added, tapping the page in her revision guide.

"All right... and the Médousa Potion," Ginny chimed in, making Hermione look up. "We haven't resumed work on that one yet."

"Severus won't until we work out which seeds are needed," Hermione said regretfully. "We're at a standstill until one of us discovers what it is."



"So, when did you want to work on it?" Ginny asked as she opened her planner. "We have a free evening tomorrow!" She looked up with a smile. "We could spend time on it tomorrow."

"No, it's Severus' birthday," Hermione stated. "I've made arrangements for a nice dinner." It was tomorrow, and she still had no idea what to do for him, except a quiet dinner alone, just the two of them. Naturally, Mispy promised to set up a nice romantic dinner in the old classroom at the top of the East Tower; a place Severus had mentioned he'd liked going especially the day after a full moon.

"That's it?" Ginny asked, and Hermione shrugged.

"I did order something from Scrivenshaft's last week," she said with a sigh. "But it's hard to go shopping when your Bonded mate will not let you out of his sight."

"I bet," Ginny said, getting that thoughtful look that sometimes worried Hermione. "I may have an idea for you," she said, her eyes sparkling in the way that made Hermione reluctant to ask.

"What?"

"Trust me, okay?" Ginny said, grinning.

"Am I going to regret this?" Hermione asked nervously.

"No," Ginny said, summoning the box of bottles from the supply cupboard.

~S~

So far, his birthday was going exactly as he'd wanted it to be. He woke up that morning with Hermione snuggled by his side and they'd made love, then had breakfast in bed, followed by making love again. He'd opened his gifts; the usual assortment of books, potions equipment, rare potion ingredients, and a few Dark magic detection devices from his colleagues and friends. Lucius and Narcissa had sent him a two hundred year-old bottle of Odgen's finest with crystal goblets, and Draco and Astoria sent him a new pair of dragon hide gloves. Elaine Prevatt, Clerk to the Governing Body, a box of cigars on behalf of the Hogwarts School Governors. Neville and Luna had given him a *Dracula simia*, a humorously creepy orchid known as the Monkey Orchid that made monkey noises and screeches. Harry, on behalf of he and Ginevra, had sent him the three books Severus had found in Jugson's hideout in Toxteth, Liverpool, with a Letter of Special Dispensation from Kingsley authorizing his ownership. Severus spent the rest of the morning, until lunch, reading one of his new books while Hermione revised in the library with her friends.

However, after lunch, he was intercepted by Hermione and Ginevra in front of the gargoyle to his office. He sighed. He'd hoped to resume his reading since Hermione had indicated earlier that she desired to spend the part of the afternoon on her studies.

"I have a surprise for you, Severus. Follow me," Ginevra said with a mischievous smile he'd seen on the faces of Fred and George plenty of times before, usually just before their potions exploded or overflowed their cauldron in some ghastly mess.

Hermione shrugged, looking quite nervous and apologetic at the same time, but her hand tightened on his, and she gave it a slight tug, encouraging him to go with the girls. "Oh, very well, lead on," he said, capitulating to them with some reluctance. As they descended from the seventh floor to the ground floor, taking several seldom used staircases and corridors, he tried to speculate on where Ginevra was leading him. When they finally exited into a damp section of the dungeons, he became quite suspicious. "Where exactly are we going?" he asked apprehensively as they passed through an obscured archway that reeked of old sewage and down a long, dank and moldy corridor.

"You'll see," Ginevra said cryptically, proceeding down the corridor, away from the more commonly used areas of the dungeons.

She had them turn right at the next corridor, down a short flight of stairs, then right again at the next corridor. "The Bloody Baron and Moaning Myrtle showed me how to find it," Ginevra said with a huge grin and made another right turn at the next junction, giving Severus the sense of having walked in a wide circle.

She finally stopped. Ginevra drew her wand, saying a rather Dark Art enchantment as she raked her fingernails down the rough stones, and pushed open a heavy door that appeared in the wall. "This is the base of what had once been Salazar Slytherin's Tower."

With some trepidation, Severus succumbed to his curiosity and followed the girls into the dimly lit chamber. Behind him was a short tunnel with dark, slimy walls, the ground littered with the remains of rats (and whatever else died down here) and a vivid green snake skin, sticking out beneath a wall of broken rock and rubble with a gaping hole at the top. He felt his skin crawl as he realized it was the remains of a basilisk's skin, if he were to guess right.

"This way," Ginevra said confidently, scrambling up the rubble for the hole with Hermione right behind her.

Once safely on the other side of the blockage, Severus and Hermione followed Ginevra as she continued down the tunnel and around another bend until the girl stopped short at a wall with two intricately carved serpents with glinting emerald eyes within a huge iron ring set embedded in a black stone wall like a medallion. Severus' mouth and throat went dry. The eyes of the snake gave the impression that the stone snakes were strangely alive.

"That," she said, pointing, "is the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets."

"Very good, Ginevra, you know the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. However, I already know of its existence..."

He was cut off short when Ginevra hissed, "Sssisess syrethss," and repeated it, or a variation of it, three times. Suddenly, the snakes on the medallion uncoiled and slithered apart on the wall until their noses pressed a particular spot within the iron ring. There was a soft metallic clicking sound as the snakes slid smoothly out of sight. For a moment Severus felt a fleeting sense of relief until he heard a heavy thunking sound followed by a hiss and the unmistakable sound of stone moving against metal as the slab of rock within the ring moved away.

"Ron taught me how to say it," she said when Severus cocked his eyebrow at her. "Follow me."

Severus followed the girls and found himself standing in the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber, with towering stone pillars entwined with more extremely detailed and very life-like hollow-eyed serpents that supported a ceiling somewhere up in the gloomy darkness above him, casting long dark shadows through the greenish gloom that filled the vast space.

"This way," Ginevra said with a smile, obviously proud to be showing him this treasure.

They walked forward, between the serpentine columns on a smooth stone path. Their footsteps echoed loudly in the vast space, especially his footsteps since he wore his customary boots and both girls wore their trainers. Between the columns were reflection pools that he tried not to stare into, but even the pattern of the stones set in the path resembled snake scales. Severus tried to keep his focus forward. Nevertheless, the hollow eyes of the snakes on the columns seemed to follow him, watching waiting. As they walked, the combination of the shadows and the eerie glow of the green illumination gave the serpents the impression of movement, setting Severus' teeth on edge, and he fought back the memories he had of Nagini and her near-fatal bite.

Half-way through the chamber they came upon the ghastly carcass of the basilisk, the head still sporting some rotting flesh even though the body of the immense serpent had been eaten away by rats, leaving only the skeleton. He forced himself to name all the uses of basilisk venom in the Dark Arts and then the uses of the skin to avoid staring at the gruesome sight as they continued forward.

When they finally stopped level with the last pillar, he found himself staring up at the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin himself. The image was not like any of the depictions that Severus was familiar with. This rendition had heavy brows, close-set, round eyes, a flattened nose, a thin mouth and a long thin beard that reached to the floor. It was

probably a self-portrait, designed to appear imposing and depicting a high intelligence with an ambitious gleam in the eyes, a proud, purposeful posture, and the fingers laced together that usually represented a cunning personality.

"So, what do you think?" Ginevra asked, obviously waiting for some sort of reaction from him.

"Impressive," he said simply, truly at a loss for intelligible speech. The petite redhead looked immensely pleased, but all he could think of was that he could hardly wait to leave the place.

~H~

Hermione did have some reservations when Ginny announced her surprise for Severus' birthday, but she'd been unprepared for his complete lack of response upon seeing the impressive chamber of the infamous founder. Even Ginny had remarked on his lack of acknowledgment, appreciation or recognition. In fact, Severus had affected his old persona, his stone-faced indifference firmly in place as he'd followed them silently into the chamber. However, his severe lack of reaction to the basilisk carcass was quite telling, and she'd wondered if maybe the chamber had brought back too many horrible memories of the war, Voldemort, Nagini and the snakebite that almost killed him.

She remembered him telling her that he'd had enough of snakes once, but until that moment standing in front of Salazar Slytherin's statue, did she realized how much of an effect the chamber would have on him. When they'd left, he'd thanked Ginny in the Entrance Hall, albeit rather formally, and excused himself, turning to exit out the huge oak doors.

Ginny had wanted to run after him to apologize, but Hermione restrained her, knowing that Severus needed some time to himself.

"I thought he'd be... happier, being able to see the chamber, considering that only the three of us, Harry and my brother have been in there since Riddle attended school," Ginny said remorsefully.

Naturally, Hermione knew that Ginny had been planning the surprise for a while. "It might have been better if we'd offered to show him, given him time to think about it, rather than surprising him like we did," Hermione said, hoping Severus was all right. "Let's work on our project, and after a while, I'll go and find him."

Ginny nodded, still troubled. "I didn't mean to upset him; but you're right, I should've told him. Then he would've had time to prepare himself instead of stumbling into it unawares." She looked up at Hermione earnestly. "Tell him I'm sorry."

"I promise."

Because neither could concentrate on their Charms or Transfiguration project, and Hermione knew it'd be useless to even attempt her Arithmancy calculations, they decided to search through the Herbology books for magical and mundane plants that produced seeds. Hermione led Ginny up to the sitting room and, after giving an amazed Ginny a tour of her new rooms, pulled out her list of every known seed used in potions from her secretary. "Here's the list I was telling you about. I've already gone through every Potions book in the library, including the Restricted Section."

"Too bad you didn't search through the Malfoy's library," Ginny said as they headed back to the library. "I hear it's extensive."

"Oh, Gin, it's incredible," Hermione gushed, telling her all about the magnificent library.

"It must have been heavenly," Ginny said with a grin that faded when she became quiet, deep in thought. "Too bad I can't go."

"I can ask Severus if it would be all right to ask Narcissa. If he says yes, and she's amenable to it, maybe we can go next weekend. We'd have to adjust a few things, maybe get Ravenclaw to swap Quidditch practice for your time slot on Sunday..." Hermione suggested.

"I'll ask Lawrence Carlin if we can switch. You know, I could write to Neville and see if he knows of any rare seed plant that we might not know about," Ginny suggested. "He's always reading Herbology journals and obscure Herbology books."

They searched through Herbology books until Hermione said she had to go. "My special dinner with Severus," she reminded her friend. She readily promised Ginny she'd pass on her apology when Ginny said once again, "Tell him I'm sorry," and hurried up to go change. She dressed in her garnet robes, since she remembered him asking her to wear them on Boxing Day, and the necklace of Tunisian glass and amber beads he'd given her last November. When she walked into his office to walk to dinner together, he stood and stared at her, his eyebrow quirked questioningly at her appearance.

"You're overdressed for dinner in the Great Hall," he stated.

She smiled. "I thought we'd eat alone tonight, if that's all right. Just you and me for your birthday," she said, watching his confused expression morph into a smile.

"Where are we going?" he asked as she led him toward the East Tower.

"It's a surprise," she said, then blanched and stopped, turning to face him as his face became stony. "Not like gods, Severus, we didn't think. I'm so sorry Ginny's really sorry. We felt horrible about... We shouldn't have sprung that on you like we did."

His expression softened. "I'm sorry if I alarmed you," he said quietly. "I was... unprepared."

"And if we'd told you where we were taking you, offered rather than assumed," she stammered.

"But because I'm Slytherin you thought I'd want to see it," he said softly.

"You were Head of Slytherin for years," she said with a nod. "I'm sorry it upset you."

"I don't blame you, nor do I find fault with Ginevra." He reached out and touched her cheek. "But for the sake of my sanity, where are you leading me this time?"

"Somewhere you said you used to like to read or to watch the sunrise on days you'd wake up early enough," she said, watching his face for his reaction. They had eaten there before, and she'd picked the room for its spectacular view, and when the sun set, they'd be able to see the lights from Hogsmeade.

A crease formed between his brows, so she added, "The seventh floor of the East Tower. I asked Mispy to set the room up for a romantic dinner." His lips softened into a smile, and he indicated they proceed, which made her feel better about her choice.

When she opened the door to the room, she nearly gasped at the sight. Mispy had draped the entire room in soft, crystal speckled, black velvet, leaving only the windows and the wall sconces visible. Huge candelabras stood in the corners, illuminating the room with a warm glow, making the thousands of crystals sparkle in the candlelight. A table, elegantly set for two in glistening silver, stood in the center of the room. Severus held out her chair and Hermione sat, still amazed at the elegance of the room.

As soon as he sat down, a long, flat box wrapped in silver with a black bow appeared on his plate. He cocked his head, an unspoken question in his dark eyes, but she smiled, knowingly. She smiled as he unwrapped the handsome silver-tipped black quill. "I sent a request to Scrivenshaft's last week," Hermione said, then looked up at him. "It's not much, but I hope you like it."

"It's perfect," he said, thanking her for the gift. "But this," he said, indicating her, "is all I needed."

Hermione felt her face warm as Mispy appeared with their first soup course. They ate, talking softly. Hermione had asked Mispy to serve Severus' favorite foods, and each course the elf served seemed to please him and tasted delicious. At the end of the meal, Mispy cleared off the table, leaving a mouth-watering chocolate Sformato with

Amaretto whipped cream for Hermione and a crème brulee cheesecake for Severus.

After only a few bites, Severus set down his spoon and watched Hermione with a bemused smile playing on his lips. "Do you want to try a bite?" she asked, holding out a bit of the Sformato her fork.

"Yes," he replied.

When she leaned forward, extending her offering, he indicating she should come over to him with a curling motion of his finger. She rose and walked around the small table. He pulled her onto his lap, taking the fork from her and setting it down. "I thought you wanted a bite of my dessert?" she asked lightly as she placed her forearms on his shoulders.

"I do," he said in his deep sexy drawl, his arms tightening around her. "But not for chocolate."

She cocked her head slightly, her mouth stretching into a lopsided grin as his fingers stroked her hair, brushing it back. "Don't you like chocolate?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled slightly, even though his mouth twitched into a smirk. "I'm not in the mood for chocolate."

His hand cupped the back of her head, gently drawing her closer to him as she asked, "Then what do you want?" teasingly, although it came out breathless in anticipation of his kiss.

The look in his eyes intensified. "You," he breathed as his lips met hers. His kiss was sensual and light, teasingly gentle yet firm. His fingers played in her hair, keeping her to him (not that she was inclined to draw away) but not forcing her or restricting her ability to move her head while kissing him back.

She loved kissing him and was amazed at how much he conveyed in something as simple as a kiss: sometimes being fiery and needy, sometimes hesitant and questioning, sometimes demanding or hungrily lecherous or, like tonight, loving and tender. Hermione began to feel a warm fuzzy, light-headed sensation that seemed to bloom deep in her gut as well, and she melted into his embrace, wrapping her arms about him more firmly. His other hand slid slowly down her back, ending at her bum as he drew her close to him, so she sat more comfortably on his lap.

His fingers tightened in her hair, not painfully, but enough to break their kiss and make her lean back with her neck arched so he could trail his talented lips from her jaw down her neck. Her eyes closed as his lips brushed the curve of her neck and across her collarbone as his hands slid to her shoulders. Then, slowly, his lips descended, and her eyes snapped open as her robe slid down, revealing her chest and breasts. "Severus?" she asked as he purred silkily, "You really do have lovely breasts."

"But Mispy will be here any minute to clear away the dishes," she protested.

"She has already cleared the table," he said, smiling against her skin, his hands cupping her breasts. He suckled one nipple, his fingers caressing and molding the other deliciously. She watched him, his hair partly obscuring his face as he switched his attention to the other, rolling her moistened pebbled nipple in his fingers, sending chills down to her groin. She stroked his sides, his arms, loving the attention, almost in worship of her breasts.

"Stand up, Hermione," he said, his voice rough with desire. She reluctantly slid from his lap, surprised when he nonverbally made the table move back with a wave of his hand. His gaze raked over her as he put his hands on her hips, saying, "Pull your skirts up," in a soft request.

"Only if you push them down," she replied with jut of her chin, knowing what he wanted and wanting it as much as he did. She smiled, watching him unfasten his frockcoat and trousers, her mouth gaping open slightly for a moment when he pulled himself free as she watched. "Shirt too," she demanded, biting her lip as his fingers began unfastening his buttons. He looked so rakish, staring at her with his penis standing erect, jutting up from his opened fly, his clothes hanging open and disheveled, baring his body to her. She inched her skirts up slowly, exposing her legs to him. "Is this what you want?" she asked as she hooked her fingers under her knickers.

"Yes," he said, reaching for her, but she shook her head.

She slid her knickers down her legs, keeping her gaze locked on his. His eyes seemed to darken as he watched her, his mouth slightly open, his chest expanding with each breath. She freed one foot, then the other, never losing eye contact, and tossed her knickers to the side before straightening up, bringing the hem of her robes up with her. He reached for her again, his eyes riveted on hers, and she straddled his lap, letting the bodice of her robe pool at her waist along with her skirts. "You know, we could always..."

"Silence, woman," he hissed as she rubbed herself on his shaft. "Gods, Hermione."

Emboldened by his willingness to relinquish control to her, she undulated on his lap, sliding herself along his length wantonly. "Guide me," she demanded softly, almost a plea, wanting him inside her and reveling in her ability to make him surrender to her. He reached down, sliding his hand beneath her robe and grasped himself, angling his penis so she could impale herself on him. His fingers stroked her as she slid down, taking him in a little at a time with each drop she made, sending shocks of pleasure shooting through her as the glorious feeling of him filling her clouded her mind.

She pushed herself down firmly on his lap, closing her eyes, enjoying the moment of being filled, squeezing her pelvic muscles on his throbbing member. She loved this moment, feeling him in her, feeling gloriously penetrated, stretched, growing warm within and complete. Two becoming one, intimately joined, the heartbeat before the dance. His hips shifted, undulating, making his penis move within her. She opened her eyes, and using her thighs and hips, she rose upward and forward with his thrust and then lowered back and down as she sank onto him while he simultaneously stroked her with his fingers. Within minutes she found a rhythm, rolling her pelvis forward slightly before rising and rolling back as she came back down, creating as much friction for herself as she could.

He watched her passively, as if simply letting her take her pleasure from him, but she could tell by his half-lidded eyes as he looked down and dark lust-laden gaze when he looked up at her, his heavily breathing and occasional times his mouth opened slightly, he was enjoying being ridden as much as she enjoyed ridding him. "Relax, Hermione," he said softly, his voice deep and rough as he grabbed her hips. "Stop analyzing and feel," he growled in a soft purr.

She closed her eyes, rolling her head back and let her mind go, permitting herself to think of nothing else, allowing her sensitivity to the sensations consume her, her body moving in a well-trained rhythm, driving her along with the swelling throb growing deep within her. "More, harder," she panted, grinding and jarring against him to increase the friction as her need built. The tempo of his thrusts increased, and her movements accelerated to match as she felt the need within her rising. She was close, so close.

"Come," he said through gritted teeth. "Oh, gods, Hermione, I can't you are so tight, so..." His fingers clutched onto her, guiding her, and she felt the pressure surge, like a tide turning and flowing down and through her as she succumbed to its release, letting go and giving in, crying, "Yes, yes, yes, oh yes!" as her orgasm rolled through her.

Her strength left her as her body melted with the ebb of the orgasm, and she collapsed on his chest with a heavy, heart-pounding, mind-numbing sense of exhausted bliss. His arms slackened for a moment, then wrapped around her, holding her lovingly in his embrace, his breathing ragged and his body sweaty.

"Thank you," he breathed.

"Happy birthday," she replied drowsily.

His arms tightened, laying his head on her shoulder and burying his face in her hair.

"It has been," he finally murmured softly.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

## Achievements and Failures

Chapter 57 of 63

Aideen is growing rapidly. Ginny and Hermione make an improvement in Transfiguration that will get the girls published, and they are coming along in validating Severus' potions variations, but Hermione is finding that their N.E.W.T. Transfiguration project is not coming along as she'd hoped. Also Ginny gets an offer from Severus she gladly accepts. Although, Valentine's Day takes a turn that Severus hadn't planned on.



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### Achievements and Failures

~S~

The first few weeks of January were busy for Severus, both with administration duties and his own personal research. Not that he'd had much time for the latter. He and Reginald were at a complete standstill until they discovered which seed was needed for the Médusa Potion. So for the time being, when he did have the time, he concentrated on the Wolfsbane Potion, well, his version of the lycanthropy concoction. The copious amount of notes he'd taken when Lupin had been in residence, as well as all the times he'd brewed the Wolfsbane Potion on Dumbledore's request, provided him with several theoretical options.

The other matter concerning him was Hermione. Although Hermione was now living with him in the Headmaster's Tower, it seemed the most he saw of her was still at meals and either after her curfew or late in the evening before they both retired to bed. He definitely knew why she spent so much time in the library, having taught N.E.W.T. level Potions to seventh-years all but four years of his adult life and being very familiar with the added workload heaped up on the graduating class. But he truly felt she had taken on too much this term, and lately he'd noticed her diminished appetite, the dark circles under her eyes, how hard she pushed herself with her schooling and N.E.W.T. projects, how enervated she was around curfew and how exhausted she was as she climbed into bed, and more than once he'd been tempted to slip her a Sleeping Draught. During most nights, he'd simply held her as Aideen's melodious trilling soothed the couple to sleep, and he'd darkened the windows on the weekends so she'd lie in, which sometimes irritated her.

He glanced at the clock. *Two-sixteen*. She'd be in Arithmancy right now, and she had a revision break before dinner as did Ginevra, so he knew that she and Ginevra would use the time in their lab in the dungeons or in the Revision Hall with the other seventh-year Gryffindor girls.

He'd begun to take particular notice of Hermione's schedule, marking on his calendar in code the times she spent brewing, revising and working on her N.E.W.T. projects, and since she was frequently with Ginevra, he'd made note of her schedule as well. He'd also spoken to Mispy regarding Hermione's eating habits, and encouraged the elf to make sure that the elves placed the more nutritious foods closer to his fiancée in the Great Hall, especially the protein rich foods, and to bring nutritious snacks for her to nibble on in the evenings. He knew that the elves had taken the task seriously; he already had three complaints from Madam Pince this week that a house-elf had slipped Hermione nuts and dried fruit in the library one afternoon, Marmite on Irish brown bread another and celery filled with hummus the next. However, instead of scolding the house-elves, he'd thanked them and encouraged them to be far more discreet in the future.

He looked up from his desk as Aideen trilled to something flying by his window. He'd made Aideen a perch for his office so she could be near him while he worked. She was nearly fully grown. She had begun to molt mid January, losing her secondary downy coat for the plumage of a juvenile phoenix. At this stage of development, her plumage was less striking muted darker shades compared to the striking colors that it would be once she reached full maturity. Aideen's juvenile golden brown head feathers would get progressively lighter until her first flight. However, when the phoenix neared its burning day, the head feathers would fade to a dirty gray just before the phoenix achieved ignition. Phoenixes fascinated him, and he hoped he'd see it; that was if he was fortunate enough to have her remain with him after her homage flight for her sire.

Severus knew that Aideen would start testing her wings in March, and she'd take her first flight shortly after. He estimated, by her growth rate, that she'd fly off to the ancient city of Heliopolis by the end of March, taking the egg created from the myrrh of her nest and the ashes of Fawkes' final cremation to the temple of the sun god in the Old Magical City or the Magical Middle Kingdom of Heliopolis. Fawkes' egg would then be shelved in the ancient room behind the altar, in a place of honor with those of his ancestors, and Aideen would then be free to choose to return or to remain free, flying from Assyria, Arabia or the Granges and even China.

It saddened him to think she might leave. But he was accustomed to disappointments.

As if reading his thoughts, Aideen began to sing softly, her simple tune lifting his spirits. He nodded to her and smiled, his gaze dropping to the framed picture on his desk that had been taken the night of the Ministry's Christmas party before he resumed his correspondences. Maybe, just maybe, the fates would be kind to him for the second time in his life.

~H~

Hermione sat in the library with her friends, the companionable quiet interrupted by page turning, scratching of their quills and the soft tinkling sound of quill tips being dipped into inkwells. Since moving in with Severus, Hermione hadn't seen as much of her friends, Alestra, Wendlynne, Veronica and Sunita as she used to, outside of lessons and at meal times, and she missed the carefree banter and the friendly discussions they'd had, so it was nice when they could sit in the library or Revision Hall together and revise.

However, that didn't deter Wendlynne and Veronica from keeping Hermione abreast with all the latest news on their personal lives or from inquiring about hers. Veronica had told her that she and Jeremy Watson had recently called it off and that she'd been seeing Dresden Penwalter instead, and that Sunita was with Jack Chen. Wendlynne said that Alestra was still seeing Thornton Bronte and it looked like their relationship was getting very serious. "*Engagement* serious," she'd admitted with a huge grin. "I don't think he'll wait until June to ask for her father's blessing not that he will say no. The Bronte's are well off and a very well respected family."

"Certainly they'd wait until they leave school?" Hermione whispered in surprise.

"No, not everyone does," Veronica whispered, her eyes alight with happiness for her friend. "Although, they usually have to wait six months to a year for a proper engagement period. I heard he'd asked his grandmother for *the ring*."

Hermione turned to look at Thornton sitting across the library with Blake, Lawrence, Jeremy and Eduardo Delgado. Blake's brow creased as he checked something in his book, and he looked up, seeing her. She smiled slightly as he tipped his quill in her direction with a minute nod of his head before turning his attention back on his book. She still partnered with Blake in Ancient Runes and Lawrence in Arithmancy, and they'd become friends, well, friendly over the course of the year.

Ginny returned from the Charms section and sat into her chair next to Hermione, dropping an arm load of books on the table in front of her. Across the table, Wendlynne glanced at Luna who had stopped writing to look up dreamily at the oak beams in the ceiling, and Wendlynne followed her gaze for a second, before shaking her head and resuming writing her essay, which made Veronica chuckle softly.

Jack Sloper waved to Hermione and Ginny in greeting as he walked by their table to join his friends, Bryan Randell, Wilberforce Wevernthral and Ernie Coppersmith, and Veronica looked up, turning in her seat to wave back at him as well.

Hermione set down her quill and put her elbows on the table, rubbing her temples. The calculations simply would not agree with her previous work. She rechecked her maths, going over each equation, not finding her error. She considered walking over and asking Lawrence if he would give it a once over, but decided to wait and ask Professor Vector instead.

"Not working?" Ginny asked softly so as not to disturb those around them.

Hermione shook her head. "I kept getting the same results, so I thought I'd try a different approach. But that's not working out properly."

"What's not working?" Luna asked, still intrigued by something in the ceiling.

Looking up at her friend across the table, Hermione's mouth stretched into a weary smile. "It's the calculations for my N.E.W.T. Transfiguration project."

Luna cocked her head slightly, twirling her quill as she regarded Hermione. "What is your project?"

"Transmutation of an inanimate object to an animate object," she said with a deep sigh. "We're focusing on trying to change a rock into a dog. Not just an animated dog, a real dog."

"The spells we learn in school only show us how to transfigure an animal into an object, like a hedgehog into a pin cushion or a tortoise into a teapot, although I thought changing a pot into a clock was fun," Luna said with a giggle, then immediately became thoughtful again. "But that's not the same thing, is it? Professor McGonagall has been showing us how to transfigure a chair or a rock into an animated resemblance of an animal to use as a distraction to escape. But the rock resumes its shape immediately after, doesn't it? It's not really an animate object."

Hermione shook her head, agreeing, "No, it's not."

"My Aunt Shaylee and Aunt Aenya took me to a mass once, and I ate a cracker."

Luna's pronouncement was surprising. "You took communion?" Hermione asked, thinking that only Catholics were allowed to accept communion during mass.

"Is that what it's called?" Luna asked and then pressed on, apparently not needing an answer. "The priest said the cracker was the body of Christ, but it tasted like a cracker. I looked it up. They believe that the cracker is transmuted into the actual body by a blessing. I think it's something like Transubstantiation in Alchemy."

Both Ginny and Hermione gaped at Luna in astounded disbelief. "Luna, you're brilliant!" Hermione said, jumping up to go to the Alchemy section with Ginny following right behind her.

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That night after dinner, Ginny sat on a desk in the room the girls used as their own potions lab, reading from *Transubstantiation in Alchemy* as she waited for the timer to indicate it was time to do the next step for her three Kibitzer Potions. She looked up when Hermione set down her stirring rod and began marking notes on her parchment. "Do you think it could work?" Ginny asked. "I know you said that the Arithmancy calculations for Penhallow's fifth principal exception to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration don't work, but we're talking about using the Torrick's Alchemic principle in Transfiguration." Torrick's *Inner Alchemical: Esoteric Transubstantiation Initiation* described the religious definitions.

"He called it the 'accident' in theological parlance and talks about the *essence* of the substance's transformation happening, but not the *appearance* of the object changing. Give me a second," Hermione said and finished her note on the differences of the Dingus Potion's color and consistency with that of the description in her *Advanced Potion Making*. She checked the directions again: *After the six crushed dried Dingalan sandcrabs, stir nine times clockwise, done, and let simmer fifteen minutes okay* She set her timer and turned as she looked up. "We just have to devise a way to do both; change the essence of the object as it transforms as well as the appearance. I still believe that we have to create an accidental transference of magic to the item itself, making it a magical animate object."

"As I understand it, external transmutation in Alchemy is transforming one physical substance into another physical substance such as turning base metals into the noble metals such as gold or silver," Ginny said. Hermione thought she had a pretty good grasp of the concepts even though she didn't take the course.

"Alchemy focuses on the kind of phase shift in which a physical substance is transformed into another albeit upgraded physical substance. But I like the comments made about the theory in *Inner Alchemical*, which deals with transubstantiation of elements," Hermione said. She knew she was close, so close, but it still eluded her. "If it can work with basic elements, why not with more complex objects?"

"You don't think we've come far enough using charms to give the characteristics to the object after transfiguring it?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I know that Professor McGonagall is really impressed with the improvement we've made to the transfiguration of an inanimate object to a fully animated object, but it's still only an animated figure. Although it's great that it holds its shape instead of changing back immediately afterward. It's like being that close," she said, holding up her hand with her thumb and index finger an inch apart, "and yet not there at all." She sat down and crossed her arms, thinking.

"At least we've already been given credit for that improvement," Ginny said with a smile. "All we have to do is report our findings for validation except that Luna and Wendlynne have already duplicated it, didn't they? So, in a sense, it's been validated. And Alestra, Jack and Ernie said they'd try it too. So if they can demonstrate it for Professor McGonagall as well, she only has to sign off on Luna's and Wendlynne's validation and indicate that the others have replicated it as well, and we will be published! *Again!*" She straightened her arms as she squeezed her hands together, making her shoulder hitch. "Imagine, me I *mearus* published. I can hardly believe it."

Both girls turned when the door to the room opened. "Severus!" Hermione exclaimed as he walked in, delighted to see him. "What a nice surprise."

"I came to see how you are progressing," he said, walking up to the first work table. He peered into the cauldrons cooling on the rack, nodding in approval at each of the nine potions they'd finished so far today on the table: the six batches of the Lachrymose Draughts, which they'd both finished three each, and Ginny's three batches of Dingus Potion. The six batches of Luculent Potions they'd brewed earlier during their revision break and right through lunch were bottled and ready to be marked by Professor Reynolds as well. Hermione's three Dingus Potions were still simmering, needing only ten minutes before they too would be set to the side, and she could start in on the Banville's Insouciance Concoction. Hermione checked her watch; she still had just enough time to finish them before curfew.

"You're still brewing three at a time, I see," he said finally, turning to face them.

"It's just as easy to brew three cauldrons as it is to do one," Hermione said, walking over to him.

He shook his head. "No, Hermione, it isn't. Most cannot master the advanced skill necessary for the timing, and their ingredient preparation becomes too sloppy to achieve an acceptable result."

She looked at him in confusion, even though he'd just given them a compliment of sorts, and he chuffed a laugh at her. "Most students can barely manage one cauldron at a time, let alone two even while working in pairs. But both of you have been doing what's only taught to protégés during a journeyman level apprenticeship. More impressive is the fact you've mastered the ability on your own and without close instructional supervision while developing the skill." Ginny sat up straighter, and Hermione smiled in delight, both pleased by the comment they took to be a huge compliment. "You do know that you don't have to validate every potion in my book?"

"Yes," Hermione drawled out slowly as Ginny said, "That's the goal."

He laughed, a deep, hearty laugh. "Reginald said you were trying to, but I didn't believe him until I saw his list of the ones you've completed." He turned to Ginny. "If you wanted to, Ginevra, I would be happy to extend to you an apprenticeship over the summer. I'm sure Hermione would love to continue working with you, if you chose to accept."

"Oh my gosh, *really*? You never accept apprentices!" Ginny exclaimed. "I know that Penelope Pentwater's brother wanted to..." She paused at his raised eyebrow. "Yes. Yes, of course I want to."

"Good. I'll fill out the forms tonight and outline my expiations and provisions. Think of what conditions you feel are necessary, if any, and give them to me, and I'll draft a suitable contract," he said and turned to Hermione, who was setting up three more cauldrons on her work table. "How much longer will you be?"

She was touched by the tone of concern in his voice. "I wanted to start the Banville's Insouciance Concoction now," Hermione said, turning to face him and saw the minute relaxing of his mouth, almost a moue of disappointment. "I could just brew some Kibitzer Potions that only takes an hour and a half." She'd only be a few steps behind Ginny if she started now, and Ginny already had the ingredients out on her worktable. This way they'd have the validation on the Kibitzer Potion completed tonight well tomorrow after Professor Reginald signed off on it.

"I'll oversee your brewing," he said, taking his robe off as he walked to the cloak stand to hang it up.

Ginny's eyebrows went up as her eyes widened, and Hermione shrugged. Normally Severus made brief visits when he checked on their progress, making cursory glances at their work and nods of approval. High praise indeed, coming from him. He would then bid Ginny a good evening and comment with a soft smile that he'd see Hermione later when she returned to their rooms. He rarely, if ever, stayed to observe them, trusting their brewing skills as much as Professor Reynolds did, although their professor's visits were always much longer.

Hermione set to work, oddly comfortable under Severus' observant gaze, especially after having him watch her for six years as his student. His pose was more relaxed than he'd been in his classroom, and when alone with her and Ginny, he was less reserved, more like the wizard she'd come to know.

Ginny hopped up when her timer went off. She peered into the first cauldron of Kibitzer Potion and nodded in satisfaction. She picked up her knife and one of her honking daffodil bulbs. "If you keep the point of your blade down, it will be easier to make your slices even, and you'll be able to slice it faster," Severus said, peering over her shoulder.

Ginny cocked her head and did as directed, smiling as the blade sliced through her bulb. "Thank you," she said, already picking up her second bulb.

He placed a hand on her wrist. "The bulb has to go in immediately after slicing. They dry quickly, and the interaction to the ingredients in your cauldron will be better if the cut edges are moist."

Ginny set down her knife and did as told. She smiled as she stirred, pleased with the reaction. "Wow, thanks," she said, then quickly resumed cutting the second bulb.

Severus watched her do the same step for the second batch, and his lip curved when Ginny gently dropped the slices in. He then turned his attention to Hermione. He watched both of them closely, but never hovered over their shoulder, and he was less cynical and detached, seemingly more interested in their techniques and gave them small pointers as they progressed. When Ginny finished her potion, she lowered her flame and settled at the desk she'd been using to finish reading on the chapter she'd started in *Transubstantiation in Alchemy*.

"Severus?" Ginny asked when he sat on the edge of another desk.

"Yes," he replied without turning his head from watching Hermione slice her sawfly larvae.

"How did you come up with the substitution of the honking daffodil bulbs in the Dingus Potions and the Raillery Elixir for the daffodil bulbs we normally use in our Potions lessons?" she asked, and he glanced at her quickly. "I mean, you were our age, weren't you, when you wrote that in your Potions book?"

"I was in my fourth year, actually. That book was my mother's, so it was in my trunk when I started school. In fact my school trunk had once been my uncle's, so it contained quite a few of his books as well. I had a friend in school who loved Potions as much as I did, and we'd experiment together." He paused, looking around. "In an old potions lab not unlike this one."

Hermione knew he was speaking about Lily, but remained quiet, listening intently while still focusing on her potions.

"The common daffodil works fine, but the magical quality of the honking variety enhanced the potion," he explained. "So I tried it on several potions to see what would happen. Mostly the results were unfavorable, except in potions that affect speech."

Hermione understood why it might work so well in potions that affected speech in some way or another since honking daffodils were considered 'vocal' nose makers.

"I wanted to brew the Flibbertigibbet Elixir to use on a... friend, and I didn't have a daffodil in my potions kit, but remembered that there were honking daffodils in the greenhouses," he continued, smirking smugly at Hermione's stunned expression. "I discovered that it worked quite well in the Kibitzer Potion as well. I slipped that one to Pettigrew at lunch. Retaliation and it worked very well. So I tried exchanging the bulb in the Dingus Potions and the Raillery Elixir. It did not work well in the Circumlocution Draught or Luculent Potion."

"How did you discover the technique of using the flat side of the blade to squash the sopophorous beans instead of cutting them?" Ginny asked, watching Hermione pick up her *Miraculotuberum*, a caudex-forming succulent from Canada.

"Hermione, use a Bubble-Head Charm before slicing," Severus suggested and then cast his own charm. Ginny quickly cast the charm on herself and then on Hermione, since her wand was in her bag across the room. "I wish you'd told us that *before* I sliced mine," she said, her voice muffled by her bubble as she watched Hermione slice the large bulb. "I hated the bitter taste that formed in my mouth and the sulfurous smell excluding from the plant is awful."

Severus shrugged as he watched Hermione. "Every student should experience it at least once," he said with a smirk.

Hermione rolled her eyes, dicing the slices of the bulb as Ginny asked, "And the wriggling tubers from the snargaluff pods? How did you come up with the idea to add that to the Spattergroit Potion after the flysucker moss?"

"I discovered that snargaluff tubers enhance the moss quite by coincidence in my seventh year," he said, but there was an edge to his voice. "There was an... accident in the classroom. Someone thought it would be funny... My partner and I were both ahead of the others, and I'd just finished stirring the moss into my potion when my potion had become contaminated with some of the tubers. However, the potion settled in the cauldron, and the color hue became more vibrant, so I urged my partner to use some of the tubers on my worktable in hers both of our potions turned out exceptionally well, but until lately, my discovery hasn't been validated, even though it can cure the early to mid-stages of spattergroit."

For some reason Hermione immediately thought of James Potter or Sirius Black, and said the names softly to herself as she measured out four ounces the diced bulb into each of her potions.

"Yes," Severus said, his tone suddenly sounding curt. Hermione turned to look at him, but his expression had become carefully guarded. "Well, you seem to have things well under control here," he said abruptly.

Ginny ended her charm. "Wait," she called out.

"You are almost done," he said coolly, and Hermione wondered why he'd become upset, unless he felt embarrassed about having admitted to the harassment he'd endured as a student. "Bottle up your samples and leave them on the table. Reginald will check them in the morning."

Ginny removed Hermione's charm as she walked up to him. "Thank you, Severus, for the help."

"You're welcome," he replied, and his posture relaxed somewhat. He looked over at Hermione. "Come up soon."

She nodded, seeing a momentary flicker in his dark eyes, almost a pleading look, before his expression became neutral again. "I will. Right after we clean up in here," she promised.

His lips quirked into a small smile. He glanced down at Ginny, who was pointedly examining the color of their potions on the other worktable across the room, then looked at Hermione lovingly. His hand lifted, almost as if he was about to touch her, but then it dropped to his side. "Don't be long," he said softly.

"I won't," she replied, smiling up at him. He nodded and turned away, and she watched him, still smiling, as he swept from the room.

"Maybe I should've given you some privacy," Ginny said, smiling knowingly at her.

Hermione shook her head. "No, it's all right. He doesn't like public demonstrations of affection."

"As long as he's affectionate enough in private, I suppose it's okay. Although... that was a fairly affectionate moment between you two, especially for him," Ginny teased, making Hermione blush. "I have to admit, he was quite personable, tonight." Ginny's expression became serious. "You don't suppose the prankster in his Potions lesson was Harry's father, do you?"

"Or Sirius Black," Hermione admitted. "I know they were not fond of each other back then."

"*Fond*? About as *fond* of each other as Harry is was toward Malfoy," Ginny stated. "Well, when they were in school. It's different now, isn't it? They are almost... well, more than just cordial toward each other but not quite friends yet either. I was surprised when we were invited to play Quidditch over the holiday."

"I was glad you came," Hermione said, turning back to finish her potion.

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When Hermione entered the sitting room, Severus was standing by the window with a mug in his hand, gazing outside into the distance. She walked up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his back.

"Are you finished for the night?" he asked softly without turning around.

Hermione nodded and felt him place his free hand over hers. "Yes, for the most part."

"What more did you need to do tonight?" he asked, his tone sounding tired.

She smiled. Maybe she could put off her school work for one evening. She had been diligent enough in her homework that it wouldn't put her too far behind. Besides they hadn't had any real time together lately, what with her projects and the extra homework her teachers had heaped on them to prepare the seventh-years for their N.E.W.T.s. "Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow." She felt him relax and knew that was what he'd wanted her to say. "I wanted to thank you for offering an apprenticeship to Ginny and me," she said, and he turned to face her. "I'm so looking forward..." she started to say, but the words died at the look on his face.

"Ginevra, Hermione. It's not customary to take your wife on as an apprentice." He seemed to pause as she took in what he was implying. "I you and I will have many opportunities to brew together if that is what you wish, but I had thought, considering your obvious gifts in Transfiguration, Charms and Arithmancy, you'd want to apprentice to either Minerva or Septima."

"But not with you," she said, disappointed. Her eyes dropped down to his buttons, and she exhaled deeply.

He tipped her head up to look at him. "It's not that I wouldn't give you an apprenticeship it's not appropriate not formally. However, informally, I had no intention of excluding you," he said, and her disappointment immediately faded. "My offer to Ginevra must follow a certain formality, so that my intentions are quite clear and above reproach, both for myself and for her sake."

That she understood, considering all the gossip she and Severus had endured in the last year, he'd want to make sure there were no misunderstandings.

"You, on the other hand, I may take advantage of in any way you'll allow me to," he said in his most silky drawl as he leaned down and then kissed her.

"And what way might that be?" she asked as she wrapped her arms around him again.

"Minx," he breathed heavily, his mouth claiming hers. Hermione closed her eyes, lost in the moment, as he deepened the kiss. His tongue teased hers; she teased his back. He nipped at her lip; she rose up to her toes to kiss him ardently. His hand moved to cup her jaw, and her school robe fell off her shoulders. She felt heady from his kisses and swooned slightly in his arms as his hands clasped her jumper and began edging it upward.

She broke away long enough to raise her arms, allowing him to pull it off her. "We always seem to wear too much clothing," she complained, trying to unfasten his buttons quickly.

Suddenly a ripple feeling slid down her front, and his *and* her buttons all unfastened with a swish of his finger. "You really have to teach me that one," she said, pushing his coat and shirt off his body, inhaling at the sight of his bare chest and the sudden realization that his trousers had unfastened as well.

"Really?" he purred with a teasing glint in his dark eyes as he peeled her blouse and let it fall on the floor. "And have you undress me at will?"

"Naturally," she said, sliding her fingers into the waistband of his pants and trying to push them down. "Why not?"

Her skirt dropped to her ankles. "Impertinent witch," he said, backing her up. His wand flew to his hand, and he made a swish with it aimed at the coffee table, making it widen and elongate considerably, significantly larger than her old dorm bed.

Hermione shook her head, saying, "No, the sofa; it's softer."

He scowled at her, then with a swish and a reverse flip of his wand, he made the rug slip out from under the table and transform into the large, very thick and plushy lamb wool rug like he'd made before. "Better?" he asked as the rug settled on the table.

"It'll do," she replied, gripping his bottom.

He growled as his mouth claimed hers again and proceeded to back her up again to his makeshift pallet. However, when Hermione's bumped the table, he paused, cupping her face with his hands and looking deep into her eyes. The intensity of his gaze sent shivers through her, but he bent slightly and lifted her up, placing her gently on the makeshift bed. "You are so beautiful," he said, his voice thick with lust. His gaze followed his hands as they roamed down her body in soft caresses that inflamed her desire for him and sent more chills through her. She watched him as he examined her. He lowered his head and placed a soft kiss to her abdomen, then gently removed her knickers, staring at her with an intense desire as she opened her legs to him. He leaned over her, hands on either side of her hips and inclined his head to her groin.

He stroked her slowly with his tongue, then made small circles on her clit, causing her to jolt at the sensation. "Please..." she moaned.

"Please what," he purred against her clit, increasing the feelings tenfold with the vibration of his voice.

"I need you," she gasped. "Please..."

He moved up her body, making small kisses and nips on her skin, then unfastened her bra with his teeth. "Beg," he said, taking one nipple in his mouth.

"I am aren't I?" she gasped as he switched breasts and flicked her nipple with his talented tongue.

"Open wider," he said and sucked on her nipple as she complied, bending her legs and letting her knees fall as wide as she could. His fingers caressed her, feeling the moisture between her legs, and she felt his tip rub at her entrance. "Yes?"

"Gods, *Yes! Now*," she cried out, whimpering as he slid in, backed off and pushed into her a little farther. "Severus, in, please, in..."

His slow thrusts and long withdrawing stokes became a sensual rhythmic dance. Hermione's knees closed on either side of his hips, making it easier to move with him as she undulated under him, tightening her hips as he pulled back and trying to push up into him as he plunged into her. His breath like hers was ragged, her heart was beating rapidly, and still he continued. He leaned down on one elbow and kissed her softly as he pulled her leg up over his hip. The angle of his body shifted with this new position, and it increased her pleasure. The build toward her own orgasm began to finally come, slowly, a thrumming increase that tauntingly promised but refused to come. She moved more aggressively, kissing his chin, stroking his body, anything to spur him on. He increased the tempo of his movements gradually, and she cried out needing more, wanting more. As if provoked by her need, her determination to quicken their pace, the pulsing in her increased, surging outward slowly and wider through her abdomen, filling her core. "Gods... yes, please... oh. Severusss," she gasped out between breaths.

"Come for me," he said softly. "Come with me."

"I can't," she mewled back; she so was close but unable to reach it.

"Don't think let it go," he said, plunging into her harder but maintaining the slower, long withdrawals. She moaned, inhaled deeply. "That's it, stop thinking about it," he said. He jerked, his movements losing the rhythm. "Come, Hermione."

She was about to say *I can't*, but she was, a water-like running release that seemed to pour from her, growing tighter as it surged downward. "Yes, ah... Yes," he grunted, "I can't... Hermione, I I'm going to come," between thrusts.

He gripped her hip, holding her tightly, and grunted, exhaling as he dove into her, pushing to bury his penis as deeply as he could in quick thrusts. She cried out, gasping as the strokes raked his pubic hairs on her clit and his penis hit a spot inside her that sent shocks through her and shivers to her spine.

His head dropped to her shoulder as his breathing slowed to normal. She ran her fingers down his back, smiling at the feel of sweat on his skin. "You're sweaty," she stated, feeling a drop fall on her nose.

"So are you," he said, shifting his weight and letting her close her legs. She still throbbed, still could feel the phantom sensations of him inside her. "Are you sleepy?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No?" he asked, lying down and wrapping his arm around her.

"No," she replied, closing her eyes in peaceful bliss.

Neither of them noticed when Mispy, shaking her head at the pair, skillfully stuck a pillow under their heads with a snap of her fingers, then covered them with blankets and tucked them in on the makeshift bed.

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Severus had woken up that morning dreading the day ahead. Not only was it a Hogsmeade weekend it was also Valentine's Day. Both Lucius and Narcissa had sent him letters the previous week, offering advice if he should need it, but he'd politely declined, well, he was a bit more direct in his response to Lucius' offer. Severus had spent a week considering what to get Hermione and knew that something would be expected of him, some suitable token that expressed his affection for her. He'd scoffed at the idea of flowers, candy or jewelry, the typical tokens of affection, and he hadn't wanted to give her another book, even though he had gone to the bookshop anyway. Instead, he'd taken Lucius' suggestion of buying her something intimate and ordered a nice night slip and dressing robe from Persephone's Secrets in a creamy peach color that would look good with Hermione's skin tone and that he was looking forward to seeing her wear. Not that she'd have it on for long. He had also asked Narcissa to suggest a fragrance from her line of perfumes, remembering that Hermione had commented on Narcissa's perfumery business and her greenhouses. Both had arrived that morning, thankfully in his office not in the Great Hall, but he had yet to give them to her since Hermione had wanted an early start in the village.

He'd known why Hermione wanted to go to Hogsmeade; apparently her friend, Kazimir, would be there, and Hermione was eager to see him. Severus had been annoyed that morning that she'd taken an unusual amount of care with her appearance, wearing a soft green jumper over snug fitting black jeans and calf-length black boots and her persimmon scarf and gloves. The mere sight of her derriere in those jeans tucked into her black boots set his own blood afire. But since there had been considerable snowfall this week, she was wearing her plain black cloak as well, so the Bulgarian would not be seeing Hermione's perfect bottom in those snug Muggle jeans.

He was actually looking forward to spending the afternoon shopping with her considering that, with the exception of the confectioners and Gladrags, they liked the same shops, and unlike the last Hogsmeade weekend, he'd have her to himself. Both Luna Longbottom and Ginevra had requested overnight privileges to spend the weekend with their wizards, and Severus had approved the requests, knowing that if Ginevra was in Hogsmeade with Harry all weekend, he'd have more time with Hermione. The



only hindrance to his plans was how much time Hermione would want to spend with her Bulgarian friend.

He pocketed his black birch wand with the phoenix feather core in his halter because the wand still felt more intrinsically friendly and supple than his original wand, and considering the amount of use he'd had with it working on the Médusa Potion, it admittedly felt stronger as well. 'Black birch, twelve and three quarters, strong yet supple. The phoenix feather core is from Dumbledore's own familiar, given to me just before he died,' he remembered Ollivander telling him with a mysterious smile the day he'd purchased it.

Many of the students were congregating in the Entrance Hall, giving their names to either Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick before leaving to walk down to Hogsmeade when Severus escorted Hermione down the stairs. Two of Hermione's friends, Miss Warwick and Miss Jameson, greeted Hermione warmly in the Entrance Hall, each wishing her and Severus good day before they walked away with Mr. Penwalter and Mr. Randall through the huge oak doors. Her other friend, Miss Blackpool, had been granted leave to go with Mr. Bronte to visit one of his elderly relatives, and Minerva suspected that the couple would be engaged shortly, if the rumors were true.

The walk from the castle was pleasant. A thick layer of snow covered the ground, but the sun was out, and the sky was clear. As they walked to the village, Hermione eagerly talked with him about her Transfiguration project and the difficulty she'd been having. He knew from conversations with Septima that Hermione had made huge strides in Arithmancy with her calculations for the project; and she would be published for disproving Penhallow's fifth principal exception to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, something that would make quite a stir among those in the field of Transfiguration. Nevertheless, he knew that Hermione's frustration in her work steamed from the fact she was trying to do something impossible, and she hated admitting failure.

It had been arranged to have increased security in the village. Aaron Brodes and Maurice Duncan were standing sentinel outside the school gates with Hagrid, and Aurors Fairley and MacNaughton were watching the students enter the village at the Hogsmeade station. Fairley nodded to Severus in greeting as he and Hermione walked by. But Severus had expected a stronger Auror presence in the village; instead there were mostly the trainees and their instructors standing sentinel. Auror Raphael Sparks and his trainees, Cho Chang and Imelda Drake stood outside of Honeydukes, and from where he stood Severus could see Hayward Blume and Ronald were standing between Gladrags and Scrivenshaft's with Auror Darrel Cattouse and Seamus Finnigan.

"Severus, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

He turned to look at her, but his gaze stopped when he saw Harry with Ginevra talking to Neville and Luna Longbottom before they disappeared into Zonkos. "Nothing of import," he said, wondering if there would be more Aurors near the Hog's Head or the Three Broomsticks.

"You're frowning," she said, drawing his attention again.

"Remembering something," he said, not intending for it to sound so dismissive. He tried smiling at her and hoped it didn't look strained. "Where to first?"

She cocked her head and naturally pointed to Honeydukes. "Lead the way," he said, hoping he sounded jovial enough. He scanned the street. He couldn't tell if there were any Aurors at the end of the street or not.

After Honeydukes, they perused the items for sale in Timothy's Tinkers. Timothy and Mary Tingley were new to the village, and he had opened his business to sell or repair pots, kettles, pans and cauldrons as well as having a few tankards and pewter bowls displayed in the window. Hermione expressed a desire to go to Scrivenshaft's next and then the bookshop. "When are you expecting to meet your friend, the Bulgarian?" he asked, opening the door as they exited the Tinker's.

"At lunch," Hermione said, turning to wait for him since he held the door open for two elderly ladies to enter. "He said that he and Tatiana will be here at noon. He wanted to meet up at the Three Broomsticks. You don't mind, do you?"

"No," he said, although he wanted to tell her he did in fact mind, but she placed her hand on his arm and leaned into him, smiling happily, which gave him a sense of reassurance. They proceeded casually down the street, stopping occasionally to peer at a window. But halfway through the village, a large, red firework exploded up in the air, followed by another and a third. A small group of students, mostly fourth-years, stepped out from between two of the shops, walking in front of Seymour Wilkes. Severus drew his wand, but Wilkes simply sneered at him from behind the students, who stood facing Severus with blank expressions on their faces and glassy eyes, effectively blocking Severus from making a clean shot.

Two more groups of students, this time hustled out of the shops by shopkeepers and shop assistants, moved into the street, mulling about confused, blocking Severus from dealing with Wilkes. He shouted, "Get out of the way," as Hermione yelled, "Move - find cover!" and the students tried to run back into the shops, slipping and sliding on the icy walkways, but the shop workers stood in the doorways of their shops, staring blankly ahead, prevented them from gaining entrance. Wilkes fired at Severus, and he blocked the spell. Wilkes fired again, and Severus easily defended himself and Hermione from the spells but reluctantly fired each time he had the slightest opportunity of a clean shot, not wanting to hit the students. From the corner of his eye Severus could see that all the shops were evicting their customers, and most of the people filing into the street loitered about in confusion, some arguing with the shop personnel to let them back in.

Within the confusion, two more faces Severus recognized materialized in the crowd: Edward Scunthorpe was smirking maliciously at Severus, and Phillip Selwyn was leering at Hermione, both with their wands drawn. Selwyn sent up a shrilly whistling flare from his wand, and suddenly all the shopkeepers drew their wands, firing spells randomly into the crowd. Pandemonium broke out as the terrified students began screaming and crying, running for any available cover, only to be herded back into the street by the shop personnel, as the few adult shoppers in the village scrambled for cover as well. Many of the terrified students simply squatted together in the icy street, huddling together in groups with their arms over their heads and around each other.

Severus saw Maurice Geissler, normally a reserved wizard Severus knew, who provided two scholarships a year for Slytherin students, was firing spells recklessly at the terrified students, and further down the street, Justin Ferkel, a fishmonger from the wharf in Newport, moved cautiously down the street in Harry and Ginevra's direction. Ronald and Auror Blume were trying desperately to gain an advantage against the Hackney brothers, Tyrone and Thomas, shoving students and a rotund witch out of their way, and Ezekiel Stroup and Gordon Pikes were fighting with Finnigan and two seventh-year students, Delgado and Watson as Cattouse and Messrs. Peaks and Coppersmith tried to subdue a shop assistant from Scrivenshaft's who was firing wildly and out of control. As Severus tried to find a way out for the students while defending them from Wilkes' attack, Cho and Auror Sparks rushed forward, engaging Edward Scunthorpe and Phillip Selwyn in a wandfight. All around Severus students cowered in clusters, while others students continued to scramble for cover, running in circles, trapped within the battle.

Several of the older students were attempting to immobilize or hex the shopkeepers, trying to get them to move, but several of them ended up victims of the shopkeepers and fell to the ground. Severus backed up and tripped over a student, Byron Stewart, who was staring up with blank eyes, and was hit in the shoulder by a hex. However, Severus' defensive charm had knocked Wilkes into a stone wall, impacting his head on the bricks with a sickening crack, and the wizard fell to the ground out cold, although Severus had hit two of the students shielding him with the blast as well.

Behind him, Hermione went down on her knees by Imelda Drake, who was lying face down in the icy mud. Hermione's shield charm wavered, and she fired spell after spell at the wizard in the doorway of a shop across the street while seventh-years, Randell and Wevernthall fired spells at the shops as well, but Severus couldn't tell if Hermione had been hit or not.

Suddenly, Devon Runcorn appeared in the side of the street, his wand aimed at Hermione, but Severus was too busy trying to stop one of the shop assistants from Zonkos and a seamstress from Gladrags from hexing students uncontrollably to be able to do anything for Hermione. However, she was protecting herself with shield charms that kept fluctuating under the onslaught of Runcorn's and a clerk's curses. Down the street, Severus could see Harry and Ginevra approaching, their wands drawn, as the Longbottoms fought Phillip Brixton and the wizard from the post office, who likewise seemed to firing spells indiscriminately at anything that moved.

A large clusters of terrified students huddled in the street trying to shield themselves, but mostly their wands were shooting sparks, and a few of the ones at the edges of the group had apparently fallen. Severus hoped none of the students were dead.

"Hermione, get back," Harry shouted.

A lucky shot from Blake Blume's wand caused the Gladrags seamstress to fall face down, and Mr. Carlin, one of Hermione's revision partners, fired on the shop assistants

from Zonkos. Severus took aim at Runcorn, ready to fire a nasty curse at the wizard for attacking Hermione, but his spell collided with Harry's causing a huge spell blast that knocked several people to the ground, including Hermione. Harry turned in surprise as Severus took aim again, but he didn't have a clean shot at Runcorn, who was successfully making Hermione back away across the street with the onslaught of his spells.

Severus was ready to cast the Impediment Curse at the pair, hoping to hit Runcorn, but suddenly Harry looked at Severus with a wild look in his eyes, and the boy took aim at *him*. Already in mid cast, the incantation, "*Impedimenta*," forming from his mouth, Severus reacted, his wand flicking at Harry as Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus*." The spells jetted forth from their wands, and in one split second, Severus knew what Harry was about as the wand cores connected, although how Harry knew of his wand surprised him, unless Hermione or Ginevra had mentioned it to him but seeing Ginevra nodding as if pleased, he quickly realized it had been her.

Severus' wand vibrated with the intensity of the magical force, producing a bright, fiery gold beam that rose up, creating a fiery arch between them with large beads of light that began to travel through the connection. Without knowing why, since he'd neither experienced nor seen this phenomenon first hand, Severus mentally pushed at the beads, focusing his will to keep them away, fighting the intense vibration in his wand and arm, and the beads began to collect at the center. The next second, the center of the beam flared, then divided, creating arches and splinters that bent to the ground and crisscrossed around, forming a blazing cage that surrounded everyone in the street.

Within the cage, the frightened students ducked and covered their heads with their arms, many of them also shielding cowering classmates and friends with their bodies. The students caught on the outside, crouched tightly against the walls of the shops in small groups.

On the perimeters, several of the Death Eaters froze, gaping at the sight. But the Aurors on the outside of the cage, who were more focused on saving the innocent victims, took advantage of the distraction and all fired at once, making several of the Death Eaters and shopkeepers fall to the ground.

Harry yelled, "*Break it!* Severus, break it *now*," and Severus gathered his will, and seeing Harry do the same he forcibly pulled his wand up, and the connection broke, shattering the fiery cage with a resounding static pulse that sent those standing on the outside falling to the ground.

As Severus regained his breath, he and the Aurors and Auror trainees quickly gained their feet and started to subdue the remaining shopkeepers and shop assistants.

"Where's Phillip Selwyn?" Auror Sparks asked, looking around.

"He vanished," Mr. Carlin stated, pointing at the spot he'd last seen the wizard. "Looked like he used a Portkey."

Aurors Fairley and Brodes both cast the Portkey Detection Spell. Three funnel-shaped lights appeared that sunk in on themselves as they faded while two more small glowing points faded quickly. "Three."

"Five," Blume said and pointed to one of the vanishing points, "That was one of the Hackeny twins."

"And that one was Ferkle, I believe," Harry stated, indicating the vanishing third spot. "I remember him from the Green Afanc."

Aaron Brodes cast the Renuverating Charm on Auror Duncan as Auror Fairley checked on the shopkeepers that had fallen at Honeydukes while MacNaughton checked the shop assistant across the street. "Imperiused," Severus heard Sparkes say to Auror Blume and Ronald on his right.

"This one too," Blume said as Cho, Ronald and Finnigan checked on the students in the street, but Severus was scanning every face in the street, searching the crowds with a growing sense of panic.

"Where is Hermione?" Severus shouted, a rising sense of dread clawing at him as he turned around, looking for her, seeing Kazimir, Harry and Ginevra come running up to him with anxious looks of their own.

~ T B C ~>  
~~~~~o0o~~~~~

Author's notes:

I know, I know. But it got too long, and I had to stop*somewhere*! Okay, not really; but you have to know we'll find out what happened in the next chapter, right?

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, to Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

# The Colubridae Snake

Chapter 58 of 63

Hermione is captured. Can Severus save her or will he fall victim to the trap set for him?



~~~~~o 58 o~~~~~

The Colubridae Snake

Hermione had been amazed at Severus' ability to defend her and all the students as they had huddled together in terror in the street or ran madly in search of cover. Not that she hadn't been trying her best to do the same while defending the innocent, but it had been chaos, and the shop personnel blocking access to their shops while firing curses recklessly and without even aiming, as far as she could tell, exasperated the intensity of the situation. She had witnessed Severus take aim at Runcorn, his body

tense and his expression determined. She rolled to her side and clambered to her knees, firing off a defensive charm at the shop assistant in the doorway of the shop nearest her. Why the people of the shops were behaving this way frightened her, but she could only come to one conclusion: they were under the Imperius Curse. They simply had to be.

Runcorn fired again, and she lunged back, executing a shield, but she slipped on something pliable and thick in the mud. Hermione barely had time to realize it was an arm belonging to a girl with dark curly hair as she tried to gain her footing while protecting herself from the onslaught of spells. His fierce attack was making Hermione back away across the street, and she was beginning to become afraid for her life. She heard Severus snarl, "*Impedimenta*," the same time Harry shouted "*Expelliarmus*." She watched in horror as the spells collided; the intensity of the magical force made a resounding static pulse that sent those standing on the street flying backward and falling to the ground, herself included.

Hermione rose quickly, feeling a sharp twinge in her ankle that she ignored. Her thoughts were jumbled as she defended herself. She'd read about the phenomenon effects of the Priori Incantatem that could happen when two wands with the same core connected... but she still didn't understand why the Priori Incantatem had occurred, unless Severus' and Harry's wands were 'brothers' and they had aimed for each other. *Surely Severus and Harry wouldn't actually fight each other, unless... Did Harry and Severus know their wands shared cores from the same source? Was it possible Fawkes had bestowed Ollivander with another tail feather?*

She fired off a series of defensive charms at Wesley Gogarty, who ran Palladium Books, and Melania MacFusty, who owned Melania's Magical Gifts For All Occasions, while at the same time, rolling to duck the spell that Runcorn fired at her. She lunged again, barely missing Runcorn's curse, and dodged a spell from Wesley again, wondering why the kindly wizard book proprietor would be trying to curse her.

She finally managed to back away from the center of the street, finding a spot at the corner of Chaldean Arithmancy and Accounting, glad to have a solid wall to put at her back when a voice, cold and malicious, said, "Hello, girlie," behind her.

Before she even had the chance to turn or run away, she felt a strong hand grasp her arm, pulling her back against a hard male body. The next instant, a hand clasped her neck, his ring biting into her skin, and she felt the unmistakable yanking sensation behind her navel indicative of a Portkey's activation. In front of her, just before being sucked into the transportation void, she saw Runcorn holding a pair of glasses with a malicious gleam in his eyes and a satisfied smirk. The next instant, as soon as they'd landed on solid ground, the wizard holding her Apparated, sucking her into the squeezing-tight stream through space and distance with him. No sound came from her throat as she screamed, "Severus," in the suffocating transportation stream.

"Who are you?" she gasped, heaving and puffing to fill her lungs as soon as they landed in a dark space of roughly hewn stone. Fire ignited in several iron braziers behind the wizard, throwing the cavern into light, illuminating flowstones, stalactites and stalagmites, the last two creating eerie shadows and dark spaces. Hermione was unceremoniously shoved to the ground, and she immediately thought of her wand, realizing she no longer held it as her body became immobilized.

"Don't you know me? We have quite the history, you and I," the wizard standing over her said mockingly.

She looked up at him, surprised she could move her head. He crossed his arms with a look of pure hatred in his brown eyes as she gazed at him. He looked like a younger version of Antonin Dolohov... but scruffier, his face sharply angular, and his body thin in old robes that hung on him.

"No?" he taunted when she didn't immediately reply, looming over her threateningly. "Well let me enlighten you." His gaze swept over her with cruel a sneer. "Drogen Dolohov, at your...well, I'd say service, but it's *you* who will be serving *me*."

She heard the sound of boots on gravel and rough stone approach. "There you are," a male voice called out and a moment later, Devon Runcorn appeared, walking around some calcium carbonate formations and a dripstone column.

"Where have you been?" Drogen asked.

"Had to kill an Auror trainee first," Runcorn said with a smirk, his eyes glittering, making a large lump drop into Hermione's stomach.

Her first thought was, *Ron! Oh no, please not Ron.*

"So what do we do with her?" Runcorn asked contemptuously.

"She's entertainment until the real prize arrives," Drogen said with delicately intoned sarcasm as he made the braziers on the other side of the cavern ignite, casting the cavern in brighter light, illuminating thick iron bars that stood in the mouth of a deep hole or tunnel in the far wall and making what appeared to be a sinkhole or pit in the floor near the other side become more evident.

Hermione mentally screamed for Severus, although she didn't utter a sound.

There was a grunt and throaty gnarl from something behind the bars, and a snarling growl came from the pit, making Hermione's stomach turn in fear.

Runcorn laughed, a grating, savage sound as Drogen gave her a nasty smile, the murderous glower in his eyes undiminished as he glared at her.

~S~

"She was right here," Harry said, pointing past the students who were clambering to their feet or helping classmates stand, many of whom had been hit during the fight.

Severus turned, surveying the street. *They escaped by Portkeys. Portkeys are traceable. These wizards are seasoned fighters and survivors. They won't stay where they've landed...* He turned to Blume and asked, "The fifth; who was the fifth?"

"I don't know. I saw an oblong spot receding," Blume turned and pointed, "right there at the corner of Packard's shop. Whoever it was took someone with them, and they were the first to leave."

"Whoever it was took Hermione!" Harry said, his voice rising to almost shouting as he gaped around in near panic. "Cast the Portkey Tracking Charm and let's go..."

"Go to where, Potter?" Severus snarled in his best 'angry teacher' voice. "They know that Portkeys can be traced they'd have Apparated by now to God knows where."

Potter's mouth snapped shut. "Wha' did one of them take Hermione?" Ron asked as he and Cho and approached.

"*Isvinete*, I ask for knowing, who would takes Her-mi-oninny?" Hermione's Bulgarian friend asked, his wand held ready in his hand.

"It wasn't Runcorn; he wasn't close enough," Ronald said definitively.

"I know that. He was in the street, facing her," Severus snapped. He turned, searching his mind for any probable location. His mind kept telling him west-southwest, but that could be anywhere. It would be someplace that he knew, he was certain of it. If one of these men took her to Drogen, he'd want him to come find her. Well, they would certainly regret if he did.

Harry had pulled out a small leather book and opened it, revealing a magical tablet. "One of the Hackeny twins..."

"Tyrone. Thomas escaped," Ronald interjected as Severus stared at the site Blume had pointed out as if by pure willpower he could see where she lay bound and immobile.

"...Phillip Selwyn and Devon Runcorn they escaped..." Harry continued as if uninterrupted, checking the names on his tablet.

"I heard Edward Scunthorpe and Phillip Brixton were captured," Cho said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Catthouse and Finnigan got Ezekiel Stroup and Gordon Pikes, and I suppose you can add Justin Ferkle to your list."

Harry nodded, marking his tablet. "That leaves Dragen Dolohov, Jamie Dafoe and Gaspard Serkis as our fifth they are the only other Death Eaters on my list."

Severus catalogued the list. Dafoe was an idiot, Serkis a politician... Dragen was the only possibility, and he'd most likely planned the attack*They'll want to keep her alive.* Severus was certain about it; he knew with absolute conviction so far she was unhurt. *Hermione*, he mentally shouted. *I'll kill them, I swear it to you. If they hurt one hair on your head I'll kill them!*

Severus saw Miss Warwick bandaging a third-year's leg with Hermione's scarf. He walked over and snatched it from her, growling, "Give me that." He swept a small circle over the student's leg with his wand as he conjured a splint for the injured girl. "Miss Warwick, take Miss Hinckley to Madam Pomfrey." He turned away, staring down the street, southwest toward the Magical Pastiche & Potpourri.

"So we've narrowed the fifth person down to Dragen Dolohov, Jamie Dafoe or Gaspard Serkis," Ginevra stated. "Which still doesn't help us find *Hermione*."

Hermione's scarf was soaked and muddy. Severus fisted it in his hand. Normally, he could feel her when he wanted to know where she was*Where are you? Where did he take you?* He looked up in the direction his intuition indicated, facing west-by-southwest. The little voice in his head said,*Ireland*." The more he thought about it, the stronger it became, "*Cave... in Ireland*." The urge, like a faint persistent tug pulling at him, was telling him where she was.*Of course, the Bond our Bond.*

"Headmaster Snape," Kazimir said, trying to get Severus' attention, but Severus' focus was elsewhere.

Ireland had many caves with a range of geological foundations and passageways, but he knew it would not be one underwater*Like before; open your mind and let it tell you.* "Fermanagh, Ireland," Severus said as the thought came to him, the direction of his intuition getting stronger the harder he focused on wanting to get to Hermione. He turned to face the others. "She's in a cave in Fermanagh, Ireland."

"How could you...?" Cho asked as Harry and Fairley all stared back at him in absolute disbelief.

"It's the Bond, isn't it?" Ginevra asked, and Severus nodded as he considered his next move.

Apparating to her he'd arrive in a trap. He knew with absolute certitude that she was in a troll's lair in Fermanagh, Ireland. "Fairley, will you and Blume come with me?"

"Yes, of course," the Auror replied, moving to his side, and several voices all jumped in at once, shouting, "I'm going," "I'm going, too," and "Take me with you."

"Pochakaite molia, I will go," Kazimir said as Ronald declared, "I'm going it's Hermione *ve have to!*"

"We can't all go," Harry said as he turned to Ronald. "Severus can only take two of us..."

"Three," Severus interjected. "But I'm leaving *now*."

Harry was saying, "So if he takes Fairley, me and Cho," but Ron shook his head, "then you can follow using the Deluminator." Ronald's eye widened as he reached down and dug around in his pocket.

"Then me and Sparks will go with Weasley," Blume stated. "Then we can all coordinate once we get there."

But Severus wasn't listening, having suddenly felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his chest*Hermione!* He had to go now! "We're wasting time she doesn't have," he ground out forcibly, cutting off Blume, making the wizard on his left side look at him in annoyance. Severus grabbed Fairley's wrist and Blume's arm, the two Aurors standing closest to him, as he quickly and deliberately focused his determination on the destination the Bond was urging him to. Fairley's arm relaxed as Blume moved closer, both men preparing for the strangling sucking sensation of side-along Apparition. From the corner of his eye, Severus saw Harry grab his sleeve, and he mentally nodded, preparing for the extra energy of Apparating with three grown wizards.

"Not without me, you don't," Severus heard a female voice say in the back of his mind, but Severus was already turning, releasing his magic and letting the Bond take him to Hermione in the same manner he used to allow the Dark Mark to teleport him.

Normally he didn't mind the suffocatingly cold squeezing sensation of the transrelocation stream, but he could feel the additional strain of the added weight as he shot through the long distance.

They arrived on an uneven rocky surface in a dimly lit area. Jets of curse lights and spell projection bursts came at them a second later. Fairley fell immediately, and Severus and Blume barely had time to erect their shields. Behind him he heard Harry call out, "Ron! *Expelliarmus*," or "Ron, *Impedimenta*," repeatedly as he cast his spells, mimicked by Ginevra.

They were boxed in. "Ginevra, stop parroting Potter and defend yourself," Severus snarled. *Four. There are four sources five Portkey residual locations. Where the fuck is Hermione?* The voice in his head told him to run down the passageway to his left, but he concentrated on the wizard to his right as Blume took charge of the one on Severus' left side, and he hoped Harry and Ginevra held on long enough against the two behind him until help arrived.

~H~

If Runcorn had thought that his Cruciatus was unbearable to the point of breaking her, he was mistaken. Well almost. But his curse held nothing compared to the vengeance she'd felt under Bellatrix's wand. Still Hermione's body ached; the ropes binding her cut deeply into her skin as she writhed and screamed in pain, and when she heaved and gasped to draw air into her lungs, her body protested and spasmed excruciatingly.

"Enough," Dragen said. The ropes binding her torso and arms loosened, but only long enough to give her a flicker of hope before they tightened around her wrists and forearms. She felt herself hoisted up, pulled by her bound ankles and by both wrists as the ends of the ropes shot out to imbed themselves securely into the rock and a speleothem that rose from the floor. The ropes tightened, suspending her helplessly over the pit. Her head fell back, and if she twisted her head slightly, she could see down a short ways into the dark void below her. She could smell something awful coming from the direction of the bars, a horrible combination of mildew, moldy socks, excrement and urine.

"So which shall it be...?" Dragen asked, his voice trailing off. "Oh, I know." Dragen cast a few Slicing Hexes at Hermione's jumper, tearing it to expose her to his cruel gaze, then flicked his wand at the cave ceiling, making sharply pointed straw stalactites rain down on her, some of the tubular stalactites cutting and stabbing her skin, and the beast below her bellowed in annoyance as Hermione cried out helplessly.

Her eyes widened as the beast down in the dark hole clawed the walls and snarled in hunger, and she could hear the sounds of sticks or bones and the crystalized shards crunch under the beast's feet.

~R~

Ron watched in horror as his sister lunged for Snape's robes and vanished along with the others. He clicked his Deluminator restlessly as he waited to hear his name

called. He hated this part, the waiting. All around him the Aurors were wrapping up the scene from the fight while Cho, Seamus and Kazimir waited anxiously beside him. "As soon as I hear my name, the ball of light will appear, and I'm leaving, no waiting," he told them.

"We know how it works, Ron," Seamus said with a roll of his eyes as Cho nodded solemnly, ready to spring into action.

"Can you carry four?" Kazimir asked, and Ron looked at him stunned. "Four. Can you Apparate four?" the Bulgarian said, making a gesture that indicated the group.

"I've only ever done three, never four," Ron admitted as Sparks looked up when Cattouse and Brodes approached MacNaughton in the middle of the street. "Those two are Imperiused in fact all of the shop assistants seem to be Imperiused," MacNaughton was saying. "None of them recall anything. One minute they were helping customers, then the next thing they know, they felt compelled to herd everyone out of their shops and start firing on people."

Kazimir nodded and pulled a gold medallion on a double chain from his tunic, snapped it in half, and handed one half to Cho. "This was gift for Her-mi-oninny and her fiancé. I can follow this. We use them in Bulgaria to, kakvo, how you say... come with you no..."

"I get the idea. What do I do?" Cho asked as Bill Weasley limped up to the group.

"Hold it," Kazimir said to Cho, making a fist, "and think to have me come with your magic." Cho nodded, putting the chain over her head.

"We were waylaid on South Court between the Hog's Head and the second hand shop," Bill Weasley said. "John Dawlish is down, but Richard Maygora is taking him to St. Mungo's. Is Macmillan all right? I saw him go down."

Ron inhaled in anticipated fear of the answer, clicking the Deluminator in nervous habit as he watched Auror Cattouse shake his head. "He didn't make it. They were fighting for keeps, mostly using the some nasty curses or the Killing Curse."

*Ron!*

The sound of his name caught Ron off guard for a second, distracting him as Cho said, "He always said that fighting Dark wizards was the most important thing we were doing, even back at school," beside him, wiping a tear from her cheek.

*Ron!*

Ron inhaled as he heard his name, but his thumb slipped on his Deluminator, "He could be quite pompous at times, but his heart and loyalties were in the right place," Seamus said sadly, turning to look at Ron and Cho. "He would've made a good Auror."

*Ron!*

He clicked the Deluminator again, seeing the ball of light emanate from the top. "This is it," he breathed. "Get ready." Cho and Seamus grabbed onto him as the ball of light touched his chest and sunk into his heart. Ron turned on the spot letting the ball of light take him to Harry and his sister.

~S~

The loud crack of Apparition filled the chamber just as Severus and Ginevra fired their spells, followed immediately by Harry's Stunner, then Blume and two Death Eaters simultaneously fired, filling the passageway with cracks and blasts. Immediately he heard Miss Chang, Weasley and Mr. Finnigan shout, "*Expelliarmus*," at the same time. Summarily, Severus fired a Blasting Curse at the location of the wizard he'd been dueling. Rock blasted from the corner, but beside him, Blume took one in the chest and fell to his knees, then toppled over.

Severus turned, fired another Blasting Curse, the same time Weasley yelled, "*Expelliarmus*," and Mr. Finnigan shouted, "*Impedimenta*." The resulting blast sent rock and dust flying through the chamber as Severus cast the strongest shield charm he could to protect the young people standing with him. "Where the hell is Sparks?" he snarled, turning and casting a nasty curse in the other direction.

"He's with Hermione's friend," Ron shouted as Cho, said, "He's coming with Kazimir Maschke." Ginevra and Finnigan all tried to disarm the two wizards still fighting them. One Death Eater was cornered in an alcove in the direction that Severus needed to go, where he could feel Hermione's presence, but the Death Eater had a huge rock formation to duck behind. The other was still firing from a dark recess or crevice in the rock wall in the other direction.

"On three, blast those bastards," Severus snarled. He took aim, "Three!" and cast a Whipping Curse at the space behind the rock as the others divided and bombarded the wizards with spells. Severus took off running, not caring if his boots made thunderous clomps on the cave floor. He had to get to Hermione. He heard someone running after him and hoped it was one of the trainees.

He veered with the curve in the wall, moving cautiously around some stalactites and stalagmites, watching the darkness fade, indicating a light source, and moved closer to the rock and calcium carbonate formations, hearing heavy breathing behind him. Up ahead, Hermione screamed. The light grew brighter, illuminating more of the passage the closer he got. Severus added a Cushioning Charm to his boots and moved forward along the flowstone and around a large stalactite and stalagmite. He stopped when he saw the glimpse of a brazier up ahead in the gap between a speleothem formations and a thick dripstone column.

"Why are you stopping?" Potter asked, taking cover behind a stalagmite.

"Never rush in blindly like a cowboy that only works in America," Severus sneered as softly as he dared. Hermione made an agonizing scream again, and it sent a knife through Severus' heart.

"They are torturing her," Potter hissed, keeping up with Severus as he moved forward more cautiously along the calcium carbonate formations and flowstones.

Severus lowered his voice magically so only Potter could hear him. "Very astute. Now hush and do as I say." Severus strained to listen for sounds, any indication of how many people were up ahead. He heard a man's humorless laugh, followed by a male voice saying, "*Crucio*," then another scream by Hermione, but he had no idea if it was the same wizard or not or how many there were.

"My turn," another amused but impatient male voice said that Severus recognized as Runcorn.

*Not good.* He liked to torture and he was a good fighter.

"We don't want her dead, idiot," another male voice said, but not one Severus could immediately identify.

"I know that," Runcorn said.

*Two. But there could be another.* Severus grabbed Potter's tunic as the boy tried to rush past him for the gap between the calcium carbonate formations and the dripstone column. "Wait! And learn," he hissed softly. "I can *feel* Hermione I can *feel* her pain. I *could* take us directly into the chamber in an instant, but it will alert the men in there. I only hear two, but there could be others. *They* will have the advantage they will try to kill us, but they *will* kill her first."

Potter nodded in understanding. Severus turned his head slightly, still watching the gap for shadows. "If we do this and there are three, she's good as dead. If there are only two..."

"But we have the element of surprise," Potter interrupted.

"No, we don't. They are expecting us. It will only take them one, maybe two seconds to realize, and then they will fire. Don't disarm. I know you think that is your best option but it's not. Use the Defensive Charm or the Stunning Curse and cast it with every ounce of magical strength you have, and fire it repeatedly until your opponent falls. You understand me? Be unrelenting."

"Yes," Potter said, nodding.

Severus turned his entire focus on the chamber ahead. "And silence your shoes."

He felt, not heard, Potter comply. The boy was learning. "What's keepin' the others?" he heard Runcorn ask as Hermione screamed again, making Severus' teeth clench and his chest hurt in response. "They should be here by now."

"Probably busy," the second male said as Severus moved cautiously toward the dripstone column. "Had enough, Mudblood? Maybe we should we try something different?"

~H~

Hermione's head fell back as Dragen's Cruciatus stopped. Tears ran down her face into her hair, and her body spasmed cruelly as it hung stretched out over the pit. By now she'd identified the creature below. The beast had been moving around the sides of the pit, snapping and snarling in frustration, it's growls increasing in hunger as it tried to reach the 'meal' suspended above him. Hermione had caught glimpses of two extremely sharp, golden horns, a flattened nose like a bull's and sharp teeth for rending flesh. A graphorn.

Her screams had also awakened the creatures (since it turned out to be two of them) behind the bars, a pair of mountain trolls, the female much smaller than the more aggressive male, possibly a father-daughter pair. The female seemed resigned to the cage, sitting hunched up beside the bars, but the male was not, reaching his arm through the bars or trying to pull them apart. Runcorn took delight in firing Static Jinxes at the pair, especially the male, just to provoke them.

Hermione tried to relax, as much as she could stretched out and suspended as she was. In her pain-addled mind she pleaded *Severus, please help me*, as Dragen paced along the pit, admiring his handiwork. She thought she could feel him, sense Severus approaching, but each time she dared hope, fresh tears fell from her eyes.

"It's too quiet," Runcorn said, sounding bored as he cast a fireball at the cage, making the trolls leap back in fright. "Maybe I ought to go check."

"No," Dragen snapped. "If they enter the cave from the mouth, the Devil's snare and Acromantulas will dispense with them. If they Apparate, our brothers will kill them on sight. We just have to wait."

"We just have to wait," Runcorn mimicked. "I'm tired of waiting."

*But Severus will be ready, he'll expect a trap* she thought. In her heart she could feel him as if he were near, close somehow *He found me before*, she kept reminding herself. *At the Malfoy's when Draco took me there; at the park before I was attacked. He even knew it when I went to his house our house before the Death Eaters attacked us.* She tried to call out to him again, but it came out as a whimper.

"Trying to call your Bonded mate?" Dragen taunted her. "Here let me help you. Severus oh, Severus." He whistled as if calling for a dog. "Severus here traitor." He whistled again. "No?" He turned to look at Hermione, his cold eyes glittering mirthlessly. "Oh well, and I had such hopes for a reunion." He raised his wand, and her body tensed in fearful anticipation. "*Crucio...*"

The pain hit almost immediately, but somewhere in her mind she thought she heard Severus' angry voice say, *Sectumsempra*," and Harry's, "*Defendinfestus*," and the pain ceased. Well, eased off considerably, replaced with excruciatingly severe muscle spasms since in her position her body could not curl up as the muscles tightened in contractions.

Dragen's sarcastic droll of, "You came," was cut off by Severus' "*Defendinfestus*," and Harry's, "*Stupefy*," and Runcorn's "*Avada Kedavra*," and the sound of rock exploding.

Instantly, the sounds of rapid spell blasts echoed all around her, dust rose and fell, bits of stalactites and broken chunks of rock fell and flew about. Hermione simply closed her eyes, unable to do anything to protect herself, fearing the worst and praying that Severus be all right and win this. A few times she thought she heard Ginny, as unlikely as that was, but it was Severus' voice that sent a thrill and tremendous fear through her.

Hermione tried to watch, having to blink frequently because of the dust and flying debris. A spell hit a large stalactite above her that broke loose, and she reflexively turned her head, fearing the impact, but Severus deflected it, then cast a series of curses at Dragen as the two wizards fought to the death. Severus was magnificent, teeth bared, his body moving and dodging like in a martial arts movie with his wand arm moving so fast it was like watching fencing in fast motion. Dragen was slashing and paring, ducking and shielding, blocking and lunging. Hermione saw a huge slice cut across the Dragen's back, blood oozing out and soaking his clothes.

She could hear Harry fighting Runcorn, but couldn't see them, although the troll, probably the male, was excited over the fight.

"Hermione, are you...?" she heard Ginny ask in a hushed voice. "Hang on. Let me see if I can do anything about your jumper ~~Intexeresarcire~~."

Hermione could feel a few shards of the straw stalactites catch as her jumper seemed to come back together, prickling and tickling her irritated skin. "Well, mum could do better of course, but at least you won't be flashing your breasts at my fiancée."

"Shards," she hissed. "Dragen showered me with straw stalactites." Beside her, Dragen tried to curse her, but Severus blocked the spell and countered with a horrible hex of his own.

"*Shards* oh, why didn't you say so?" Ginny exclaimed softly. "*Accio shards*," she said.

Hermione felt many of the shards extract, some tearing away from her skin, but she managed to suppress crying out by clenching her teeth and lips tightly together, making only a, "Ggh," and a hiss.

"Okay, to finish fixing your jumper." Hermione looked down as Ginny said the incantation, "*Resartextum*," and the jumper tightened again, but now it was quite bloody. "Now for the ropes..."

"Gin, wait, the..." Hermione sucked in her breath, her eyes widening as she felt the ropes vibrate and her body sagged minutely. "Gin, be careful, the graphorn," she hissed, hoping that Dragen didn't notice.

"Almost," Ginny said, keeping low so that the men fighting didn't see her.

Suddenly, Dragen fell flat on his face, and Severus turned, his arm coming down to a slash at someone on his left as he hissed *Sectumsempra*." The next minute, only the troll's and graphorn's snarls could be heard over the thrumming cadence of her heartbeat.

The ropes sagged more, and Hermione inhaled in fright, hearing the beast leap up to try to get her. "It'll get me," she cried out in fear.

"Not if I can help it," Severus said as the ropes gave. For one split second, Hermione panicked, but then she realized she was floating. "Well done, Ginevra," he said, and she could almost hear his smile of approval.

"It's Ginny, Severus. *Ginny*," her friend said adamantly as the ropes fell away from Hermione's body and Severus righted her in mid air. "When you call me Ginevra, I swear I feel like I'm in trouble."

Hermione floated to Severus and into his arms. "I've got you," he said, holding her to him as she wrapped her arms about his neck and hugged him back fiercely.

"You came for me," she sobbed in relief, unable to stop the tears that flowed freely.

"I'll always come for you," he said and kissed the side of her head. "Don't ever doubt that I won't."

"I won't, never again," she replied, clinging to him. He loosened his arm, letting her stand, but her ankle, the one she thought was sound, gave her a sharp twang, and she wobbled with an inhaled hiss at the pain.

"Hermione?" Severus asked as his arm quickly tightened about her to support her weight, his dark eyes full of concern as Harry asked, "Is she all right?"

"My ankle, I think it's broken," Hermione said, holding onto Severus while trying to lean on her better ankle, ignoring the sharp twinge. "Both might be, actually."

"Then let's get you back to the school, shall we?" Severus said as he swept her up in his arms.

Hermione saw Kazimir and Ron making their way toward her and smiled at her friends; they had all come to save her.

"Kak si, Priatel?" Kazimir asked, his expression showing deep concern as Harry moved to the side, allowing Severus to carry Hermione to the passageway entrance. Hermione noticed Ron's ears turn bright red as he watched Severus carrying her. All of her friends had worried expressions, and she realized she must look a fright: covered in dust and dirt with her sweater soaked with her blood.

Seamus entered the chamber, saying, "Sparks and Cho took the other four to Azkaban. He sent me to..." He paused as if interrupting something. "Is Hermione all right?"

"I'm fine," Hermione said, laying her head on Severus' shoulder as he said, "She'll be fine," and turned to look at her.

"I'm fine. It's just an ankle," Hermione added offhandedly, not wanting to worry him. "Madam Pomfrey can fix it in a jiffy, right?"

Severus smiled, the worry in his eyes still unabated. "Yes." He turned to the others. "Harry, if you'll escort Gin-ev Ginny to the castle, I'm sure Ronald and Mr. Finnigan can handle these two. I'll notify your superiors as soon as I arrive at the gates. You all did exceptionally well. Thank you." He looked at Kazimir. "Mr. Maschke, if you and your lady friend would like to come up as well, I'm sure accommodations can be made."

Hermione hugged him. "Thank you," she said and kissed his cheek. He smiled at her again, a faint flush rising on his face, as he turned to leave.

"Wait!!!" Hermione exclaimed, and everyone stopped to look at her. "Drogen said there is Devil's snare and Acromantulas at the entrance of the cave. In case you need to remove them. I thought you should know."

Seamus' smile turned into a wide grin. "Ron and I can take care of that," he said, "Can't we, Ron." But Ron had paled at the mention of the giant spiders.

"Anything else," Severus asked with a quirk of his lips.

Hermione shook her head. "Just take me home, Severus," she said, hugging him tightly.

One side of his mouth curved upward, and he adjusted her weight in his arms before Apparating. They arrived at the school gates. Aurors Brodes and MacNaughton strode up to Severus, stowing their wands as they approached. "Professor McGonagall ordered the Heads of Houses to make an accounting of all of the students. They are all accounted for the injured have either been sent up to your hospital here or to St. Mungo's," Brodes told Severus. "Considering the spells cast we were lucky. There were a number of casualties but only four dead that I know of."

Hermione's heart sank like a lump at the pronouncement, but she remained quiet. *This is all my fault. If I'd been more vigilant, no one needed be hurt or killed.*

Severus' comment was equally as hard to hear. "Fairley was killed the moment we arrived, and Blume was hit; I don't know his condition. I left Seamus Finnigan and Ronald Weasley in charge of taking Runcorn's and Drogen's bodies to St. Mungo's morgue. I know they will also need help dispensing with some Acromantulas and Devil's snare."

"I'll notify the Aurory," Brodes stated, pulling a disc from his pocket.

Hermione listened as Severus instructed Kenneth Brandstone and Hagrid to secure the gates. "I expect Potter and Ginny to be along shortly, as well as Kazimir Manshke and his lady friend."

"All right, Headmaster, sir," Hagrid said, still smiling wanly but watched Hermione in the headmaster's arms with a look of deep concern in his eyes. "I'll wait to let them in."

"I'm all right, Hagrid," Hermione tried to assure him. "It's only a broken ankle and some deep scratches, after all. I'll be fine."

"I'm going to take Hermione up to Madam Pomfrey. I'll be available later for a statement," Severus told the Aurors and then looked up at the castle. "Hermione, hang on." The next minute she felt a great heaving sensation, as if Severus had jumped into the air, but found herself clutching nothing but smoke even though she could still feel Severus in her arms and could make out his face in the smoke plume. The oak doors opened as they approached, and they sailed into the Entrance Hall. Severus landed easily, the smoke dissipating, leaving him standing there holding her firmly. The startled students still lingering about all parted quickly as Severus carried her up the stairs.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" Hermione asked in awe.

"Where else the Dark Lord. And yes, someday I will teach you how to do it," he said.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey demanded as Severus entered her hospital wing, carrying Hermione.

"Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade..."

"I know about the attack," Madam Pomfrey said, indicating the rows of occupied beds. "I've been dealing with the injured students all afternoon! I meant, what happened to you, Mrs. Snape?"

"Drogen had Hermione suspended by ropes over a graphorn pit, and I suspect Runcorn may have had a hand in her mistreatment," Severus stated as he carried Hermione to an empty bed. He jerked the curtain closed as the matron walked up to Hermione. "It's a broken ankle."

"I see that," the Healer said, casting a series of mending charms on Hermione's ankles. "All better. A few potions and a good night's rest, and you'll be right as rain." She turned to face Severus. "I don't suppose she'll be staying here?"

He shook his head. "No, I'll tend to her. You have your hands full. If you need an assistant, I'll approve the funding."

The matron turned to Hermione. "You're to stay off your feet for a few days, young lady *no walking at all*." She turned to face Severus. "St. Mungo's sent two Healers, and the worst cases have been transferred," the matron said. "Now for you; are you in anyway injured?"

"Cuts, scrapes and bruises, but nothing that I cannot tend to myself," he replied as she swept her wand over him, casting diagnostic charms. "Or allow my fiancée to. We were quite lucky."

"I'd hardly call today's events lucky," the Healer admonished him, although kindly. "I'll be sending you a few potions as well." She lowered her wand. "Severus, how many more?"

Severus shrugged as he scooped Hermione back up in his arms. "With the six we got today and Dragen and Runcorn dead, there won't be any more resistance. It's over."

Hermione could have cried with relief as she buried her face against his neck and held onto him tighter. "Thank God," she sighed as Madam Pomfrey said, "Thank goodness," and returned to her duties.

Severus carried Hermione up to their rooms. Hermione gasped at the large bouquet of white roses, fragrant snapping stock, white carnations and Lover's daises in a hand-painted vase standing next to a large pink and silver stripped box from Persephone's Secrets and a small gold gilded box on the coffee table. "What is all this?"

"Gifts," Severus said as deposited her carefully on the sofa. "It is Valentine's Day after all, and I was informed that such tokens are," Hermione cupped his face before he stood up, "expected..." He leaned down to kiss her.

When he ended the kiss, he turned and snatched the card from the flowers.

"Then why are you frowning?" she asked, reaching for the card. He let her take it from his fingers. Written on the card in a very formal scrip were the words:

*Happy Valentine's Day, my dear*

*Severus*

She turned to look at him. "For a wizard who doesn't do flowers, that's twice now you've given me some." She tugged on his hand, drawing him down to her. "Thank you," she said, trying to kiss his cheek, but he bristled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied, still glaring at the flowers. She gave his hand a light squeeze, and he turned to face her. "They're not from me."

"But if not you, who...?"

He turned his head. "I suspect Lucius had a hand in it."

Hermione looked at the roses. They looked familiar, and the Manor did have a lot of white roses in the gardens. "But why would Lucius send me flowers under the pretext that they are from you?" she asked.

"He..."

"Doesn't think you to be capable of romantic gestures?" she asked, and he turned his head away. "Severus," she said softly, running her hand down his arm as she leaned forward, trying to make him look at her. "You are quite romantic, more so than I'd ever have guessed." His head snapped in her direction, and she smiled. "You show me how much you love me every day and in so many different ways." A blush rose on his pale skin. "You make me very happy."

His shoulders relaxed, and he leaned back into the sofa. "Open it," he said, indicating the other gifts.

The small box contained a perfume bottle with an ivory camellia on the cap. The perfume was named 'Morgana's Lace', and she took the cap off to smell the fragrance. It was a delicate soft misty floral with hints of fern, lily, night jasmine and peach. "It's lovely. Thank you."

He took the bottle and dabbed a bit on her wrist, waited a few seconds, then inhaled.

"Well?"

"It's pleasant, but I prefer the way you normally smell," he said softly.

She playfully swatted his arm lightly, and he recoiled in indignation. She opened the large box and ran her fingers over the lovely robe and night slip inside. "They're lovely."

She set the box aside as he turned, pulling her into his arms and leaning her back against the sofa to kiss her. "Thank you for my gifts," she breathed before their lips met.

He pulled her closer as he leaned over her. "You're welcome," he purred and brushed his lips against hers. His kiss was soft and tender, and his hand cupped her face gently, his fingertips caressing her cheek. She sighed, trying to increase the contact, to deepen their kiss, but he seemed persistent on driving her mad with light sensual touches and kisses.

"Ah-hem," Ginny coughed at from the doorway, and Severus pulled back quickly. "I thought we were expected."

Harry, slightly flushed, seemed to find the doorframe fascinating.

"You were not," Severus, replied. "Yet. I expected..." The box with the lingerie disappeared behind the sofa when Ginny tugged on Harry's arm as she entered the sitting room. "Mispy," he called out softly, still blushing, "put that in the bedroom, please."

"Kazimir and Tatiana are in your office," Harry said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder. "I could give him a tour of the castle if you're, er, busy?"

Hermione watched in amusement as Severus closed his eyes as he exhaled, then looked up at her friends resolvedly. Only five or six months ago he'd have snarled at them to leave; now he was actually trying to be social with them. His fingers tightened on her hand. "No, I have delayed speaking to Professor McGonagall about the raid long enough. Why don't you have tea here while I meet with my Heads of Houses."

He turned to Ginny and gave her a rather pointed look. "Hermione is to stay off her feet, Ginny, be sure she doesn't walk." Ginny nodded as he stood. He looked down at Hermione's hand, still clasped with his own. She knew he was reluctant to leave but knew that he had a duty to the school as well. "I won't be long."

"Take as much time as you need. I'll be here when you come back," Hermione replied, giving his fingers a slight squeeze. His lips curved into a smile as he let her fingers slip from his. "I'll be fine. If I need anything, Ginny and Harry are here, and the house-elves will come if I call. I'll be fine."

He nodded and turned, nodded once to her friends, and hurried from the room. She watched him go, and then smiled at her friends.

"Still doesn't like demonstrative acts," Ginny said, coming to sit by Hermione as Harry followed Severus out to get Kazimir and Tatiana.

Hermione shook her head. "No, but it's all right. Thank you for re-knitting my jumper," she said, plucking at her jumper as she looked down at the mess it was in.

"It can be replaced," Ginny said with a shrug. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Priatel, kak si, you have me very vorried," Kazimir said as he entered the sitting room, followed by a stunning Bulgarian girl and Harry. "I find this. Sapoviadai. Is this your vand, no?" he asked, holding out a carved vine wood wand.



"Yes," Hermione exclaimed, almost jumping up to hug him, except Ginny clamped a hand down on her shoulder, making her sit. "Where did you find it?"

"The cave," Kazimir said. "I have to give credit to your friend, Veasel-ly; he find it, when ve search the vizards who hurt you." He squatted down to be eye level with her. "A ti? Are you good?"

"I'm good. Our school Healer, Madam Pomfrey, mended the bones, but she said I can't walk for three days," Hermione replied as Mispy brought in a tray with a tea service and plates piled with sandwiches, fruits, little cakes and tarts. The elf snapped her fingers and four chairs appeared before she popped out.

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Kazimir and Tatiana had been overwhelmed by Severus' offer to remain in the castle for the next two days while Hermione recovered. Kazimir showed Severus and Hermione two Healing charms used by the Quidditch medi-wizards for strengthening mended bones and for strengthening ligaments and tendons, and he and Severus discussed potions used in sports injuries, several that Severus was already familiar with. When Kazimir used the charms on Hermione's ankles, she felt an immediate improvement, but Severus still insisted that she not walk for the rest of the night.

Tatiana and Hermione took little time at all to become fast friends, but then Tatiana had heard so much about Hermione through her fiancée. Kazimir and Tatiana had chosen to dine with Hermione and Severus in the Headmaster's tower the first night, rather than brave the Great Hall, but they did accept a tour from Harry and Ginny following dinner, leaving Hermione alone in Severus' very helpful and extremely talented hands.

Severus even allowed Harry to spend the night in a guestroom and for once didn't set forth the admonition of old-fashioned propriety, both of them knowing that Ginny would slip into his room anyway.

The next morning, after a most pleasant lie in of being awoken by a very amorous Severus, Hermione asked Dezzy to invite her friends to have breakfast with her and Severus in the eating room, as Kirsch called it, since Severus wouldn't allow her to leave the Headmaster's suits.

"Maschke and his fiancée as well as the Potter's spare me," Severus growled against her breast. "I'd prefer breakfast in bed."

"But they are our guests," Hermione said, trying to make him look up at her.

He relented and sat up. "Expect me to exact revenge for this interruption," he said, reaching for his pants.

"If it is anything like the payment I had to remit last night and this morning for the inconvenience of yesterday's rescue, I'll be happy to oblige," she responded cheekily, still feeling a glow from this morning's lovemaking.

Severus pushed her back down on the bed and leaned over her. "Impertinent witch," he said and kissed her soundly. "I've half a mind to exact more payment on that right now."

"Which would have to be a quick one since we're expecting company soon," she pointed out as she slid her hand down his body and cupped him. "But you seem up for the challenge."

He grasped her wrist with a hiss as she raked her fingers up his length. "Wench." He nipped at her breast and sucked on her nipple, releasing it with a pop. "Later. I don't do 'quickie'."

She laughed as he rolled off her, and she reached for her night slip at the foot of the bed. Severus turned, snatched it from her hands before she could put it on and leaned down to kiss her, stroking her breast as he did so. "I don't know why you'd buy me this if you won't even let me wear it," she said, looking up at him from beneath her lashes.

"For the fun of taking it off you," he purred. "Get dressed. *You've* got company coming."

"*We've* got company coming," she corrected him.

He stood up and crossed his arms, her night slip still clutched in one hand, the silky fabric framing one side of his semi-erect penis tantalizingly. "Harry Potter and your Bulgarian Quidditch buffoon are not..."

"Kazimir is not..." she started to say, then threw her pillow at him. "You're making fun of my friends? I thought you were starting like them?"

"I like Ginevra well enough, and I tolerate Harry and your other friends, but I've yet to change my opinion of Mr. Maschke."

"You're still jealous of Kazimir?" Hermione asked while scooting to the edge of the bed. She remembered how horribly jealous he'd been of her friend over Christmas.

He turned to pick up her potion off the bed side table, but the moment she swung her legs over the side and sat up, he rushed forward and pushed her back onto the mattress. "Where did you think you are going?"

"To get dressed," she said, hating being an invalid. She cupped his face, drawing him back down to her and kissed him. "You have nothing to be jealous of. I love you," she implored when he broke off the kiss. She stared up into his dark eyes, trying to convey to him how much she loved him.

"I do, too," he admitted softly and turned to the wardrobe to hide his blush.

She smiled, even after everything, he still sometimes found it hard to tell her. He called for Dezzy to help her as he turned away. She watched him walk to the wardrobe as she drank her potion, surprised at the savory, celery seed and herring taste.

Hermione hated asking for Dezzy's assistance dressing, although she had to admit the quick bedside bath was a nice gesture on the elf's part, but she didn't like being treated like a helpless baby, especially with Severus watching her amusedly. When she was ready, Severus insisted on carrying her to the sitting room. Moments later, Harry and Ginny arrived with Kazimir and Tatiana.

Kazimir inquired after Hermione's ankle and did a quick diagnostic charm over both ankles, then repeated his healing charms, which tickled her this time around, especially in her left ankle. "You should be able to walk," he announced, but Severus insisted that until Hermione was cleared by Madam Pomfrey, she would be staying off her feet.

When Kirsch appeared, announcing breakfast was served, Severus picked up Hermione and led the group to the dining room.

The small dining room in their family suite must have been expanded because it seemed spacious even with the table enlarged to seat the three couples. Hermione and Ginny chatted with Tatiana while the men conversed at the other end of the table. When the owls carrying the *Daily Prophet* converged on the windowsill, the conversations turned serious, mostly about the articles in the paper about the previous day's raid.

Of the Death Eaters, Dragen and Runcorn were pronounced dead. Seymour Wilkes unconscious with a bad concussion and wasn't expected to survive. Both Maurice Geissler and Phillip Brixton had been arrested, pending trial. Brixton, who'd wept openly in relief that the horror was now over, was receiving little sympathies from the reporter. Phillip Selwyn, Thomas and Tyrone Hackney, Edward Scunthorpe, Justin Ferkle, Ezekiel Stroup and Gordon Pikes were all arrested, and facing multiple charges and a life sentence in Azkaban.

Wesley Gogarty, who ran Palladium Books, and Melania MacFusty, who owned Melania's Magical Gifts For All Occasions, William Sprague, a shop assistant in Scrivenshaft's, Christopher McCrum, one of the shop assistants in Zonkos, Amy Williams, a seamstress at Gladrags, and James Darney, the wizard from the post office, all

gave testimony to having been put under the Imperius and begged the public to forgive their actions. Hermione hoped that the public would forgive them and they'd not lose their jobs over the incident.

Hermione was very disheartened to read that three students, Peter Blatty, Byron Stewart and William Hughes, and Auror trainees, Imelda Drake and Ernie Macmillan were dead. Seeing Ernie's name particularly stung. The paper mentioned that there were six students who had been critically cursed and were lying in the Dai Llewellyn ward and Spell Damage ward at St. Mungo's: Tadashi Takara, Wilberforce Wevernthrall, Samuel Bowdern, Hester Mott, Deborah Halloran and Kaitlin Farley, who had been very badly hurt, but were expected to recover. However, unfortunately Hester Mott and Wilberforce Wevernthrall wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts this year.

Kazimir was quite concerned about the remaining Death Eaters, and the girl's conversation paused when Severus and Harry reassured the Bulgarian that the last remaining Death Eaters had been captured.

"I heard you mention yesterday, Harry, that there are two more," Ginny stated. "Jamie Dafoe and Gaspard Serkis."

"So there are these two more...?" Kazimir asked, turning his attention from Ginny back to Harry and Severus.

"Dafoe is a simpleton; he turned himself in right after he heard that Dragen failed. Serkis will be found, he has few connections left who would support him," Severus stated. "It's only a matter of time. Cecil Selwyn has already given a statement as to where he thinks he might be hiding, since Serkis and his brother, Phillip, had been friends. He wants to completely distance himself from all of the Dark Lord's followers."

"Isvinete, what of this woman Rita Skeeter mentioned, Elladora Wilkes wife of one of the Death Eaters caught yesterday. She says this woman was forced under coercion," Tatiana said.

"When she was arrested in conjunction with her husband's suspected connections, Elladora Wilkes, broke down, crying hysterically and admitting that her husband forced her to accept the Mark," Harry said. "She claimed that her husband had told her that the Dark Lord would kill her children if she hadn't. Not many in the Wizengamot believe her."

"The last remaining few are mostly supporters. They will want to appear cooperative," Severus said assuredly, his gaze shifting to Hermione with a small smile and back to the Bulgarian pair. "Most will turn on each other. It's all clean up from here on out, no more serious skirmishes."

Tatiana and Kazimir glanced at each other. "If it will make you feel more comfortable, I can assure you that both this school and the Malfoy's residence are adequately protected," Severus stated. "I can put in a word with Lucius Malfoy, but I know that he is quite honored to have you reside with him until you have settled."

"Da," Kazimir said with a nod. "He is a kind wizard. He is helping my Tatiana find a home for us while I have practice with the Chudley Cannons."

"May I ask why you chose the Cannons," Ginny asked, trying not to be rude, but Hermione could tell her curiosity was getting the best of her. "They've had the worst record of the league."

Hermione almost giggled at watching Severus suppress his chagrin at the turn of conversation by taking a long sip of his orange juice, which she mimicked with a lift of her eyebrows.

"They are... how you say... rebuild the team around me and Bartholomew," Kazimir said.

Hermione smiled when she saw the corner of Severus' mouth twitch in response before he casually set down his goblet, his face a perfect mask of cordial interest.

"Brian Cadwallader is a fine Chaser he and Casper Gorder work well together. Bartholomew and Fritz Quarks are the Beaters for next season. They fly well; they are very aggressive."

"I'd heard that Fritz Quarks was hired when Jenkins injured his knee," Harry said, and Kazimir nodded. "And that Nettle may get his job back, but as second string."

"Yes, the Cannons' managers want to keep Nathan Nettle; he has done better since his arm grew back, but Jenkins is to be retired. Chayse Martin and Theobald Stromber will be alternate Beaters, and I know the owners want to hire two more alternates for Chaser. The Keeper, Heath Wrinds, is replaced by, I'm not sure I am to say," he paused, but Tatiana nodded so he continued, "John Quicke, he will be first string. And we will have a girl Seeker, Malila LaCourse, but she is not announced. We hope to change the team's motto back to 'We shall conquer'."

"So you'll have a whole new team next year," Hermione said, wondering how Ron felt about that. Maybe later she'd ask Kazimir to sign a poster for Ron. He'd like that.

"Da," Kazimir said. "We will."

Hermione glanced up at Severus at the head of the table and smiled at him, and he gave her a minute lift of his eyebrow and turned his attention to their guests, pretending to be interested in the Cannons, and Hermione knew that life with him would consist of many meals like this one. It warmed her heart.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I chose the title, the Colubridae Snake, because of the Slytherin Death Eaters vs. the good Slytherin guys theme in the opening. The Colubridae snake family includes about two-thirds of all current snake species and is found on every continent except Antarctica. While most colubrids are mostly harmless, a few are venomous snakes, such as genus Boiga, which can produce medically significant bites, while the boomslang, the twig snakes and the Asian species of Rhabdophis are in fact poisonous and have caused human fatalities.*

*Speleothems is a generalized term for the incredible formations that form in a cave, like stalagmites and stalactites, flowstone, and the crystal formations. Speleothems are typically formed in limestone or magnesium limestone caves. Speleothems are sometimes named for their resemblance to man-made or natural objects.*

*I want to thank ArabellaBloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulx for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*GE-TPP: Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*My Bulgarian comes from an online site. All mistakes regarding the words I chose are my own: [http://www.linguanaut.com/english\\_bulgarian.htm](http://www.linguanaut.com/english_bulgarian.htm)*

*I created two new spells and the incantation for the Defense Charm using my favorite Latin translator.*

*Defendinfestus: Defendo, or actually I used defendi, which according to my favorite Latin translator means: [to repel, repulse, ward off, drive away, to defend, protect] with infestus, Latin for [aggressive, hostile or dangerous,] to make up the incantation for the Defensive Charm, since HPLexicon didn't have it.*

*Intexeresarcire, Resartextum the spells Ginny uses to repair Hermione's jumper came from combining these two Latin words:*

*Intexere/intextum [to weave in, plait in, interweave; to weave around, wind around]*

*Resarcire/resartum [to patch up, mend, repair, restore]*

## Jealousy and Flowers

Chapter 59 of 63

Severus endures a lengthy visit with Hermione's friends, and Hermione and Ginny solve the puzzle.



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### Jealousy and Flowers

Alestra, Wendlynne and Veronica had come up to the Headmaster's Tower to see Hermione after having been told by Madam Pomfrey that Hermione was convalescing in her quarters. Severus persisted in being the one to carry Hermione whenever Hermione and her guests moved from room to room. It amused her, not only because it meant that he spent his entire morning with Kazimir, Tatiana, Harry and 'the girls', but because it gave her plenty of opportunity to kiss Severus, or his cheek, affectionately, much to his embarrassed chagrin. Currently, they were all sitting in her parlor having tea when Hermione leaned over to Severus and muttered, "Er, Severus?"

"Yes," he said in an equally soft slowly tone.

"I need to use the loo," she tried to say as discreetly as she could.

He smirked. "Of course you do," he turned to the others. "If you'll excuse us, Hermione and I shall be back shortly." He picked her up effortlessly and swept her across the room.

"Not the one upstairs?" she squeaked in a tiny voice as he headed to the powder room instead of the round room.

"Why would we need to go up there? This is a perfectly acceptable lavatory and its closer," he stated as he elbowed the door open. She could see Alestra and Ginny both fighting back a smile, and Harry blushed slightly, so she clamped her mouth shut.

He set her on the counter and helped her bunch up her robes and remove her knickers. "The room has silencing spells, I assume," he said as he placed her gently on the toilet. "I'll be right back. Will three minutes be enough?"

Hermione sighed. "Gads, I can't wait until I can walk."

"Fine, I'll make it five," he said and slipped from the room. As if he'd been listening, he returned just after she patted herself dry. "So have you ~~believed~~ yourself, Hermione," he asked as he swooped her up, allowing the toilet to flush, and literally plopped her on the counter.

"Yes, thank you," she replied, taking the sudsy flannel he held out to her and washed her hands, growing curious about the mischievous smirk on his face.

"Are you sure," he said, leaning over her so that she was forced to angle away from him. "I'd hate to think you haven't ~~believed~~ yourself properly."

She gasped as his hands slid up her legs. "But you can't take advantage of we have they will hear us!" she uttered, trying to close her thighs as his fingers sought out her core.

"Do I have to remind you yet again that I'm no school boy? I told you there are dampening spells on the room, but by all means," his other hand pulled her knees apart, "scream for me. I love to hear you vociferating in the throes of passion."

She wanted to say no, but his mouth claimed hers in a rapacious kiss, making her head butt against the mirror as his fingers delved into her moist heat. It was divine. Fear intensified everything: her sense of hearing, the feel of his hand, the look in his eyes all adding to fuel her craving for what he was doing to her. However, her mind warred with the desire to give into him against the concern that her friends could hear her or worse, might walk in on them. Her body was tense with want, a trembling budding trepidation of need. She moaned into his mouth, realizing her body was reacting quickly even as the logical side of her mind seemed to shut down.

He chuckled softly as he pulled away and lowered himself. "How quickly do you think I can make you come," he purred as he lowered his mouth to her core.

Every sound seemed magnified, the touch of his ministrations seemed more arousing, the sensitivity of her own skin seemed heightened, more aware of him and the sounds of her utterances seemed to echo in the confined space. Hermione gripped the counter with both hands and sucked in her breath as the widespread excitement in her pubic region increased to a peak. She hit her head on the mirror again, biting her lip to keep from crying out as she came.

But he didn't stop. He looked up at her, but his fingers still stimulated her, making her even more sensitive. "Severus, please, enough..." she pleaded and tried to clench her legs together as she reached down to stop him, surprised by the tightening of sensation as it ebbed, grew, waned and returned. She closed her eyes, wanting him to stop and not wanting him to stop.

"Not until you come," he said, his voice thick and sultry.

"I did," she gasped.

"I didn't hear you," he stated, and his fingers stroked deeply inside her. "You're so wet. I want you, right here, right now."

"Oh, gods, Severus, please..." she begged, and he laughed as he bent down again. Merlin's stars it was torturous and so rude. Her friends were in the other room, most likely able to hear them and snickering but gods he made her needy, made her want this. "Severus, lick me," she demanded, "use your voice to make me come like you..."

"Like this," he purred against her clit, and she stammered, "Oh yes, that's... Merlin, gods yes!"

He said something else while sucking on her clit, something erotic possibly, or not; it hardly mattered the way it made her body tense from the sensations it created, but then hummed, adding electrifying vibrations to the flicking of his fingers and tongue. She was sure, but her mind went blank as her body exploded, incredibly intense and unrestrained as he devilishly made her come for him a second time with his talented fingers and tongue. His lips curled up in a satisfied quirk, similar to the satisfied look of completion he had after he'd come.

"Oh, gods, Severus, but you didn't..." she gasped between breaths as she slumped bonelessly on the counter, her head sliding slightly on the mirror.

"Oh, but I did," he said with a smug look of accomplishment, and she felt the cool sensation of a cleaning charm sweep over her before he stood up, adjusting himself. "And I'll exact the other half later tonight," he said smoothly as he slid her knickers over one foot then hooked the other foot in. "I'll let you pull them up now," he said while sliding her knickers up to her knees. "But tonight I'm tearing them off you," he added, drawing them as far up her thighs as he could, his voice a lusty drawl. "And having a proper feast, taking you properly until you scream so loud you frighten the portraits."

His declaration sent a tremulous quiver through her entire body. "Thanks for the warning," she said breathlessly, struggling to pull her knickers up.

He handed her a hair comb. "You're welcome," he said and washed his hands as she fixed herself up. "Ready?"

"Barely," she said, sighing that her hair wouldn't lie back properly. It was fine, she supposed, but messy. She'd have to condition it well tonight. She let her skirts drop. "Ready."

He picked her up and carried her back to the sitting room.

Thankfully, if any of her guests had noticed their extended absence, or had heard her, no one commented, not even Ginny.

Alestra, Veronica and Wendlynne had been delighted about being asked to stay and have lunch with the famous wizards, Harry Potter, Kazimir Maschke and Tatiana Krainova, who it turned out, was a famous Moravian model. Hermione had been amazed when the small dining room in the Snape's family quarters seemed to swell in size again to accompany nine comfortably. And the girls stayed through tea, all chatting happily in Hermione's parlor.

"Gods, the time!" Ginny exclaimed, jumping up as Kirch cleared away the tea service. "I have Quidditch practice in ten minutes. Everyone will kill me for being late!"

"Her-mi-oninny, you could ask one of your house-elves to get Ginnie's Quidditch gear," Tatiana suggested as if this was completely acceptable.

"I couldn't possibly," Hermione started to say, then turned to look where Alestra was pointing in time to see both Kirch's and Dezzy's ears droop from where they peered around the doorframe, their excitedly expectant looks morphing into a sad acceptance. "Unless Dezzy wouldn't mind getting Ginny's things, of course." She turned back to her friends, both Alestra and Veronica burst out laughing at Hermione's resolved scowl and Tatiana's confused expression. "All right, all ready. I hate having house-elves enslaved to me it's reprehensible!" she announced.

Ginny rolled her eyes, Severus made a humorous smirk, and Harry mumbled, "Spew."

"Hermione doesn't understand house-elves," Ginny said in way of explanation as Dezzy appeared with her Quidditch clothes and broom. "Do you mind if I use your room?" she asked Hermione, pointing at the door.

"No, go ahead," Hermione said with a flick of her hand indicating the way and a shake of her head, ignoring both Severus' and Harry's identical knowing smiles.

"What's no to understand?" Tatiana asked. "They like to serve we give them a home to live in, and they pay us back with service," Tatiana said, almost mimicking Talfryn's statement on the subject.

"The first house-elf Hermione knew about was Dobby, a house-elf who became my friend. He hated being a servant, and I freed him," Harry explained.

"And Winky! They were *slaves*, pure and simple," Hermione reminded him. "Look at how happy Dobby had been as a free elf and Winky! look how she had been mistreated."

Harry shook his head. "And she had been miserable ever since Mr. Crouch freed her, hadn't she? In fact, I heard she'd passed away from a broken heart," he pointed out. "So, are you coming with us to watch Gryffindor practice? Kazimir wants to go."

"Da, I want to. We can carry you to the pitch, if you want," he said as Ginny entered the room in her Quidditch gear.

Severus gave the Bulgarian a warning glare, but Ginny cut off his retort by exclaiming excitedly, "Oh, then you can give us pointers!" Thankfully the exchange drew everyone's attention, except Hermione's, from Severus' glare.

"No, Ginnie, I will not," Kazimir said adamantly and narrowed his eyes so she'd not argue. "That would be an unfair... ne snam, kak," he looked at Tatiana, "vantage, you say, I think, to your other teams and might hurt your standing, no? Disqualify you?"

"No, but it would be seen as a favoritism if I allowed you to do so," Severus stated. "Unfortunately, Hermione won't be able to go; I've other matters to attend to. So, if you'll excuse me and my fiancée..."

"But I want to go," Hermione said and turned to him. "Surely it will be all right, if I promise not to walk. Besides I'd only be sitting in the stands." But his expression, the one he used to show his indifference, masked his displeasure at the request. "I'm sure Kazimir could... *levitate me*..." Her suggestion faltered the minute his facial expression morphed into a blank mask and his eyes hardened slightly.

"You could use my broom," Ginny offered, coming to her rescue and holding up her Cleansweep five, her brother Charlie's old school broom.

Hermione really hated being an invalid, but she couldn't expect Severus to carry her everywhere, and he was apparently opposed to letting Kazimir carry her, not that she was at all surprised.

"Or we could make your chair hover and push you?" Ginny suggested.

"Kirch and Dezzy can make the rug float; it can carry our mistress wherever our mistress wishes to go," Dezzy suggested and Kirch nodded. Almost immediately, both elves had their hands over the rug, and Ginny and Alestra both jumped back before it began to hover, but neither Harry nor Wendlynne moved quickly enough, and they almost lost their balance as they hopped off the animated rug. Between the two elves, Hermione floated elegantly from her chair to the rug and it rose higher.

Severus turned on Harry and Wendlynne. "Then I'll charge you to seeing that Hermione doesn't walk, not one step," he demanded firmly, and Wendlynne paled like a first-year under his stern glare.

"Really, Severus, it's..." Hermione started to admonish him, but he turned a stern glare towards her. "All right, fine. I'll fly my magic carpet, happy?"

"Ecstatic," he said.

Hermione had felt like a fool, sitting on a rug floating between her friends, listening them all talk around her, but she had to admit, the floating on the rug was comfortable. At least once up in the stands, when the rug draped over the bench, did she feel less conspicuous, although under other circumstances, riding a magic carpet would have been fun. Too bad they were considered an illegal magical artifact. She hoped Severus wouldn't get in trouble for allowing its use.

Kazimir sat next to Harry on the row above the girls, opting for the 'better view,' allowing Tatiana to sit with Hermione, Alestra, Wendylynn and Veronica, but Hermione secretly knew it was more for his fiancée to spend more time with her new friends than to watch the students practice, since he and Harry talked through most of the practice.

Hermione was surprised to see Baltazar Gonçalves sitting in the first row of seats stands directly below her, avidly watching the house team fly and busily scribbling away on a writing tablet on his lap. More than once, Hermione saw him use a Trigonometric scale slide rule with magnifier cursors, a magical three dimensional abacuses or a Wrentlock free dish-double cursor circular slide rule as he worked on his complicated number charts.

He looked so small sitting there, his Hogwarts uniform hardly hiding his thin, lanky frame. The first time Hermione had met him, it had been hard to believe he was sixteen not thirteen. He turned his head as he watched the Chasers soar by, his eyes wide and biting his lip, as he followed their movements. The very last minute, Jack swerved under Ernie, taking the Quaffle from him, as they both flew toward opposite goal hoops. Warner Pietersen, a fourth-year, quickly swept toward the left hoop as Jack threw the Quaffle at the middle hoop. Pietersen angled quickly, barely blocking the Quaffle, and knocked it into Ernie's direction.

Hermione watched Baltazar shake his head and add something to his chart. She remembered overhearing Severus, Professor McGonagall, Bartholomewo Gonçalves and the teachers who were to have the new Portuguese boy in their lessons discuss the results of Baltazar's placement exams. The general consent was that, while Baltazar was significantly advanced enough to sit his O.W.L.s, there were a few of his lessons where it would benefit him to join the school year this term as a fifth year, mostly giving the boy time to pick up the magical skills he was not fully proficient at before he sat the exams and then advance with his new classmates. Bartholomewo Gonçalves had been concerned, considering that would make his brother older than the other students in his year, but Baltazar had been very happy with the arrangement, almost ecstatic, saying he'd not only have the term to broaden his magical skills but that it would ensure that he'd receive high marks on his exams.

*Hermione stifled a laugh as both Severus and Bartholomewo Gonçalves rolled their eyes. "He's just like you a swot," Severus grumbled to Hermione on their way to dinner after the meeting. "You should have seen his eyes when I showed them the library he was salivating."*

*"I'm sure you're exaggerating," Hermione said, laughing at Severus' raised eyebrow.*

*"Want to bet?" Severus said drolly. "His comment was that he'd 'be able to read all of these' with eyes as round as an owl's."*

Professor McGonagall had asked several students, Hermione and Ginny included, to volunteer tutorial assistance should Baltazar require it. However, Baltazar rarely, if at all, asked for any help, and neither Hermione nor Ginny had had the opportunity to work with him as they'd expected, although Hermione had spoken to him many times in the library. Her impression was of a shy and very intelligent boy with a very inquisitive and sharp mind.

Hermione was pulled from her thoughts as Ginny swooped over the stands to get out of Harold Weinberger's way of the Bludger and looked down. Though Ginny normally preferred to play Chaser with Jack Sloper and Ernie Coppersmith, she had been playing Seeker because she hadn't found a better flyer. Across the pitch, a fourth year, Jack Temlett was nervously anticipating which way Jack would throw the Quaffle. Hermione smiled as the barrel-chested boy made a nice block and threw the Quaffle to Ernie.

"Watch the pop pass," Ginny shouted as they flew by and below Hermione on the first row. Baltazar shook his head and made some more notes on his charts. Ginny swerved her broom closer to peer over his shoulder. "Whoa, what's all that?" she heard her friend ask as she landed next to him. Hermione saw his ears turn red, and he placed a hand on his tablet as he peeked up at her shyly.

Beside her, the girls were talking about the upcoming London Fashion Week in February. "Yes, I will be modeling for Corazón de Voltaire..." Tatiana was saying, but Hermione really wanted to go down and join Ginny and Baltazar to see what the boy had been doing.

"Yes, but that looks complicated," Ginny said. "You've... those are Quidditch moves and game plays, aren't they? May I see it?" she asked, and he handed her his tablet. Hermione leaned forward as Ginny examined the charts. From where Hermione sat, she could see that they were quite complex, but she couldn't make out the calculations because his numbers were so small. He shaded his eyes as Ginny turned the page and set down her broom, pouring over his diagrams. "These are amazing," Ginny exclaimed, and Baltazar seemed to light up at the comment, talking adamantly, then seemed to shrink into himself.

"No, show me!" Ginny exclaimed as she plopped down on the bench next to him and tapped his tablet. He handed her a chart and several pages of diagrams.

"Oh, do you think the Headmaster would let us?" Wendylynn asked, and Hermione fought the urge to ask, 'what?' "I suppose we could ask him," she said, hoping that they'd give her a clue about what they needed permission for.

Baltazar flushed and bowed his head as he looked up at Ginny timidly. "NO, please go on," Ginny said encouragingly, and he sat up straighter.

"Oh my gosh, really? Do you think he'll say yes?" Alestra exclaimed. "Mum goes every year, and I have to miss it because of school."

Baltazar made his charts float in the air in front of them, obviously explaining the Arithmancy to Ginny, then he bit his lip, looking at Ginny to gauge her reaction. Hermione fervently wished she could be part of the conversation instead of listening to Wendylynn and Alestra talk about Faunita Surreal's shoes and handbags and Donatella Foxford's and Ashley Croft's robes.

Seeing Ginny's attentiveness, Baltazar continued, and Hermione could see that he was really trying to win Ginny over. She was glad; he'd been such a loner since coming to Hogwarts, and it was good he was trying to make friends; she only wished he would try making friends with those in his own year, too. Hermione smiled as she turned her attention to the conversation going on between the other girls, glad that Baltazar and Gin were getting on well.

When practice was over, Kazimir and Hermione tried to reactivate the spells on the rug as Ginny introduced Baltazar to everyone on the Gryffindor Quidditch team as their new strategy coach.

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Madam Pomfrey came by the Headmaster's tower that evening to check on Hermione. She was delighted by the progress of her ankles. She pronounced her ankles sound and gave Hermione ankle supports/braces to wear for the next few days.

By the time Severus announced it was time to go down to the Great Hall for dinner, Tatiana confided in Ginny and Hermione that now she was quite looking forward to moving to England, especially having made so many nice friends.

The Great Hall was in a buzz over the international Quidditch player, Kazimir Maschke, and the famous Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley sitting at the Gryffindor table with Hermione and Ginny. Sunita had her star-struck-gobsmacked-guppy expression firmly in place, and Nadine Graham, and Deborah Smythe appeared quite jealous as Alestra, Wendylynn, and Veronica chatted easily with the famous wizards and the Bulgarian beauty.

From where she sat between Ginny and Kazimir, Hermione frequently turned to look up at Severus at the staff table, but unlike before, he seemed relaxed, hardly concerned about her dining companions. Harry, Ron, Kazimir and Ginny, along with the others in the house who could talk about Quidditch endlessly, maintained a friendly argument over who was favored to win the World Quidditch Cup this year and which company would put out a better broom this summer for the upcoming season. On her other side, Alestra, Wendylynn, and Veronica were telling Tatiana all the best places to shop to buy the finest fashions.

Hermione sipped her pumpkin juice and wished privately she'd brought a good book as she pretended to care about either subject.

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Kazimir and Tatiana said their goodbyes after dinner, but Ginny and Harry stayed with Hermione in the sitting room for a while. When Ginny slipped off for the loo, Hermione asked Harry, "So have you decided on a date?"

Harry looked sheepishly at Hermione, and the Rudbeckia flowers blushed pink. "No, not yet. It's not a matter of wanting to wait, it's the fact that the reporters keep dogging me and everything I do. I don't want my wedding to become a media circus. We've decided that it will only be immediate family and a very select group of friends: you and Severus, Luna and Neville, of course, and only those who have always been there for us, like Kingsley. I want to include Hagrid, too."

"Hagrid will be delighted," Hermione said. "Where are you considering having it? The Burrow hasn't been rebuilt, and the Phoenix House isn't suited for a wedding, is it?"

"I was thinking of having it at my grandparent's house in Glasbury, Drake Cottage. There is a nice back garden, and I can ask Neville for landscaping advice. It's a bit overgrown. That's where Ginny and I decided we're going to live. We've decided to keep the house in Scotland, the one on the Western Coast up near the Kyles of Bute," he said. "But we thought it would be too cramped for a wedding."

She looked up and smiled, seeing Severus enter the room. He paused, a frown almost forming possibly from Harry's proximity on the sofa next to her, and left without a word, going to his office. Hoping that Harry wouldn't think Severus rude, she turned to Harry, noticing the flowers still sitting on the coffee table and felt her face flushed and smiled. Between her feelings for Severus and Harry's feelings for Ginny, the blooms were almost a ruby pink. "Has Kreacher decided which house he wants to live in?" she asked, remembering how upset Kreacher had been Christmas day.

"He still hasn't said, and I feel horrible about putting him in this situation." He looked down at his hands, worrying his thumb. "Hermione," he began, then looked up, "Do you know how house-elves... I dunno, breed?"

"No," she said, feeling off-footed by the question. "I suppose the normal way. Why?"

"I have two more. They just showed up saying that they are Kreacher's family and are bound to serve Kreacher's family. I assume that means me," he said awkwardly and the flowers in the vase turned white like the roses. "I have to name them and everything. Apparently they are both taking over for Kreacher."

"Is Kreacher ill?" Hermione asked, concerned for the old elf.

Harry shook his head. "No, not that I can see, but both new house-elves are young males; one decided to stay with the Phoenix House, and the other says he is serving me where I go."

Hermione thought a moment. "I remember you saying that Dobby told you that Dobby and Dobby's family were to serve one family forever." She called Kirch.

"Yes, Mistress," Kirch said warily, bowing so low he bent his nose.

"Kirch, may I ask you a question about your kind," Hermione asked, hoping he'd enlighten her. There were not many books on house-elves in the library, and she had no idea how else to find out how inheritance occurred in house-elf enslavement.

"My kind, Mistress?" Kirch asked, his brow forming deep wrinkles as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"House-elves," Hermione clarified. "Please explain to me how house-elves come to serve their families? Do they choose a family or are you bound by your parents' oaths? And their descendants are they bound by the same... enslavement to serve their sire's family?"

Kirch tilted his head. "Yes, Mistress. House-elves are to serve their families all their life. We serve one family. Our offspring replaces us so our family is always taken care of."

"If you have more than one house, which house does your house-elf live in?" Harry asked.

"Whichever house his family is in, sir," Kirch replied, clearly dumfounded by the question.

"But what if you have more than one house?"

"Then the house-elf takes care of all houses owned by their family, sir," he said and disappeared.

Harry shrugged. "Okay, so that solves it. I've inherited two house-elves under Kreacher's enslavement." He smiled as Ginny entered the room, and the Rudbeckia flowers blushed deep pink. "So, Gin, yes, you get to name my house-elves."

"Oh, great! The one with the little nose can be Baylie and the taller of the two can be Rylie!" Ginny said with a grin. "You know, the heroes from *The Baleful Burrow*." But Hermione didn't understand what she meant, and neither did Harry since he'd shrugged while he shook his head and a crease had formed between his brows. "Oh c'mon, you know from the... You've both got to read your witchtales!" she exclaimed as she plopped down on the nearest chair and began to recite the story to them.

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Severus turned right after the flames in his Floo died down after Harry's departure and mounted the steps two at a time to his sitting room. Never had he been more delighted to see anyone disappear in green flames before. "Good night, Ginevra," Severus said with a slow drawl upon entering the room.

"It's Ginny *Ginny*, Severus," she stated, then turned to hug Hermione. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"For Merlin's sake," Severus said and narrowed his eyes. "You'd best hurry before Filch catches you out this close to curfew."

"I just have to run down the corridor to the Fat Lady," she replied cheekily. "In fact I could just ride my broom."

"You know the rules," he started to say, but she mimicked him as they said in union, "No running and no flying in the corridors."

"I know! I'd really hate to have to serve detention under you. I had enough of that last year. Good night, Hermione," Ginny said as she grabbed her broom.

"Night, Ginny," Hermione replied with a chuckle as Ginevra headed out. He followed her to the door. "Good night, Severus."

"That's Headmaster Snape to you, Ginevra," he said, trying to sound like his old acerbic self but the inflection in his voice lacked firm conviction, and she smiled at him before disappearing down the stairs.

*How in the world have I become to be such a sap?* He thought as he watched the door to his office close behind her, and then hurried up the stairs again to get to Hermione. I can't believe I'm friends with the very students that made my first year as Headmaster hell. He saw Hermione perched on the sofa, waiting for him expectantly and grinned wickedly. "It's all your fault, you know," he said as he stalked up to her.

Her smile plummeted into a look of shock. "My fault?"

"Yes," he said, leaning down over her, grasping the back of the sofa with one hand. "Your fault," he repeated, tipping her face up and kissed her, claiming her mouth so that he literally shoved her back against the sofa. She responded to him instantly, trying to match his ardor. It amused him and fueled his lust even more. He stopped to

pick her up and carry her to their bedroom, smiling appreciatively that she was feeling amorous enough to kiss him all the way up to their bed. He set her down and began undressing her as if she were a child, lightly slapping her hands when they got in his way of disrobing her. As soon as her last sock hit the floor, leaving her in only her undergarments, he used his nonverbal Unfastening Charm to make his clothes open, shrugging his robe, coat and shirt off as his trousers fell to the floor. Smirking, he toed off his boots, pulled his pants down and slid off his socks, never losing eye contact with his witch. Her eyes widened when he stood and climbed on the bed over her, making her lay down beneath him.

He grasped her knickers, and with a wandless nonverbal severing charm, ripped the cloth right off her, making her squeal his name in indignation. "I did warn you," he said with mischievous mirth. He tore the front of her bra the same way.

"I'll have to replace those, you know," she chastised him as he took her nipple in his mouth.

"No, *I'll* replace them and with a *proper* brassier," he said against her skin. "If you wore the right kind, I wouldn't have to destroy them," he added switching to the other breast.

"The right kind?" she asked, but having anticipated her question he added, "I hate the ones that hook in the back." He reached down and spread her legs. "You've driven me mad all day with your taunting, woman," he said smoothly against the skin right below her ear, making her quiver and suck in her breath. "Merlin, what you do to me." He slid a finger into her heat, pumping them only a few times before her moisture spread, pleased that she'd become wet for him so quickly. She moaned deliciously, and he hoped she was ready for him because he was so hard, so randy, he didn't think he would have much stamina. Jerking off in the loo while giving her oral sex had only increased his need, and he didn't want to wait through foreplay to make her ready. He thrust another finger inside her and increased the pumping tempo, trying to gage her as he suckled her breast. He flicked his tongue on her nipple, and she gasped as her hips rose up into his hand the same time her inner walls clamped tighter. Taking that as a good sign, he withdrew his hand and slid his arm under her thigh, using his other hand to positioning himself at her entrance. She made a deep throaty moan as he slid into her and thrust hard into her depths.

He stood up, tucking his other arm under her left thigh and pulled to toward the edge of the bed. The angle allowed him to be upright, so he could watch her while also folding her body, making thrusting into her easier. He smirked as she lay there watching him pump into her helplessly, her breasts jiggling enticingly with each thrust. Her hands were free, but she couldn't do much with them but grab the quilt as he bucked in and out of her.

Or so he thought.

Her hand slid to one breast, cupping the tender flesh as he thrust into her repeatedly. His gonads tightened when she rolled the nipple between her fingers as she stared at him, and her other hand slid down her front to where he penetrated her, her fingers tickling his shaft each time he withdrew. He stared at her, enthralled as she caressed and toyed with her breast and fingered herself increasing her own pleasure and enflaming his own concupiscence. His breathing quickened, his heart increased tempo and he became lost, watching her. He felt the spasms began to roll at the base of his penis and the pressure increased painfully in his balls.

She licked her lips, rubbed her clit, and he pounded into her hard, driven by the incredibly erotic scene she was awarding him. His gonads restricted, drawing tightly. He closed his eyes momentarily, trying to forestall his impending orgasm, but when he opened them, his gaze locked onto the sight of her hand pleasuring her clitoris and his cock sliding in and out of her wet cunt. His testicles relaxed and loosened in response as his own release broke, and he exploded, gasping out in euphoric bliss, cursing himself for his loss of control. His come squirted out of his shaft over and over, filling her.

Hermione's breath hitched, her fingers moved more ardently, forcing her to catch up and follow him over into orgasm. Even though he'd softened somewhat, seeing her desperately making herself come, made his penis twitch, just hard enough to keep moving within her. He watched, enthralled, as she inhaled sharply, holding her breath as her head rolled back. Her body jerked and arched, angling up to him, and she closed her eyes, giving herself into her release with a euphoric expression on her face. He loved seeing her come loved how uninhibited she could be, how expressive she was. He managed to keep moving, watching her come, until her hand stilled and fell limply on the bed.

He dropped her leg and grabbed her hand, bringing it up to his mouth to suck on her fingers, relishing in the taste he never seemed to get enough of. "Gods, woman you're incredible," he said, dropping her other leg and leaning over her, taking in her wild hair splayed out on the bed, the sweaty flush of her skin and satiated look in her eyes. She was glorious.

She smiled up at him contentedly. "I could say the same thing about you."

Not caring about their clothes, he climbed into bed as she scooted to lay her head on her pillow. She turned to him as he reached out to pull her into his arms and sleep. He smiled tiredly when she kissed his nose. "Aren't you sleepy?" he asked, waiting for her to settle down.

"Not particularly," she replied, reaching up to caress his face. She brushed his hair back, and he opened his eyes. "You're not the dark, dangerous and brooding wizard you used to be."

He huffed in derision. "I can still make the first- through fifth-year students scamper out of my way and jump with only a word or cower with a mere scowl," he said in his smooth teaching voice.

"True," she replied. "Personally, I like this you, better." She kissed his nose again.

"Impertinent witch," he sneered softly, but his intended disdain was sorely lacking.

She laughed softly. "I've tamed the snarly, snarky, greasy git, bat of the dungeons," she said between giggles.

He wiped a hand on his face, and then wrapped his arm around her. "I'm still snarly, snarky and an acerbic git. I've simply relocated to higher accommodations. Now," he kissed her head, "go to sleep or I'll prove it to you."

She kissed his chest. "I love you, you know."

"I know." He leaned back and kissed her forehead, then relaxed into slumber.

~oOo~

Severus hated looking for her, but since she'd been given her own suite attached to *their* sitting room it seemed that he needed a tracing charm just to keep track of her. Their connection through the Bond came in helpful, he could always tell in which direction she was, so he'd ruled out the library or the potions lab she and Ginny used in the dungeons, but he hated the fact that the rooms off their sitting room only gave him a singular vague direction, not an exact pinpoint. Worse was when she'd been in the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Luna last week; he'd had a sense that she was on the seventh floor, but he hadn't been able to pinpoint her location. She was in the castle, rather there but not there. It had been infuriating. He'd paced the corridor, his irritation mounting as the minutes had ticked by, snarling and snapping at the Gryffindors until Hermione exited through a door that had not been there previously with her two friends and asked him benignly what was wrong.

He entered Hermione's study, looking for her. The bouquet of Lucius' roses now sat on the table between the armchairs that faced the lounge. He'd been glad when he'd noticed that Lucius' flowers had been removed from their sitting room, but to find them here was like a punch to his gut. The large white bouquet made him scowl at Lucius' audacity: he knew that the white rose was a symbol of honor, reverence and new beginnings, white stock was the symbol of happy life and contented existence, and that the Rudbeckia flower, known universally as the lover's daisy, was a symbol love's strength. But Severus hadn't needed his friends intervention, he'd done well enough on his own; his gifts had been sufficient and well received.

He still recalled seeing the blooms blush the evening Hermione and all her friends had been together in the sitting room, and most recently when she'd been sitting here with Potter, heads together conspiratorially; the ridiculous blooms of the lover's daisies had been a deep, dark pink. Clearly after everything they had been through, she still

harbored strong feelings for Potter. He felt the irrational urge to blast the flowers. Instead, he turned and stormed across the room; he hadn't needed the added insult and reminder of the flowers.

Calming himself first, he peered into her bedroom (not that she'd ever sleep in that room if he'd have his way) finding the room empty. So was her bathroom. Sighing, he turned and stormed into her parlor, startling the three occupants. "Severus?" Hermione asked, her wand still pointed at the black Shepherd sitting on the floor with its tongue hanging out and its tail wagging happily. "Is everything all right?"

Luna looked up at him with a serene smile while petting a black Labrador, and Ginny cocked an eyebrow at him, waiting for his response as he inhaled deeply. "It's fine," he said after quickly regaining his composure. He nearly tripped over a rock as he approached Hermione and stepped over a log. "I have a letter for you." He held out the letter Pepper had delivered and watched as Luna played with the dog, making it roll over so she could scratch its belly. He looked up at Hermione, adding, "And we've been invited to dine at the Malfoy's," with a definitive air and waited for her to argue.

"When?" she asked calmly, accepting the proffered letter.

"Tonight," he said, admiring the level of animation Ginny and Hermione achieved with the transformation. The two dogs behaved exactly as dogs should, the dogs even had limited improvisation of their movements without needing magical management or specifications as previously required. Naturally he knew of the girls' Transformation project, the transfiguration of an inanimate object into an animated one, and both had managed to make large leaps in the animation of a transfigured object, but he knew that Hermione was still unhappy with their results. "The Burkes were invited for dinner this Friday, and Sidney Burke apparently asked if we'd be included. Sidney indicated his daughter, Evelyn Ashby, wanted to meet you."

Hermione smiled, a reaction he'd not expected. "I'd be delighted to go."

He watched as Ginny terminated the spell, and the dog transformed back into a lump of basalt rock. "If you want, I can bottle up the potions," Ginny said as Hermione made her Shepherd revert back into a large piece of granite with a flick of her wand.

"All right," she replied absentmindedly as she read his great-grandfather's letter. If she was at all perturbed that he'd opened it, it didn't show on her face at all. She laughed softly.

"What does he say?" Ginny asked.

"Hermione, of course I received your letter," Hermione read aloud. "No, I don't do Easter." She chuffed a laugh. "I haven't bothered with the holidays since Eileen left for school." Her smile faded. "They only made Deidre cry so I stopped allowing the house-elves to mention them or to decorate. Besides, won't you be celebrating it at school with my great-grandson?"

She looked up and smiled at him, and he raised an eyebrow back at her in question. Of course they would be celebrating it together, but knowing his witch, she was hedging something, and he was certain he could guess what it was. "I am doing better," she continued reading. "Pepper still tries to feed me five to six times a day, and I've gained nearly a stone. Miss Alden is constantly hovering about, meddlesome witch. At least she's not trying to kill me, so yes, I'm keeping her around for a while. Thank you for the picture. You look happy, but why didn't my great-grandson smile?"

"Which picture?" he asked, wondering if the old man had put it on the piano with the others. He was still getting over his surprise that she was corresponding with his great-grandfather.

Hermione looked up at him with a glint in her eyes. "The one from the Ministry Ball. I had a few copies made," she said, folding up Talfryn's letter and placing it carefully in her pocket.

"And to whom did you send these copies?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"One is for my parents, if I can restore their memories. I sent one to Harry and another to Luna she wanted one, and of course to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley," she replied, and he fought the urge to remark. "I also had a few nonmoving ones made for a few of my relatives."

"Which relatives?" he asked, realizing that he didn't know anything about her family at all. She of course, knew all about his family, well, the Prince side, but nothing about the Snapes. And it would stay that way if he had any say in the matter.

"Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Marciel, Uncle Christian and Aunt Maureen, and I have one for both my Grandmother Merle and my Aunt Julianne, but I'd have to restore Aunt Julianne's memories as well before I give it to her."

"Did you want them on your guest list?" Ginny asked, and Hermione shrugged.

"I always liked Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Marciel, but they were always wary of me because of my magical outbursts as a child, and my cousin, Jean-Alexandre, is afraid of me. I doubt they would come. My Uncle Christian, Aunt Maureen and two cousins might, but most likely they'll send an invitation for us to come to France instead. I haven't seen them in years not since my summer holiday after my second year. My grandmother Merle has Alzheimer's, she won't be able to come. And then there are my parents unless I can restore their memories and explain why I did it, they..."

Severus and Ginny both moved forward, but Severus reach her first. He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. It was awkward with both Luna and Ginny watching them, well, Luna was actually intently inspecting the log for something or other, but Hermione wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. "Thank you, but it's all right," she said. She looked up and gave him one more hug before letting go. "I always knew it would be awkward, me being a witch and not being able to tell them anything about magic or the magical world. I hated being told by the Ministry witch that I'd have to let them all go, but really, its hard hiding what I am and pretending to be normal." She looked at Ginny. "It's why your family means so much to me, like having a family that understands and accepts me for being me."

Ginny stepped forward and hugged Hermione. "You'll always have us," Ginny said, smiling at Severus over Hermione's shoulder as Luna came up and wrapped her arms around the pair. "You're practically an honorary Weasley!"

Severus suppressed a groan at the pronouncement.

"And you have Neville and me," Luna said ardently. "Friends forever, right?"

"On that note," he said, backing up. "I have correspondence to attend to and a staff meeting in an hour to discuss next year's marketing campaigns." He managed to escape before the girls became too sentimental, or worse sappy.

~H~

Ginny and Hermione sat across from each other at the table Dezzie had put in Hermione's study. They had several validations to finish for Professor Reynolds and their progress report on their N.E.W.T. level Transfiguration project to complete. Beside Ginny's elbow was her N.E.W.T. level thesis and her report on her success for her charms that created animated cognitive responses in an inanimate object that had been transfigured into an animated object.

"Too bad the flowers are starting to wilt," Ginny said, eyeing them sadly.

Hermione paused to glance over at her bouquet from Mr. Malfoy. The flowers were finally starting to fade, the petals of the Rudbeckia flowers curling downward and they didn't change hue so readily anymore, and the roses and white stock were turning brown. She smiled wistfully. Hermione had decided to keep the large bouquet since, in a way, they were another reminder of the Malfoy's change of heart toward her, and it had been a very nice gesture on the part of Mr. Malfoy. She huffed a laugh, recalling Severus' reaction to the flowers, glaring at them each time they walked through their sitting room together each morning. For some reason he didn't like seeing the flowers,



but Hermione loved the way they had blushed dark pink each time she'd thought of him. "Yes, it's about time to throw them away," she said sadly.

"Too bad they won't go to seed. Mum would have loved trying to get them to propagate," Ginny stated as she signed the validation report and rolled it up.

Hermione gaped at her friend.

"What?" Ginny asked, meeting Hermione's stunned stare. "She's always wanted some for the garden."

"They won't go to seed!?" Hermione said somewhere between a question and exclamation, her mind seemingly stuck mid-thought, trying to recall something that was just not coming to her. "Why don't they why won't they?" She knew why. *You can't get seeds from cut flowers due to the energy it takes which the individual flowers can't draw from water alone! You have to let them go to seed before you cut them...* She looked at the wilting flowers. *The Rudbeckia flower the lover's daisies. No, not a daisy, it's a plant species in the family Asteraceae! The species are herbaceous, mostly perennial plants, grown for showy flowers, used in perfume and... potions?*

"Some flowers are easier to propagate from cut flowers than others... Hermione?"

But Hermione had set down her quill and was walking over to her bookshelf. "I aren't Rudbeckia flowers used in potions?"

"Yes," Ginny said slowly, turning in her chair to watch her. "The flowers are used in potions as are the taproots..."

"The flowers; is it the bracts, florets, stamens, carpals, sepal, ovaries..." She opened one book after another trying to remember what was eluding her. She dumped Thomas Vaughan's *Herbal Tinctures and Potions* on her desk and then checked Spillitons' Grimoire of Arcane Potions, vol I and set it aside as well, opening the second volume. All three mentioned the roots and flower heads as ingredients. "Argh, it's not here!" She checked the list of flowers in *Encyclopedia of Herbal Remedies, vol I* and set it aside, picking up volume three, then volume four. Like the others, Jigger's *Advanced Formulas and Drafts* only mentioned the flower head and the roots.

"We have to go to the library," Hermione announced, setting down the book.

"It's less than an hour until curfew," Ginny called out, jumping to her feet and following Hermione as she ran from the room.

"I'm going to be library, Severus," Hermione said as she hurried past his desk. "I'll try to be quick, but I might be back right after curfew."

"Hermione?" he asked, then barked, "Ginevra," making Ginny stop. "Explain?"

"I can't! But I have to go, please don't expel me," she replied and hurried after Hermione. Ginny managed to catch up to Hermione in the corridor outside the library. "What has your wand in a knot?"

"Rudbeckia flowers find any reference to the Rudbeckia flower parts used in potions. I have to know which part of the flower is used. The specific part," Hermione said, running for the shelves on potions. "Check that side and I'll check this one," she said, ignoring Madam Pince's admonishments.

"But what am I looking for?" Ginny asked in a loud hiss, grabbing the first book.

"You'll know when you see it," Hermione said, doing the same. She scanned the ingredient lists in one book after another, growing frustrated. There weren't that many potions that used the flower. She discarded several and piled up those that had lengthy descriptions. It was here, in one of these, she knew it.

"Nothing," Ginny announced as Hermione turned and said, "Keep looking, I'm going to the Herbology section."

Hermione searched through any book that mentioned propagation and germination of the Rudbeckia flower. She knew she'd seen it, but couldn't remember where. The pressure of finding it before Madam Pince threw them out was adding to her stress level. *Why can't I remember...?* she chastised herself as she set Beaumont Marjoribanks' *Herbal Species of Great Britain and Ireland* back on the shelf. *Modern Magical Herbology* by Derwent Shimpling only mentioned propagating Rudbeckias either by dividing the taproots or starting seedlings in peat cups in a greenhouse. She skipped *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore because she had a copy of it on her desk.

Shimpling's *Harvesting Seeds From Magical Botanicals* however, mentioned how to determine if the flower head held viable seeds.

In Tildon Toot's, *Best Garden Tips Every Homeowner Needs*, there were moving illustrations for the process of natural reproduction from the parent stock. Then on the next page, in the section for deadheading flowers, was the mention she needed, *'Allow several of the flowers to dry and turn brown. Select only those flower heads that are perfectly formed and snip the flower head and set in a tray until the seeds darken for use in potions. Hold each seed head over a pie plate and gently crumble the seed head, then blow lightly to separate chafe from seeds.'* "Each flower head produces one hundred black seeds if fully formed" she read aloud with exuberant elation. She'd found it!

She marked the page with a slip of paper from her pocket. Finally she found it!

To be thorough, she checked Harvey Rosenbury's *Cultivating and Harvesting Semi-Sentient Botanicals, vol II, Botanicals Specifically Used In Potions* There on page two hundred and ninety-four it specifically stated that the flower heads held exactly one hundred seeds per flower. She placed a marker and stacked it on top of Tildon Toot's and Shimpling's books.

Hermione turned to carry her three books over to Ginny, bumping into her friend at the end of the aisle. "Merlin, how could I be so stupid! The seed is a flower head!" Ginny exclaimed the same time that Hermione said, "They seed the flower heads produce *one hundred seeds!*"

"Girls, the library is closing," Madam Pince scolded them. "You must leave now."

"Yes, of course, sorry, ma'am, I lost track of the time. Madam Pince, please, may I check these out before we go?" Hermione asked as sweetly as she could.

The librarian frowned but relented. "The liberties I allow you to make, Mrs. Snape," she said sternly. "Hand me your lending cards. I expect the books back within the proper lending period." She collected the lending cards and shooed the girls out of her library.

Hermione and Ginny ran all the way back to Severus' office and dumped their books on his desk.

"It's not a seed it's a flower head!" Hermione said the same time Ginny said, "We found it it's a flower!" ignoring his scowl at their intrusion.

"It's mentioned in the potions books as a flower, not a seed," Ginny said, opening one of her books the same time Hermione stated, "The Rudbeckia flower produces one hundred seeds" while opening Tildon Toot's book to her marker.

"See?" both girls said at the same time.

He stood and turned both books around to read the page. "That's why I couldn't find it anywhere, I was looking for a seed not a flower head," Hermione said, opening up Shimpling's book.

"And all this time we've been searching, the flowers have been here under our noses," Ginny stated.

Severus looked up as Hermione opened Rosenbury's book to her marker. "Very good, I'm impressed," he said softly. "I'll run this by Reginald in the morning, and we'll do the calculations." He closed the book. "Now, you, Ginevra, are out past curfew," he said, his tone chastising. Hermione opened her mouth to retort as Ginny sighed dejectedly. "However, under the circumstances, I'll write you a note excusing you *this time*."

Both girls smiled at him. "Thank you, Severus," they said in unison.

He quickly drafted a short note and handed it to Ginny. She thanked him again, said good night to them both and hurried from the office. "We solved it," Hermione said, feeling elated. "Deductive reasoning and research..."

"You did well," he said, coming around his desk. "If the calculations prove correct, yes, you've solved the missing ingredient. But that doesn't absolve you from being out in the corridors after curfew."

"But..."

"No, buts; you've violated curfew," he said, and her heart sank.

"I'm sorry," she replied, looking down at his desk.

He tipped her head up, looking intently into her eyes. "Kiss me and I'll let it pass," he said.

She grinned happily, throwing her arms around his neck. "Gladly!"

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Validation and Rediscovery/Congratulations

*Chapter 60 of 63*

Severus and Reginald work to complete the Médousa Potion and the validations commence. Hermione also makes a new friend and makes a mature decision regarding some possible thing that happened in Severus' past.



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Validation and Rediscovery/Congratulations

Hermione had Harvey Rosenbury's *Cultivating and Harvesting Semi-Sentient Botanicals, vol II, Botanicals Specifically Used In Potions* propped up against the pumpkin juice pitcher so she could read it while eating. She had woken early, a habit she seemed to be picking up from Severus, and found herself once again alone in the big bed, another almost-daily occurrence she was getting used to. So she'd dressed, packed her school bag for the day and came to the Great Hall, finding herself one of the first to sit at the Gryffindor table. She hated this new morning routine, wishing that she could be getting ready for the day with her friends, laughing and talking as they dressed, since it seemed she wasn't spending her morning with Severus. But she now lived with Severus, her Bonded mate and fiancée. She wondered if things would remain the same as his wife. Time would tell.

She had no idea where Severus was; he'd not been in his office, nor was he here at the staff table. Her intuition told her she might find him in the dungeons, but she didn't want to go down there and disturb him if he was working on the formulations for the potion. She'd knew that he could be quite irritable when anyone, herself included, disturbed him when he was intently focused on something.

She wanted to ask him about the Médousa Potion and whether she was right about the seeds. So far he was avoiding answering her, simply saying that he and Reginald had yet to finish their formulations and calculations to complete the potion's directions, and he'd let her know when they were done. It was maddening. She knew that this part of the process should be left to him and Master Reynolds, but she hated the waiting. In her heart, she knew she and Ginny were right the one thousand seeds were ten Rudbeckia flower seed heads. She simply wanted confirmation from him.

She saw Baltazar enter with several members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, all carrying their brooms. Hermione smiled at Baltazar's appearance: his school robe was open, his hair was tousled, rivaling Harry's on a good day, and looking as if he'd slept in his shirt and trousers. "Good morning, Baltazar," she said with a warm smile as he approached down the aisle on the other side of the table. He stopped and looked at her at the sound of his name. "You're up early."

"I'm always up early," he replied, looking down the table then back at her.

She flipped her hand palm up to indicate he sit down as Ginny climbed in next to her. "Always reading. We missed you this morning," Ginny said as Baltazar looked back at Hermione as if considering, then sat down across from her, setting his tablet and slide rule on top of his copy of Spore's *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungus* next to his plate. Jack, Ernie and Leland slid onto the bench next to Baltazar as Ginny asked Hermione if Severus had said anything.

"Not yet," Hermione admitted. "I'll try asking him again this afternoon."

Ginny looked up at Baltazar and reminded him about the Quidditch practice on Thursday evening. "I love the passing plays you suggested, today. Oh, and Amy Hollingham asked her parents for a Nimbus 3000 and they're sending her one!"

Hermione shook her head and went back to her reading as the conversation across from her centered on Quidditch. When the mail arrived, the school owl Hermione had used to send a letter to Talryn landed next to her and held out his leg proudly. She untied the letter and gave the owl a piece of bacon before carefully breaking the wax seal.

*Hermione,*

*No need to keep asking, I'm the same as I was last week. I'm sorry that your experiments in Transfiguration aren't going well, but sometimes things just cannot be done. Even magic has its limits. Take the credit for what you've accomplished and move on. Are you going to pursue a career in Transfiguration instead of Potions or Charms? I know a witch in the field who will accept an apprentice. If my great-grandson won't write you a letter of reference, I can provide you with a letter of introduction if you want.*

*Talryn*

Hermione smiled and tucked his letter in her pocket. She loved the gruff forthrightness of his letters and how he never minced words. His offer to introduce her to a Transfiguration master was heartwarming, and she wondered who the witch was since it obviously wasn't Professor McGonagall.

She looked up at the staff table and sighed. Most of the staff had sauntered in by now, taking their seats, but the Headmaster's chair remained empty. Hermione finished her breakfast while she read. By the time Alestra, Veronica and Wendlynne came down, Hermione had finished her breakfast as well as her book. She said good-bye to her friends and went to the library to exchange a few books before lessons began.

~S~

Severus and Reginald faced two blackboards; one with the copies showing their most current possibilities for the directions of the Médousa Potion which stood next to the one with their notations and Alchemic and Arithmancy calculations. Even though they had finally broken the curse on the directions from three sources, there were still inconsistencies among the three versions which were written in layered colors on the blackboard, with numerous circles, sections or words underlined and various arrows going in all directions. Several sheets of parchment, on which they had written the failures so they wouldn't be repeated, had been tacked to the frame.

From what Severus could determine, the development of the potion's base would take four hours to create, and it would have to simmer for at least six hours to blend properly.

"Arnica is a volatile oil, and it will react poorly with the stewed Mandrake," Reginald pointed out. Severus fully concurred. "And the common European limpets and Jack Jumpers heads will do little to quiet the brew however, the ground gotu kola leaves and Bungles Banes should settle the potion."

"Three hours later," Severus stated, indicating the timing sequence. "The fire will have to be low or we'll melt the cauldron. The preparation for the whelk is time consuming, that will take a good hour on its own, and will have to be done while the potions simmer since they are most potent when fresh." Unfortunately, they still hadn't determined when to add the Cajanus. It was still listed both before and after the one thousand Rudbeckia seeds, so that needed to be worked out. So far he and Reginald were disagreeing on that point.

"And we've yet to decide on the bicorn horn in the third phase we still can't confirm if it's best to add it before or after the Leguminosae roots..." Reginald stated. "Either way the potion will be volatile again possibly gaseous, so we should tell the girls to be cautious."

Severus flicked his wand and made the chalk write 'Use the Bubblehead Charm' as a warning in the margin. "The phoenix tears will have to be added while stirring because of the toxic nature of the potion at this point. My guess is to divide it evenly, one drop after each seventh circular movement. Once in, it should stabilize the potion. We still have yet to determine the size of the pipette." He looked at the parchments in his hands. His potions kit had fifteen standard pipette sizes, varying in capacity, graduations and tip style, each delivering a different milliliter measure not to mention that the temperature and the specific gravity of the reagent had to be considered as well.

He read his initial assessment. It was accepted in potions that with phoenix tears, each tear was a measurement, but the directions said 'six drops of Aquila's tears' not 'six phoenix tears,' and based on his collection techniques, twelve of Fawkes' tears made one milliliter. However, Aileen was a juvenile phoenix, her tears, although potent, were smaller in size than Fawkes' tears had been he'd noticed that when she'd healed Hermione's arm. So he had to determine which pipette would deliver the right amount of tears for the potion to stabilize.

"The use of the poisonous fly agaric fungus will increase in toxicity when combined with the shredded Astragalus roots. The potion would be temperamental at that point, and arsenic and Bluepike crab roe might react, as will the carambola juice, but the crushed mangoes and moon sugar should halt the reaction."

Severus closed his eyes. They were so close and yet had so much to resolve before he would let Hermione attempt to brew the potion, and she was itching to get started. "I'll work on whether the Cajanus should be added before or after the Rudbeckia seeds," he stated, and Reginald nodded.

"All right, and I'll begin three cauldrons of potion base," Reginald said, reaching for the pewter cauldrons.

Without a word, Severus sat down at his desk and pulled out his Trigonometric scale slide rule and Wrentlock free dish-double cursor circular slide rule to work on his mathematical calculations, while Reginald set up a cauldron to begin the creation of the base.

~H~

Narcissa's letter had said a small dinner party, and Hermione knew that Victoria and Sidney Burke would be bringing their daughter, Evelyn Ashby, but she didn't know who else might be coming or how formal the dinner party would be. Hermione had chosen to wear her color-changing silk gown that transitioned between blue and green hues as she moved. She had no idea if the gown was proper or not since the neckline hinted at more cleavage than it actually showed and a good portion of her back was bare, but so far she hadn't had any occasion to wear the lovely gown. She put on the black heels that Narcissa had given her and Delphinia's pearls. When she entered their sitting room, to her surprise, Severus had only removed his teaching robe and changed his trousers and boots, and even though he still wore his frockcoat and nicer trousers, she wondered if maybe she'd overdressed for the occasion.

But his gaze had swept over her, darkening appreciatively, and she relaxed. His eyes narrowed questioningly at her question, "Are you ready?"

"Of course. I've only been waiting on you."

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting for long," she said as she accepted her cloak from Dezzy.

He simply shook his head and led the way to his office, opening the door for her and following her out of the tower. Severus was very quiet as they left the castle, his dark eyes distant.

"How are things going with your calculations?" she asked as they rode in the carriage to the gates.

His eyes snapped to hers. "Hermione..." he growled.

"I'm only asking," she sighed. "I hate it that we can't even talk about what you're doing."

He closed his eyes briefly, then said, "It's going slowly" as he turned to the window. "There are two points in the potion where the instructions disagree, and until we work

out in which order to add those two ingredients, I am unable to determine the exact amount of tears needed."

"So it's not the seeds it's the order of the ingredients and the tears," she repeated, more to affirm it to herself.

"No, it was not the seeds" he said with a quirk of his lips.

She smiled at the confirmation. "How close are you?" she asked, carefully keeping her tone conversational.

"As you know, the directions simply stated three ounces of *Cajanus*. We've narrowed it down to the legumes of the *Cajanus cajan*," he said, and she caught herself before she added, *also known as pigeon pea or tropical green pea*, quoting her books. "Once we know whether it should be added before or after the *Rudbeckia* seeds, then we will be able to determine when to add the bicorn horn, and that will tell me how which size pipette dropper is needed for the tears," he continued uninterrupted.

*The actual amount of the liquid in each drop depends on the size of the opening in the end of the pipette, and the temperature and the specific gravity of the reagent*, she quoted softly to herself from her *Magical Drafts and Potions* book. "So it's still trial and error."

"Developing new potions is time consuming, even under the best of conditions," he said evenly.

She knew that he'd created several potions that saved many lives, including Mr. Weasley's, during the war. "I can't imagine how stressful it must be when you're under a time constraint or have someone's life on the line," she said with a sense of awe, remembering her week trying to find a way to revive Severus.

"That's when it's exciting," he stated with a crooked smile. He turned thoughtful. "I wasn't always so fortunate; there were times when I was unsuccessful." She understood what he meant; he hadn't been able to save Dumbledore's cursed arm, and she let the subject drop.

The carriage came to a stop, and he exited first, offering her his hand to disembark. She faced him, expecting to be whisked away to their destination, but he cupped her face gently and kissed her tenderly. She closed her eyes, savoring the moment. One of his hands pressed on the small of her back, holding her firmly, the other still on her cheek, yet he seeming to be restraining himself, even though she reciprocated in the dance of tongues and lips. He stopped, gently nipped her lip and then kissed her cheek.

He held her, and she relaxed in his arms, giving him as much time as he needed.

The way he was delaying their departure, she wondered if he wasn't looking forward to the dinner party. It couldn't be the Malfoys, he enjoyed their company, unless his reluctance had something to do with the Burkes. She thought back over the few times they'd seen the Burkes and tried to bring to mind any indication of unease in their interaction but she came up short. The Burkes were not at all indifferent toward him, as far as Hermione could recall. But come to think on it, the few times she remembered seeing Severus with Mr. Burke had been in Lucius' company or with other men and Severus had been befittingly polite in their company, but not always at ease. Could it be they were possibly one of the families he'd betrayed, or worse, failed in some way when he'd been a Death Eater?

She began to shiver and realized they'd been standing there a while. "Is everything all right?" she asked softly.

She felt his chest rise and then fall as he exhaled against her hair. "Yes," he replied finally. They stood like that for a while longer until he let her go.

"Ready?" she asked, tucking her arm firmly in his with an encouraging smile, hoping that whatever made him pensive wouldn't make tonight too uncomfortable for him.

He Apparated them without comment. They arrived in an open vestibule and walked into a large hallway. He led her away from the drawing room with purple walls to a room decorated in peach with white trimmings and wainscoting. There, in the delicate French baroque chairs, Narcissa sat with Mrs. Victoria Burke, Katherine Dietrich and to Hermione's delight Fanny Gabnold. The men, standing by the heavily ornate marble fireplace, turned to face them, and Lucius lifted his glass slightly in greeting. Astoria, who was sitting next to a woman Hermione recognized as the one who played the harp at the Burke's party, turned to look in her direction. Astoria rose and came up to Hermione and Severus, smiling warmly. "I'm so glad you came," she said, and Hermione smiled back. "Hermione, I want to introduce you to Evelyn Ashby."

Hermione was swept away to join the ladies as Severus walked stately toward the men. "Hermione, good to see you," Fanny said, turning in her seat to face her as she approached.

Hermione quickly greeted each woman, then sat on the settee next to Miss Ashby as Astoria suggested. "Evelyn, this is Hermione Granger, fiancée and Bonded mate to Headmaster Snape," she said, taking Hermione's hand and placing it in Miss Ashby's before sitting herself as the older women reengaged in their conversation, leaving the younger girls to talk.

"I am so glad to make your acquaintance. I've heard so much about you," Miss Ashby said, her fingers gently caressing Hermione's hand as if reading it. "I loved reading about all the things you've done and the adventures you've had you've really had an exciting life." The curiosity evident in her voice reminded Hermione of the first impression the girls in Ginny's dorm had had of her.

"Believe me, it is not at all how it sounds in books," Hermione said.

"But you've fought Death Eaters, rode a dragon to break out of Gringotts, invented cures and validated potions you're a real life heroine," Evelyn said, still holding Hermione's hand as if she didn't want to let her go.

"Well, when you put it that way," Hermione said, making Astoria and Evelyn laugh. Evelyn, it turned out, was a lovely lady, soft spoken and shy. However, since Evelyn sometimes stared past her, Hermione was reminded of a blind patient of her father's, Mr. Donnelley, who had requested to touch her face, and her mother's, when they'd met. "Did you would you like to touch my face?" she asked.

"You don't mind?" Miss Ashby asked, smiling. "Few allow me; I have to go by magical impression alone." Hermione turned toward her fully and took Miss Ashby's hand, gently placing it on her cheek. Miss Ashby agilely touched her face and gingerly touched her hair. "You've very soft curls. I don't know why I thought your hair would be straight, but your curls are nice." She dropped her hands. "Thank you." She dropped her hands to her lap. "I have a tutor who helps me get around when I'm at home, but I feel lost without him when I go out anywhere," she explained.

"Have you ever thought of acquiring a Guide dog?" Hermione asked, wondering why the tutor didn't travel with her.

"A what dear?" Mrs. Burke asked.

"They are dogs specifically trained to lead blind people around safely. Muggles use them," Hermione said, then bit her lip, not sure how it would be received. But both Evelyn and Mrs. Burke were intrigued, so Hermione told her what she knew. "My parents they are dentists they have a patient who uses one, a golden lab. The dog is exceptionally well trained and very patient."

"Sidney," Mrs. Burke called over to her husband. "You must come and hear Hermione talk about Guiding dogs!"

Her husband walked up, followed by the other men. "What's this about guiding dogs?" Mr. Burke asked, and Hermione quickly repeated her explanation as he listened intently, glancing lovingly at his daughter and back. She could tell he'd do anything for his daughter, even consider buying her a Muggle assistance dog. "How does one obtain a Guiding dog?"

Hermione felt stumped. "I think that they are provided by a Muggle charity that supplies the dogs for registered blind people and I don't think that the new owner has to pay anything apart from vet's bills and food... I could make a few inquiries, if you like." She looked at Severus. "Could the Healers at St. Mungo's register Evelyn with the proper Muggle authorities?"

"I can assist you with that process," Mr. Malfoy stated to everybody's surprise, and Hermione along with everyone else, turned to stare at him. He raised a quick eyebrow at their response and his lips quirked. "Contrary to popular assumption, I *am* capable of interaction with Muggle bureaucracy...." He looked at the Burkes. "Sidney, Victoria, I'm sure that with Hermione's help, I can find you a suitable dog."

The rest of the evening went well. Hermione fully enjoyed herself. Dinner had been delicious, the conversation warm and friendly. Afterwards the men retired to the Gentleman's parlor for cigars and brandy, and the women gathered in the salon for after dinner cordials and mints. Evelyn offered to play the Malfoy's harp, and Narcissa summoned for Draco to come accompany her on the grand piano in the Malfoy's music room. The music was lovely. Hermione had no idea Draco was so accomplished a musician, but according to Astoria, he'd had lessons for years.

At the end of the evening, Hermione said good-bye to the women and thanked both Lucius and Narcissa for including her and Severus. Evelyn even asked Hermione to write to her. "Although, I have to send back my missives in a sonant letter," Evelyn said wistfully.

"A sonant letter? Is that a version of the Howler?" Hermione asked her curiosity aroused.

"I'm not sure. I could have my tutor write it out for you," Evelyn said.

Hermione gave Evelyn's hand resting on her arm a light squeeze. "I look forward to knowing how to do it. Then we can talk to each other."

Severus took Hermione's arm and Apparated them to the school gates, and they climbed into the waiting carriage. When the Thestral began walking up the path, she could see the tension leave his body, but there were minute lines in his forehead and he was staring out the window, deep in thought. She shifted to his side of the carriage and snuggled up to him. "Are you cold?" he asked as he raised his arm and settled it across her shoulders.

"Not particularly," she said, snuggling closer, feeling a little tired after the long evening. "I like sitting like this with you."

His arm tightened, drawing her closer, and he kissed the side of her head. She turned, and placed a kiss on his jaw. "Severus, is everything all right?" she asked softly. "Don't just say it's fine, you've been... quiet, somewhat distant. Is it the Burkes? Don't you like them?"

"I admire the Burkes very much; they are fine people," he replied, but his voice sounded flat. "I noticed you made friends with their daughter."

She nodded, saying, "Yes, she's lovely." Something though bothered him. "Did something happen to the Burkes?" she asked tentatively. "I mean during the war?"

She felt him stiffen and quickly added, "Not that I am asking what it was, but was there? Because from what I can tell, apparently they like you."

"Victoria does not," he replied. "Let it go, Hermione, please."

"Enough said." *I was right, it's some regret from his past involving the Burkes* She knew that Severus carried many regrets and plenty of guilt about things in his past. She looked up at him. She naturally wondered what it was, but knew he wouldn't talk about it. "Should I not pursue a friendship with Evelyn?"

He sighed heavily. "No, as far as I know, she doesn't have many friends, and you seemed to get on well." He turned to look at her. "It would be good for her to get to know you. I was amused by your suggestion of the Guide dog."

"I was more amused by Mr. Malfoy's suggestion that I help him find her one. I mean, I will. I just have to go to a Muggle library to get the name of the organization and how to apply."

"I will be in London next week; I could probably find it for you," he stated, and he made a rueful grimace when she gaped at him. "I know how to use the phone book and can look things up in registries." He paused, then continued, "It made me valuable."

She realized what he meant. "I would appreciate it," she said and let the subject, and subsequent questions that came to mind, drop. She settled back, enjoying the presence of his company.

They walked up to the tower quietly, his boots making hardly a sound on the stone corridors. She smiled, knowing he used a spell on them so as to move about quietly, allowing him to catch misbehaving students unawares. She stifled a yawn as she rode the stairs up to his office. "Tired?" he asked softly.

"A little," she admitted.

Once in the room he turned to the wardrobe and began to undress. Hermione carefully removed her robes and pulled out the night slip he'd given her for Valentine's Day, but when she turned to face him, he was climbing into his side of the bed. She joined him and scooted over to his side. He wrapped his arms about her, pulling her close, and exhaled heavily as he relaxed, still holding her tightly. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked, hoping for more of a reaction.

He kissed her head and said, "Yes, everything is fine," softly, almost drowsily.

*I hope that whatever had happened could be forgiven or at best put away in the past* She settled in comfortably and relaxed, but she could tell he was not asleep. She listened to his breathing, wondering what had happened that Victoria Burke hadn't forgiven Severus for as she lay in the dark. Her mind came up with horrible scenarios, but she realized that this was part of his past he wanted to forget and leave behind. Whatever it was, she decided it best to let it go and leave in the past. Besides, there were so many things to look forward to, she didn't need to dwell on it any further, unless it harmed her new budding friendship with Evelyn.

Those were her last conscious thoughts before Hermione fell into a peaceful sleep.

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Unbeknownst to her, Severus lay quietly, taking comfort from Hermione's warmth and her very presence in his bed, deeply grateful that she hadn't hounded him for his melancholy, taciturn mood. He liked the Burkes; he especially liked and admired Sidney. But Victoria's occasional piercing stare and cool dismissal, all because of that thrice damned fouled up raid that happened eighteen years ago this very month, vexed his thoughts and had affected his mood.

Sidney's oldest boy, Anthony, had refused to join the Dark Lord, and thus he and his new wife had been killed and Evelyn had lost her sight. It still bothered Severus, especially since only four months later eight weeks after Draco had been born Lucius and Narcissa had introduced him to them formally during his induction into the social elite for his potions and Dark Arts expertise. No, Severus hadn't been present when it happened, but following his trail and the evidence given by Dumbledore, Victoria blamed Severus for not giving warning of the raid.

Trying not to disturb her, Severus looked at the witch lying in his arms and inhaled her scent. He didn't deserve the good fortune he had been bestowed and silently thanked Hermione for it. Severus closed his eyes and tried to sleep, focusing his thoughts on more pleasant memories, in hopes of staving off nightmares of his old life and his dark years.

~o0o~

Hermione felt she needed a break from revision.

Before, when residing in the Gryffindor Tower, her friends gave her enough distraction that she had to hide herself at times to get her schoolwork done, or remind them to do theirs. However, since moving in the Headmaster's Tower with Severus, all she did it seemed was to revise or work on her essays. She missed the playful interaction she'd had with her friends. Lately, when Ginny sought her out it was to work on their coursework or projects, and Luna always came up at least once or twice a week, bringing her own schoolwork with her, but the visits from the other girls were becoming fewer and fewer.

Severus too was very preoccupied as of late. When not busy at his desk, he would be down in the lab, either with Reginald or alone, and she was tired of being by herself so much of the time.

So, she decided that she could either seek out her friends in the Gryffindor Tower or possibly go to see Hagrid, or go find Severus. At the mere thought of him, she knew he'd be in the lab, working, and had a yearning desire to see him. She wondered what stage of the process he'd be working on as she walked down to his office and exited the tower, running quickly down the revolving stairs instead of riding them as she'd normally do.

As she made her way through the castle, she hoped he'd not mind the intrusion. Lately, the only time they had together had been after curfew or their few infrequent weekend lie-ins, and she really missed being with him. The thought of being with him made her heart race, and she quickened her step. He was alone and for some reason she knew he would be. She had to refrain from running down the stairs to the dungeons and forced herself to walk, not run, to his lab. The more she thought about being with him, really physically being with him, the stronger the urge to do so became.

She opened the door and slipped inside.

There he was; he'd turned to acknowledge her briefly before turning his attention back to his work. He looked so handsome; his hair was tied back, although a few strands had escaped and framed his face, and he wore his collarless, three-quarter sleeve brewing coat with his shirt sleeves rolled up, showing the tiny dark hairs on his forearms. He had a light sheen to his face, and he looked pleased, his lips drawn back in contented look of completion and achievement. Her mind immediately recalled how he looked after making love to her, exactly how he looked at this moment, and she wanted nothing more than to be the cause of that look.

He set down his stirring rod and watched the potion for a while, then checked his directions. She started unfastening her cravat and her buttons as she approached him, because she was feeling stifling due to the steamy heat in the room. "How is it going?" she tried to ask casually, but her throat was surprisingly dry. Merlin, she hoped he had reached a stopping point in his work. With a mischievous grin, she brazenly unfastened the button between her breasts.

"As soon as I add the Ashwinder eggs, it has to simmer for two hours, then I can begin," was all Hermione heard. *have two hours! Two full hours!* she thought, watching him carefully lay the three eggs on the surface of the potion with perfect precision and stirring them in slowly. He turned to face her, and she flung herself at him. "Hermione, what the..." he tried to say, but her mouth claimed his, and she kissed him, passionately attempting to deepen the kiss as his hands landed on her waist. He stood to his full height and drew his head back, and she mewled in protest, trying to pull his head down to hers.

Severus grabbed her arms and held her at arm's length, making her drop from being on her toes to flat-footed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I would think it was pretty obvious," she snapped, frowning at his reluctance. "But if you don't want me, I'll..."

"Not want you? Merlin, I would happily oblige, but this is not the place to be fooling about," he snapped. "There are volatile ingredients," his arm made a wide sweep, "dangerous ingredients and bubbling potions in hot pewter cauldrons in here." His arm dropped. "Not to mention sharp knives and instruments... You could be scalded, burnt or blown up! What are you thinking?"

"That you looked unbelievably sexy with your shirt sleeves rolled up, your hair tied back and sweaty while you were brewing..." He started to back her toward the door. "Fine, I'll leave, you don't have to..." she was cut off when her back hit the edge of the sink, not the door. "Sever...?"

She was silenced as his mouth crashed into hers and he wrapped his arms around her, pinning them to her sides. He was relentless, demanding and practically bent her backwards over the sink.

When he came up for air, she opened her mouth to speak but he placed a finger across her lips. "I am not tired of you. How in the world could you think I'd ever be tired of you?"

"I just thought," she started to say, but he laughed at her, a deep hearty laugh.

"You are the smartest, most idiotic person I know," he rumbled. She tried to protest, but his fingers pinched her lips closed. "No, I know you're clever very clever indeed but sometimes you don't think," he stated. "It is one of the most frustrating things about you." He let his hand drop. He leaned forward, looking her in the eyes. "So, you think I'm sexy, do you?" he asked.

Her eyes widened at his sudden change of demeanor. "Well..." She gave him a mischievous grin. "If you want to find out, then we have to take this someplace more appropriate, apparently. Or... I can leave you to your chemistry and dangerous and volatile ingredients and sharp implements." She made to leave but he blocked her exit. "Which shall it be?"

"I can't leave right now, I'll ruin it will explode," he replied as she fastened the button between her breasts, his gaze riveted to her hands. "I have to add the stewed Mandrake and Ashwinder eggs then I can set the base aside."

"Fine, I'll be in my room," she said as sultry as she could, teasingly toying at fastening her buttons. "Come and find me."

"All right, as soon as I'm finished here," he said with a slight hitch to his voice. He lowered his hands to his sides to let her go.

"Don't make me wait too long." She slipped away and stopped at the door to wink at him. "I may even let you take a bath with me."

She heard his loud "Uggh!" as she closed the door behind her. She fastened her blouse up properly and then hurried up the tower, knowing that he'd be up as soon as he could.

However, Hermione decided to finish her runes translations in her study until Severus came up for the night, then they could bathe together.

She was trying to find the translation of a rune she hadn't seen used before when the touch of a small hand on her arm startled her. She turned in her chair and smiled at the small house-elf standing behind her.

"Pepper is sorry, Miss. Pepper was told to give you this letter, Miss."

"Hello, Pepper," Hermione said, taking the letter. "What a nice surprise."

"Pepper is sorry to disturb you, Miss, but can Miss tell Pepper where to take a missive to master, Headmaster Snape?" she asked nervously.

"He is in the dungeons," Hermione said as she opened her letter. "He doesn't like being disturbed while brewing." She knew that having a house-elf pop in on him at an inopportune moment could be disastrous. "If you want, I can see that he gets the missive." Hermione looked at her watch and inwardly smiled at the time. "Or if you prefer, you can sit with me until he returns. He should be here in a few minutes."

"Sits? You invite Pepper to sits?" Pepper looked about the room as if confused, her ears quivering, wringing her hands and her eyes wide. "Miss lets Pepper sit... like a-a... equal?"

"It will make me nervous to have you just stand there, so yes, have a seat in one of the chairs," Hermione suggested. "Or I could make you a toy to play with."

"Play...?" Pepper asked as if the concept was utterly foreign to her.

Hermione smiled and read her letter while Pepper considered the chair Ginny frequently used with some trepidation before climbing up and sitting there, looking as if expecting chastisement any minute for her audacity.

Hermione,

*Unlike you, my great-grandson hasn't given me leave to use his given name. If he wants me to call him Severus, he can tell me himself. But you can relay my gratitude to him for the potions he continues to send me. His Rheumatoid Potion tastes better than the one Miss Alden makes, and I like his purple Restorative Sleeping Elixir. Not that I need help sleeping.*

*In regards to Miss Alden, she's working out fine. Not that I need her meddling in my drawers or trying to dress or bathe me. Pepper manages that well enough, and I don't want some young witch gaping at my privates.*

*Now, about Easter, why in tarnation would you want to come here? I told you we don't celebrate Easter. Don't you want to swap eggs at school and have the Easter feast with your friends?*

*And don't send any chocolate to my house-elves they are excited enough as it is, the buggers. By the way, what did you tell Pepper? She's acting conspiratorially again.*

Pepper's ears perked up and she announced, "Pepper hears Headmaster Snape!"

Hermione thought that she felt Severus in his office the same time that Pepper jumped from the chair and ran from the room. She rose and followed, finding Severus in his office reading a letter. "What does Talfryn want?" she asked, approaching him.

He shook his head. "It's from Miss Alden," he said, setting the letter on his desk. "She wants to know why my potions taste different than hers do. Apparently my great-grandfather refuses to take his potions, insisting they are foul."

Hermione smiled. "Because yours are made from your improved versions, aren't they?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not all of them; the purple Rejuvenating Elixir is Madam Pomfrey's creation." He looked at Pepper. "Tell Miss Alden I'll send her more Rejuvenating Elixir. The directions for the other one she wants is in last months' *Potions and Draughts Today*."

"Yes, master, Headmaster Snape, sir," Pepper said as she bowed, then she vanished with a pop

Hermione smiled knowing that Severus' Burn Paste and two pain potions as well as several of her and Ginny's validations had been published in the journal.

"And when my *Magical Potions and Draughts, A Guide to the Art of Potion Makings* published and I rewrite *Advanced Magical Potions and Draughts*, she can buy a copy of both of those, too."

"Severus?" Hermione gasped in surprise. "Does that mean you're...?"

He smiled proudly. "Considering all the validations you and Ginny have done, and the quality of the work you have both put forth, Whizz Hard Books and Dust and Mildewe have contacted me for the publication rights to my revision of the Potions textbooks. I even have an offer from Brookomore-Wordsworth Publishing and Wilder Wizarding Press."

She rushed forward, exclaiming, "Severus, that's wonderful" and hugged him.

His arms closed loosely about her waist. "I may even have your friend Luna Longbottom illustrate my books."

"Luna?" she asked, recoiling slightly to look him in the eye.

His lips curved into a grin. "Didn't you know she is an exceptional artist?"

Of course, she knew; she had seen the mural in Luna's bedroom last year. The portraits of her, Harry, Ron, Ginny and Neville had been really life like, and they had been painted strictly from memory.

"Every essay and test I received from her for six years had border decorations or had been elaborately illustrated," Severus was saying. "The ones she turned in for Defense were quite amusing."

No, she hadn't known that Luna had decorated her school papers, but she wouldn't put it past her friend. "We have to celebrate!" she exclaimed and called for Mispy. The elf appeared immediately and bowed. "Please set up our room in the East Tower for a special occasion. Severus and I have something to celebrate."

"No," Severus said, startling both Hermione and Mispy. "I would prefer to eat here," he said, brushing her hair off her shoulder to bare her neck.

"Are you sure?" she asked, blushing as he kissed her neck. "I..."

"I'm certain," he purred seductively in her ear.

"I'm so proud of you, Severus," Hermione gushed and he blushed slightly, although he began to unbutton her blouse. "Severus the portraits!"

"Fine," he said, but whispered in her ear, "Why don't we go upstairs, and you can show me how proud you are," making Hermione flush in anticipation.

She led the way up the sitting room, but pulled on his hand, stopping him from proceeding upstairs. "I have a better idea," she said cryptically leading him to her bathroom instead. Only last week Hermione had made mention to Dezzy that she wished she had a shower in her bathroom as she climbed into the tub. Dezzy had been utterly confused and tried to make the water rain down on Hermione, creating a horrible mess. Hermione had tried to explain a shower stall and shower heads, "It cascades down your body and rinses you....," but the young elf hadn't understood her. Kirch asked Hermione to explain it to him, and the results were amazing.

She led him to the glass fronted, smooth granite 'cavern' the elves had made, complete with hand-held massager shower heads, side spray sprouts and of course, a button that literally made rain fall from the ceiling. "I did promise you a bath," she said, starting on his buttons.

He gaped at her. "That is not a bathtub," he said, and she giggled.

"Nooo," she drew out slowly as she took a step back, adding, "it's better" as she unfastened her buttons. She unfastened her jeans, turned and pulled them down, along with her underwear, giving him a full view of her bottom as she removed her shoes and socks as well.

He tore out of his clothes as she walked forward and turned the knob for the shower head and rain feature. His arms wrapped around her, and he propelled them in under the water. He ran his hands over her body as the water poured down over them. "I have no idea why you'd pull that stunt in my lab, Hermione, but it took all my effort not to dash out the flame under my cauldron and run up here," he purred, his lips against the shell of her ear. His long lean body pressed into hers, and she could feel his arousal along her lower back.

She turned her head, the water cascading down, making her hair hang heavily. "I wanted to be with you," she said as his hand gripped her face, angling her head slightly as he kissed her neck.

"But timing is everything, Hermione. Like everything I do, carefully planned preparations," he pinned her to the wall, "to yield maximum results, take full concentration of the task at hand." His hand slid down her chest as his lips trailed warm kisses down her neck and his other hand deftly found her groin. "Having to focus on my brewing, at a

very sensitive," he flicked her clitoris, "spot, could have had disastrous results."

She inhaled sharply at the contact. "I know that," she said, placing a hand on the wall to keep from falling as her knees suddenly became weakened. He knew her so well, knew just how to touch and tease her to invoke the most wondrous feelings inside her. She reached around behind her and grasped him, wanting to feel his cock in her hand.

"I should punish you, for the intrusion," he drawled out slowly in her ear, his rich voice, made louder and more melodic in the shower, exciting her even more. He slid two fingers in her as he bucked into her hand. "Bend you over, right here and pound your behind."

"Oh gods, yes," she said, surprising herself, clasping his penis harder as she tried to stroke him in rhythm with his fingers. "Oh, please," she begged as little quivers trickled in her core. She wanted more; oh Merlin, she wanted more.

"Bend forward," he intoned in a firm, softly spoken demand that sent shivers down her spine. She let go of him and obediently placed her hands on the wall, but he laid a hand on her back. "Lower," he said, making her bend even more, "and open up for me," he added, widening her legs with one of his feet.

She braced her forearms on the wet stone, waiting with anticipation as he teased her opening from behind. His tip slid forward and back before slipping in to her, making her gasp in pure desire, and he held her hips as he pushed forward, burying himself in her. Ecstasy. That was the only word that described the feeling of his filling her, pure perfect sensation of bliss. She pushed back wanting more and he laughed.

"Eager, aren't you?"

"I need you," she said, almost pleading. He moved, and she tried to match each of his thrusts. She could hear the sound of wet skin slapping wet skin over the patter of the water, and her soft moans filled the chamber. His movements sped up; she could feel his sac slapping her with each forward drive, its impact tantalizing her clitoris. She was close herself, so close. His arm came down and circled her, "Come with me," he said, and she could tell by the thickness of his voice he was close.

"Touch me," she breathed, trying to let the tightening sensations in her build faster.

She nearly gasped at the first flick of his fingers, and her knees practically gave as he circled her clit. She reached down, her fingers tangling with his as she tried to get him to flick it again. "Oh, gods. Oh, here, please," she cried, frigging herself with his hand, feeling the ripples began to spread. He pounded into her relentlessly, and her fingertips grazed his sac when it hit her fingers. She loved this, the feel of him behind her, moving in her, the water cascading down, dripping off her nipples. She arched her back, the angle increasing contact of his sac with each thrust, and she became lost in the overflow of stimulations.

Her orgasm ripped through her, making her collapse on the wall, but his arm tightened around her, holding her firmly. His free hand landed on the wall over her head, and he snarled his orgasm as he leaned over her, filling her with his hot come.

They stayed like that for a few seconds as her heart rate slowed down. She sighed with regret when she felt his penis leave her, feeling a small ping of discomfort. She stood, turning and smiled at him, and he cupped her face, pressing his forehead to hers as the water ran down their faces. Leaning back, she reached for the soap and flannel, but when she started to wash him, he grabbed her wrist. "Too sensitive yet," he said, taking it from her. "So you first."

She smiled. "If you want to." They washed each other, slowly, thoroughly, and tantalizingly, and by the time he allowed her to wash his groin, he was rock hard again. "Humm, looks like you're ready again," she said with an appreciative grin.

He grasped her leg and pushed her up against the wall as he leaned into her. "That I am," he said and kissed her.

By the time they left the shower, their skin was crinkled like prunes, but they both felt fully satiated and ready for bed.

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When Severus and Reginald finally announced to Hermione and Ginny that they had worked out the correct order of the ingredients and calculated out the precise rearrangement of the tears, both girls were extremely excited to begin the brewing trials. Hermione and Ginny had immediately pulled out their revision guides and rearranged their schedules to free up their weekends, and they had been bouncing with enthusiastic expectation, itching all week for the weekend to come so they could begin.

But somehow the final phase of brewing the Médousa Potions had been very anticlimactic, much to Hermione's dismay. The built-up anticipation of brewing the potion for the first time had been greater than the actual task. In actuality, it had been just like brewing any other complicated potion she'd produced. Naturally, she'd paired with Severus on the first batch while Ginny had worked with Reginald. The first brewing had been exhilarating only because the potion was complicated and had several tricky steps. The second, third and fourth trials had been used to write their validation reports and had been as fun as following any intricately involved and potentially dangerous potion could be, but it had also been exactly the same as validating any of Severus' potions had been. The potions turned out perfect each time.

It was after Reginald and Severus completed the presentation packet with their samples to be delivered to a panel consisting of the Master of Potions at St. Mungo's, representatives of the Department of Education, the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers *and* the Academe of Potion Masters and Brewers, did the full weight of the accomplishment hit Hermione.

*Potions and Draughts Today*, *The Montpellier Academies of Potions*, and the *Journal of Analytical and Applied Potions* sent out photographers the next morning to take their picture for the journals, and each received a copy of the *Potions and Draughts Today* journal two days later. Severus gave Hermione his copy to send to a friend since he'd received another when the journal sent out their regular subscriptions. He did at least, although rather bemusedly, sign the both of her copies, as did Reginald and Ginny.

In a special ceremony in the St. Mungo's auditorium, Master Severus Snape and Master Reginald Reynolds were given a considerable honorarium and specified annuity for their achievement of the rediscovery and successful recreation of the Médousa Potion. As faculty of Hogwarts, they both received a substantial endowment for the school. Hermione and Ginny received full recognition for the development research and validation for the rediscovery and successful recreation of the Médousa Potion as well as a respectable financial annuity. Not only was their work to be published, they also received achievement honors from the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers and the Academe of Potion Masters and Brewers. Had Hermione's parents' memories been intact, enabling them to attend, they'd have been exceedingly proud of her. As it was, Harry, Luna, Neville and Mrs. Longbottom and the entire Weasley family were present to see them get their rewards. Even Kingsley came to congratulate her.

Hermione likewise received full recognition for the creation of the Inferi Curse cure as well as a respectable honorarium and payment of a financial annuity, plus compensation for the previous seven months. The Master of Potions of St. Mungo's, Gerard Brauen-Wellsby, gave Hermione a plaque, a copy of the one that now hung on the wall next to the room in which Severus had been revived.

Still, for Hermione, the one thing that would have made her evening perfect would have been to have her family present. She laughed at the idea of sending a letter to her Aunt Julianne since her memories were still blocked, and her Grandmother Merle might not even recognize her name, let alone realize they were related unless it was a day she had her mental acuity back. She wrote letters to her Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Marciel and to her Uncle Christian and Aunt Maureen, merely giving mention of her accomplishments, honors and awards (since explaining fully would violate the Statute of Secrecy) and informing them of her engagement to Severus, but she had second thoughts about sending them.

Nevertheless, she wanted at least one person she could call family, real family, to know of her accomplishments and honors. So she wrote a long letter to TalfrynTrue, *he isn't technically family yet Severus and I aren't even married yet although magically speaking he sort of is family through the Bonding...* she rationalized as she attached the letter to the leg of a school owl. *So that makes him the only family I have beside Severus... well, of the people who recognize me as family* She dropped her other two letters off in the post box that would instantly deposit them magically in the Hogsmeade Post office for Muggle delivery.



Talfryn's reply came the next morning at breakfast by the same owl that delivered her letter to him.

Hermione,

*Congratulations on working out the ingredients for a potion. What does this potion do? I did get the copy of the journal you sent me. It's quite impressive that you and your friend have validated thirty-two of my great-grandson's potion improvements. Never knew he was so adept in the field. Knew he taught the subject, but not that he had such an intrinsic knowledge of the art. Congratulate him for me.*

*How many more does he need to have validated? And can't you wait until after you leave Hogwarts to do this?*

*Don't you have lessons to attend? Do not let your marks fall by taking on so much extra work. It's ridiculous to do an N.E.W.T. level project in each subject you've your N.E.W.T.s to revise for. They are important, so you should strive to do well on them.*

*I had a visit from a young whipper-snapper named Longbottom this week. He came to work on my front garden. He said he knew you. I can assume you hired him to fix up the grounds for the wedding, not that I blame you. I don't tend to the plants, Diedre used to after Delphinia passed away. I'm too old to be squatting on my knees in the dirt anymore.*

*Are there any other renovations you want made on the house or grounds?*

*I expect you to leave my bedroom as it is. I finally have it sorted out the way I like it.*

*If you really feel that you need to see me on the Sun, the 4th of April then fine, come. Don't expect much, I'm too old for all the nonsense. Dustin will cook the traditional foods. If you have any particular dishes you want, let me know. Pepper has threatened to decorate, the bloody elf. If you and my great-grandson want to sleep over, I'll have Pepper make up the guest suite.*

Talfryn

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

## Preparations and Projects

Chapter 61 of 63

Hermione is validating Severus' variations to the potions in his Advance Potion Making book, working on her N.E.W.T. level projects, revising for her N.E.W.T.s and has to find time to plan for a wedding. Thank Merlin she has friends.



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### Preparations and Projects

Hermione really shouldn't have been surprised to see brightly decorated boiled eggs among the food offered by the house-elves, but with the huge amount of work the professors had been piling on the fifth- and seventh-year students to prepare them for their exams, she'd forgotten all about it being Easter Sunday. It had simply slipped her mind; her focus had been primarily being on keeping abreast of all her schoolwork and the six potions they'd brewed the previous week for Severus' validations. Even Ginny was complaining about the workload the teachers were heaping on them.

The funny thing was that when she'd spoken to Ginny the previous weekend, telling her that since the next Sunday was the first Sunday after the first full moon after the March equinox, it would be a great day to being the base for the Wolfsbane Potion, it hadn't dawned on her that she'd inadvertently suggested they start brewing on Easter Sunday. And she should have, considering she'd sent a response to Talfryn's last letter, telling him how much she was looking forward to seeing him again on Easter. But glancing at her revision guide, she realized that she'd made so many entries this month, her book was beginning to resemble Severus' Potions book. She'd written on every available space.

So this morning, since Severus was once again up before her, Hermione had come down to breakfast as per usual, book bag in hand, expecting Ginny to try and coax her out to the Quidditch pitch to watch the team practice after they had spent their morning in the lab finishing up their potions from the previous evening.

Ginny climbed into the seat next to Hermione as the owls came in with the morning post. "Sorry, I'm late. We had two third-year boys who ate several Nosebleed Nougats but they didn't have the other half to stop the bleeding."

"It's all right, we still have plenty of time before Severus and I have to leave." Hermione picked up an egg and turned to look at Severus, catching his eye as she held the

pink and yellow flowered egg up. He cocked an eyebrow at her, apparently not understanding her silent message. She tapped her egg. He shook his head, picking up an egg that had been placed in front of him. She shook her head, laughing, then pulled out her quill and wrote, *Don't forget lunch with Grandfather Talfryn at eleven-thirty. He wants to show us the garden.* With a flick of her wand, the egg sailed over to him, and with an annoyed smirk, he caught it.

"What's that about?" Ginny asked as Molly's owl, Persistence, delivered large chocolate eggs for her and Ginny.

"She's flirting with the Headmaster," Wendlynne said, smiling at Hermione.

"Is flirting with your fiancée against the rules?" Hermione asked and smiled in surprise as a red speckled green egg appeared on her plate. The writing on the egg read, *haven't forgotten.*

"Mum, sends her regards," Ginny said as she set the letter aside. She opened the Easter card from Harry, and a flurry of bunny-shaped confetti shot up in the air, each turning into a chocolate bunny as they drifted back down.

"Oh, that's amazing!" Alestra said, picking up the chocolate bunny that had fallen on her fork.

"A new product of my brother's," Ginny said absentmindedly as she read Harry's note with a wistful smile playing on her lips. She turned to look at Hermione. "I really envy you, you know."

Hermione looked sympathetically at her friend. "We've only three more months."

"Yeah, *three whole months!*" Ginny said with a grimace. "Sneaking out to see Harry for an hour or so isn't the same as being able to *live* with my fiancée. Oh, I wish I had overnight privileges like Luna," Ginny added with a frustrated sigh. "But with his training exams coming up, Harry and my brother have been really busy revising. I know Ron revising. Hard to believe, but nevertheless it's true!" She leaned closer to Hermione and lowered her voice, "So Harry can't get away to meet me in the Shack this weekend."

After breakfast, Ginny and Hermione excused themselves and walked down to the dungeons, Ginny still lamenting about not being able to see Harry. "Oh, talk about getting away, when are we going to see Mr. Prince's house?" Ginny asked as they neared the lab.

"When Mr. Prince approves the intrusion on his solitude," a softly spoken voice in a smooth drawl intones.

"Severus!" Hermione turned around, smiling broadly. "What brings you down here?"

"I'm supervising your brewing this morning," he said with a smirk. "Reginald informed me that you are planning to begin the Wolfsbane Potion." Both girls nodded. "There are a few deviations to the directions that I may not have fully explained in my annotations."

Hermione pulled out her copy and started reading the small script in the margins. "Which part?" she asked confused.

"Are you turning down taking advantage of receiving private tutelage with me?" he asked.

"Gods, no!" Ginny exclaimed. "Only, please don't berate me like you used to do in my Potions lessons."

"As if my scowl or taciturn demeanor has any effect on you anymore," he said, giving them his perfected professor's scowl. However, neither Ginny nor Hermione flinched at all. "Just as I expected." He opened the door for them. "Shall we begin?"

Hermione and Ginny dropped their bags and draped their robes over a chair, then crossed the room to bottle the potions they'd left simmering overnight. Severus carefully inspected each of the potions, nodding in approval of the quality they'd accomplished. "Set these aside for Reginald," he said, glancing at the six other cauldrons. "The De-Horning Potion is too thick," he commented. "And it's supposed to be sienna not cinnamon."

Hermione peered into the cauldron as Ginny checked her notes. "According to your note on the right-hand margin, it should be thicker, like a salve, but you didn't mention a color variation. Of course, the left side said to add the dragon fruit before the bee balm... Well, Hermione and I disagree on this, actually, but the arrow here," Ginny said, pointing at the arrow, "shows it as being after which is what I did and my three have the dragon fruit before," she indicated her three cauldrons. "Nevertheless, Hermione put the fruit after, and she added mint."

Severus' eyes narrowed, making Hermione pause, thinking she'd made a mistake, but Ginny continued nonplussed, "She is a few steps ahead of me since I had Quidd..."

"What? Did I do it wrong?" Hermione interrupted worriedly. The page for this potion had a lot of writing, making interpreting the directions difficult. She fought the lump of dread she felt from Severus' lack of reaction or expression. "Did I misread your changes?"

Severus held out his hand, so Ginny handed him the book. Hermione bit her lip as he read his notes, turning the book sideways as it continued to the bottom of the page.

"So, which is it before or after?" Ginny asked. "Who was right?"

"Before," he replied, and Ginny gave Hermione a told-you-so grin. "The mint was crossed off," he stated, making both girls turn to gape at him. He peered into Hermione's cauldron again as Hermione flipped through her Potions journal for her notes on the potion. "The potion should be ruined." He looked up at her. "What else did you do differently?"

"I didn't add the mint Hermione did! I used the mintleaf bee balm wild bergamot," Ginny stated as Hermione shook her head. "I have to add the garlic and the Catspradrille stingers."

"Nooo, it's mint leaf, bee balm and then bergamot mint was underlined bergamot oil was written on the margin. According to Libatius Borage, when bee balm, horsemint or oswego tea are mentioned in the same potion with bergamot then essence of bergamot or bergamot oil should be used," Hermione said as she held up her notes so he could see them, but his gaze remained focused on her. "So I used crushed mint leaf, bee balm and wild bergamot, then added the dragon fruit juice, followed by the crushed dandelion stems to draw out the sap, and added it with the mashed yarrow..." Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Why are you frowning?"

"When exactly did you add the dandelion sap and yarrow?" he asked, using the spoon to check the consistency.

"The line goes from above the bee balm, under the mint leaf, then you have bergamot and dragon fruit squeezed in between the bee balm and the wormwood leaf. You then have dandelion sap, sliced goat's beard root and mashed yarrow before the garlic and the stingers."

He inhaled sharply. "Bloody hell." He turned to face her. "Give me your notes."

She handed him her book, and he walked up to the blackboard, making the existing surface exchange for a blank one with a flourish of his wand. Hermione and Ginny watched in awe as he wrote out the potion's directions based on Hermione's notes, adding the phytochemical compounds, properties and active elements composition of each ingredient, noting the interactive variances and examining the chemical reactions due to the interactions.

"Is it wrong, did I mess it up?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Give me a minute, woman," he snapped, writing out a complicated equation on the side of the board with several variables. He took the numerical value for the five variables and wrote out quadratic equations for each, then started another equation. Hermione watched him with bated breath, worrying her lip each time he erased something and started over.

"If I'm not mistaken..." He then took the corresponding inequality and started another, adding in number representation for the five variables, then changed several variables and intervals and rechecked his calculations. "Yes, but then that would..." He erased a section and started over, coming up with the same coefficient. "That can't be right?" he mumbled, checking his calculation again.

Hermione followed along with each new equation, beginning to see a pattern.

Severus' arm dropped as he stared at the blackboard. "I'll be damned."

"What? Tell me!" Hermione snapped, wondering what she'd done wrong.

He turned to face her. "You've created a potion that, if my calculations are correct, should not only cure troll warts, but might prevent them from reoccurring."

"I did what?" Hermione asked, gaping at him.

Severus smiled at her. "You used all of the ingredients I had considered but discarded for improving the De-Horning Salve. Your misinterpretation led you to invent a new potion. I'll have to verify it of course, but I think it is a troll wart cure."

She was stunned. "I invented a potion to cure warts on trolls?!"

"Troll Merlin, you're priceless!" Ginny exclaimed and started to laugh hysterically, then stopped when Severus glared at her. "You have to admit it, Severus, it's hilarious!" she said, still chuckling. She turned to Hermione. "Troll warts are like magical plantar warts but really hard to get rid of and they can spread! They are really deep and crusty and black. Charlie got some once, and it took ages for him to get rid of them."

Severus asked Hermione for parchment and copied out his directions for the De-Horning Salve. "Finish your potion: I'm going to work with Hermione on hers," Severus said, handing the directions to Ginny. "Then we'll begin the base for the Wolfsbane."

Ginny walked over to her cauldrons, tacked Severus' directions on the wall and started to press her garlic cloves while Hermione compared her notes to the directions in Severus' book.

"With the use of the yarrow, I might suggest using bloodroot paste, rather than sliced bloodroot as it will be more potent," he said, and Hermione nodded, making a notation in her notes. He also suggested increasing the lemon balm oil and adding goldenseal root. The finished potion was a glutinous sienna salve with a pleasant mint lemon smell.

"Bottle it up, and I'll contact the Master of Potions at St. Mungo's for testing," he directed and then walked over to check on Ginny's potions.

Hermione turned to him in surprise. "To St. Mungo's? They're not going to test it on people, are they?"

He turned to smirk at her. "Whom did you think we'd test it on Ginny? Because I certainly don't have any troll warts," he said, ignoring Ginny's outraged exclamation of "Oi, I don't have any!"

"And I know for certain you don't have any," he added, crossing his arms. "The Healers in the contagious infections wards will be able to test the salve. In the mean time, Ginny and I will repeat your process and validate your discovery."

"*Our* discovery! You've as much involvement in its creation as I did more actually," Hermione argued. "If you hadn't worked out the calculations and determined its possible purpose I'd have disposed of the potion and started over."

"If that is how you want it, fine, *our* accomplishment." He tried to look indifferent but there was a look of pride in his eyes. "I'll ask Reginald to validate my contribution, and then you and I will brew another batch. Afterwards, Reginald and Ginny can validate it."

Ginny clasped her hands in glee, exclaiming, "Another forty Galleons!" which Severus chose to ignore, telling them to set up their cauldrons to being the Wolfsbane Potion base.

At ten o'clock, Severus called a halt to their brewing. "Leave it on stasis and continue it this evening. Hermione, you should go change. I'll be up shortly."

Hermione said good-bye to Ginny and ran up to shower and change. She was drying her hair when Severus arrived. She started to say, "I was beginning to wonder..." as he crossed the bedroom, saying, "I'll be out in ten minutes," as if he hadn't heard her.

Shrugging off his curt disappearance into the bathroom, she brushed her hair and put on her Mediterranean green robes. She was sitting patiently on the bed when he emerged, hair damp and fully dressed, from the bathroom.

"Shall we?" he mumbled and indicated they go. As they walked to the gates, Hermione asked Severus to explain the standard wizarding testing practices. Although such practices seemed almost as cruel as Muggle animal testing, she could see the practicality of the methods used at St. Mungo's. "During the war, necessity often caused brewers to rush the trials or to skip the process all together," Severus stated, then looked away toward the trees. "Sometimes the results proved... as expected."

She became quiet as she absorbed in what he'd told her. "When will we hear the results?" she asked softly.

"In no more than a week, I should think. The Healers will be very excited about the cure if it works as well as I predict it will," Severus replied, accepting her arm on his. He Apparated them to Talfryn's front garden.

Hermione turned around on the path facing the old stone house as she gazed at the garden. It was beginning to look so much better than it had at Christmas. The air was pungent with the smell of freshly turned dirt, mulch and manure and the early spring blooms. The lawn had been liberally fertilized, and new grass gave the promise of a lush summer lawn. The large, neatly trimmed hedges and trees that lined the low rock wall still had bare patches here and there, but they were filling in nicely with the new spring growth on the branches. The fountain was still dry, but the peonies, various magical plants, flowers and herbs had all been well tended and now looked like a lovely informal garden that would be amazing when in full bloom. "Oh, my, it's really lovely," Hermione said softly under her breath.

Beside her, Severus merely grunted, "Yes, lovely," noncommittally, urging her to walk to the house.

Pepper opened the door the instant after Severus' knuckles made contact with the door. "Pepper is so happy you are here," the elf squeaked, pushing the door wider. "Master is walking, Miss," she told Hermione as she took her coat. "He is still using his cane, but he is moving without Pepper's help."

"Stop babbling and let them in," Talfryn said from the doorway, drawing Hermione's attention from admiring the large spring bouquet in the foyer. "Good to see you, but shut the door. You're letting out the heat." He turned, and Hermione and Severus followed him into the parlor.

Hermione smiled at the bouquets of flowers that sat on every surface. "You saw the garden, I suppose," Talfryn said as he sat down in the same armchair he'd used last visit.

"I did, it's lovely," she reiterated, making Severus chuff a laugh at her.

"Should be, the amount of time that young Mr. Longbottom spends here," Talfryn stated. "You shouldn't have gone to the expense; Pepper could have sorted out the garden."

"I haven't..." Hermione only just managed to conceal her surprise. "Neville and his wife, Luna, are good friends of mine," she admitted.

Talfryn grunted in acknowledgement. "At least he's reasonable. So why aren't you spending more time on your schoolwork and in preparation for your N.E.W.T.s?"

"Pardon me? I've never I wouldn't I'm not behind at all," she sputtered in reply.

"What my fiancée is so ineloquently trying to say is that her studies are far from lacking. She is abreast of all her studies, even ahead in several of her subjects," Severus said smoothly. "Otherwise, I'd personally curtail her other projects myself."

"You'd stop her from validating your potion inventions?" Talfryn asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Severus nodded once. "If her academic standing suffered even slightly, I'd put an end to it immediately," he said smoothly. "As things stand, she could very easily complete all her N.E.W.T. exams now and still obtain Outstandings in every subject," he glanced at her, "with the possible exception of Defense Against the Dark Arts. You only achieved an Exceeds on your O.W.L. in that subject as I recall."

Hermione felt her cheeks warm up. "It's... yes." She raised her chin slightly. "But I'm doing better this year. Professor Dawlish is unrelenting in our N.E.W.T. preparation. We're learning how to detect and identify Dark Arts spells and enchantments on places and objects, and how to break or disassemble the spells and to defend ourselves from a flashback and backflash from abeyant spells. We also have regular practical application of defensive charms and counter-curses, hexes and jinxes."

"Her professor is an ex-Auror," Severus stated. "He has taken the post quite seriously, considering the number of students who died in the war."

Talfryn stared at Hermione steadily as he regarded her for several seconds. "So, when are you bringing your wedding planner to the house? I want to know how much redecorating you're going to do, how many people you're inviting and how elaborate you're planning to make this."

Hermione was thrown aback by how quickly he was changing subjects. "I don't have a wedding planner, and my guest list isn't really that long maybe twenty guests or so."

"I'll have to include several members of my staff," Severus stated and looked at Hermione, "I had assumed you'd want your professors present." He turned back to Talfryn. "I have few friends, and you're the only remaining family I have. The number isn't expected to exceed forty."

"The most Deidre ever had here was forty-two," Talfryn stated. "How are you with spatial distortion charms and replication transfiguration?"

"Adequate," Severus stated, and Hermione turned her hands palm up as she said, "I've done nondetectable extension charms in a purse and on my dorm mate's wardrobe."

"All right then, you can do a formal dinner in the dining room then," Talfryn stated with a firm nod. "You still haven't told me the date."

"First weekend after the students leave the school," Severus stated, but Hermione's mouth opened as she let out an audible surprised squeak. "Or the weekend after..." he amended, but Hermione's eyes were still wide as saucers. "We haven't decided."

"You aren't giving yourself any time to plan it unless you want to postpone it until August?"

"No," Hermione said, shaking her head. "We agreed on June. I suppose it will be either third or fourth weekend in June." Severus merely shrugged. "I'll let you know soon, I promise."

Talfryn nodded and then switched the subject back to Hermione's validating Severus' potions, apparently very intrigued in Severus' abilities in Potions. When Dustin announced supper was ready to be served, Hermione was pleased to see Talfryn rise and walk unaided to the dining room.

The dining room was awash with glowing light, and crystal sparkled throughout the room. Pepper had likewise placed beautiful bouquets of flowers wherever possible and decorated the table with wild flowers and brightly colored eggs. As expected the food was wonderful. Talfryn asked Hermione about her N.E.W.T. level projects and inquired as to her plans for after school. She even managed to get Talfryn to talk about his years at school and to get both men to tell her about their N.E.W.T. level projects.

All in all it was a very delightful afternoon, and came to an end all too abruptly when Severus announced it was time to return to the school. Pepper gifted Hermione with a small basket of brightly colored chocolate eggs and several soft pastel-colored pigmy puffs.

However, as she and Severus walked up to Hogwarts, Hermione saw several first-years rolling Easter eggs on the grass. She fought back the bitter feeling of nostalgia, remembering the times she'd spent decorating Easter eggs, sharing chocolate eggs with her dad and participating in Easter egg competitions in the park on Easter as a child, and wished that she could someday revive her parents' memories.

~oOo~

The following day up in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione told Ginny about her conversation with Talfryn regarding her wedding to Severus. To her surprise, Ginny supported the idea of having a wedding coordinator. "Hermione, you're in school. You don't have time to visit caterers, florists, and all the other necessities for putting on a wedding. And before you scoff," she added before Hermione could say she didn't want an elaborate wedding, she added, "Remember, I was in the house while Fleur was discussing all her wedding plans with my mother, and her wedding was considered small and quaint by wizarding standards. Like you, Fleur only wanted a simple garden wedding with close friends and family."

"There were over two hundred guests!" Hermione pointed out.

"One-hundred-and-eighty-nine, but that's beside the point. I've seen your list and it's short, I'll grant you that. But really, I can barely get you to discuss specifics about your wedding, and it's only what? two months away!"

"What is there to discuss? I've sorted out all the basics with you," Hermione argued. "Severus said we could ask some of the Hogwarts house-elves to help with the set up, cooking and clean up. I just have to order the flowers. I saw the bouquets that Pepper did for Easter they were gorgeous! So, I'll only need to buy our nosegays and a few corsages..." She paused when Ginny gave her an incredulous glare. "What?"

"Who is going to officiate?" Ginny asked.

Hermione opened her mouth and then promptly closed it.

"Neither you or Severus seem overly religious. And even if you've attended a Muggle church regularly this will be a magical wedding. With witches and wizards not exactly something a Muggle priest can officiate, even if you only do standard vows. Wedding vows are like taking a magical oath there will be a magical signature, a sign of the sealing. Remember Luna's and Neville's wedding? You have forty-two on your guest list; have you thought about overnight accommodations, Apparition site registration and Portkey registration and permits? Or have you considered arrival timing of your guests that has to be coordinated and approved with the Department of Magical Transportation."

Hermione deadpanned her face. "No. I haven't."

"I didn't think so. So you have two options, you can ask my mom to help coordinate your wedding, or, and I think this would be best, ask Mrs. Malfoy if she'd be willing to help you, since my mum and Fleur will be working on the plans for my wedding to Harry."

Hermione dropped her hands and gaped at her friend. "What I can't possibly impose on Narcissa!"

"Right," Ginny drawled out slowly with an incredulous smirk. "You address her by first name. She was your sponsor for the winter holiday season. The Malfoys are Severus' closest friends. Lucius is likely to be his best man, and Draco will most likely be asked to stand up for him, too. And I recall Draco telling me at the Christmas Ball that she had hoped you'd have it at their manor... Don't you think she'd be thrilled if you asked her?"

Hermione opened her mouth to retort, paused, and then sighed. "I could always send her a letter and ask. But I don't want an elaborate affair; I just want a simple wedding, like the one Fleur had."

"Now, for the decisions I can help you with. I know you've indicated that you want me to be your maid of honor, but I'm assuming you'll want other bridesmaids?"

Hermione nodded. "I asked Luna if she'd be a bridesmaid..."

"Matron of honor," Ginny corrected her. "The wizarding world is rather formal on that. Who else? Alestra, Veronica and Wendlynn have mentioned that they want to do it."

"Five bridesmaids," Hermione sighed, knowing she'd have to ask all three of them because she didn't want to hurt any of their feelings by choosing between them.

Ginny raised an eyebrow, expecting an answer, so Hermione gave into the inevitable. "Okay, three bridesmaids, a matron of honor and a maid of honor that's still five!"

"Excellent, you ask them to stand up for you, and I'll inform Severus on the number," Ginny stated. "When is the date?"

"Severus and I haven't decided yet," Hermione said, her shoulders sagging. "He wants the second weekend in June the sooner the better in his opinion. I told Talfryn it would be either third or fourth weekend in June."

Ginny pulled out her revision planner and turned to the month of June. Hermione was surprised to see the number of entries already written for the month. "I have to move a fitting, and... Okay, the nineteenth," she stated, writing 'Hermione's wedding' on the square.

"But that's only two weeks after we leave Hogwarts!"

"Then we better get things finalized," Ginny stated. "Harry wanted to get married as soon as I left Hogwarts as well. So things will be really tight." She looked up. "Now, when can I see his house?"

Hermione deadpanned her face again.

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Hermione sent out a letter to Narcissa the following morning before breakfast. Narcissa's extremely haughty and very well manicured owl landed in front of Hermione at breakfast the following day, carrying her reply. "I'll have to answer her later, I have tons of revision to do today," she told Narcissa's owl as she accepted the letter. "You can either wait in the owlery, and I'll come get you," the owl looked horribly affronted, "or I can use a school owl."

With what could only be a huff, Narcissa's owl spread her wings and flew away.

Laughing softly, Hermione read Narcissa's letter.

*Hermione,*

*I would be delighted to assist you in any way you need for your wedding. I won't deny I was disappointed that you didn't wish to have your wedding here, but it is quite proper for you to have it at Severus' great-grandfather's home. I am glad that he has mended his relationship with the man. The Prince family was once a very highly respected wizarding family.*

*We should meet so that I can have an understanding regarding your wishes and desires for your nuptials.*

*Please consider my offer to host your engagement party. It would be our great honor to do so.*

*Sincerely,*

*Narcissa Malfoy*

"So, we can go, right?" Ginny asked, reaching in front of Hermione for the pumpkin juice.

Hermione nodded. "Talfryn said we could come by at ten on Saturday." She was really looking forward to seeing Talfryn again. "I'll ask Narcissa to meet us there. I can't believe I'm planning a wedding, and I haven't even finished my N.E.W.T.s."

"We've less than two months! You don't want to leave anything to the last minute," Ginny said.

Hermione and Severus had spent an evening making a list of everyone they wanted to invite, and as Severus predicted, the list came to exactly forty-two. However, Evelyn had sent a verbalized letter during the week, indicating that she would very much like to play at her wedding, and Hermione, who could hardly believe the generous offer, had gladly accepted, making the guest list increase by three, since she felt the need to invite Mr. and Mrs. Burke as well. Severus handled the news in stride, especially when Hermione pointed out that he'd be so busy being congratulated by everyone, he'd only have a moment or two with the Burkes.

~S~

Severus finalized the report to the school governors regarding the option choices and staffing for next year, and added the request for an increase of the pay for staff for the next year in his postal bag. He then included his lesson observations and performance reviews for the staff. He was quite pleased with his assessment and quite proud of the report he'd filed. Even under his strict guidelines, the performance of his staff so far this year had been exceptional. He was sure the pay increases would be approved. Elaine Prevatt, Clerk to the Governing Body had shown Lawrence McDonough, Administrative Officer of the Hogwarts School Governors, Severus' grading scale, and she'd told him that Lawrence had felt Severus was being unfairly stringent. *If they even manage to pass with an Acceptable on these performance review qualifications they will have earned their pay raises*, the note Miss Prevatt had forwarded to his office had read.

He wrote out a memo to reassure the staff about future plans for the staff rooms, their private quarters, and their pay rise this year, and made enough copies to have one delivered to each member of the staff. He then approved all press releases and wrote three articles: one for the articles for *Daily Prophet* and two for the end of term Hogwarts newsletter outlining the exam dates and the future plans for the school.

Severus set down his quill and called it quits for the day.

He walked upstairs and paused in the doorway to his sitting room. Hermione had fallen asleep at the coffee table again, books and parchments scattered around her, her head on her arm and her quill still held in her sleep-slackened hand. He'd noted with each passing day the toll the stress of the end of term workload was doing to her, but he also knew that she was keeping abreast of all her schoolwork. She had already turned in all of her N.E.W.T. projects with the exception of the one for Transfiguration.

He knew she was struggling with the failure of being unable to fully animate an inanimate object. She and Ginny had made huge strides in the animation of a transfigured inanimate object, but that's not what Hermione hoped to do. He knew that Hermione felt completely dejected over this. *Silly girl.*

As Talfryn had said in his last letter, *'You can't take an inanimate object and make it come to life. Something that isn't alive can't be made alive only God or priests can do that and even then it's questionable. Take credit for what you've accomplished and concentrate on your NEWTs.'* Severus wholeheartedly agreed with his great-grandfather on this, but he knew better than to push her. She needed to finish this year on her own terms and at her own pace, even at the exhausting pace that she'd set for herself, almost inhuman as it was, but then he'd been as driven during his seventh year.

"Dezzy," he called out softly. The elf walked into the room instead of Apparating, which might have awakened the sleeping witch. "I'm going to take her to bed. Be sure her vitamin potions are in the pumpkin juice pitcher nearest her at breakfast and again at lunch."

Dezzy nodded silently.

"And be careful when you straighten the sitting room not to disturb her work."

The elf nodded again, then bowed deeply and ran off.

Severus cast a Weightless Charm on her and carefully lifted the sleeping witch.

Hermione stirred, snuggling closer to him as he carried her upstairs. "Wha' time is it?" she said while yawning.

"Bedtime," he replied softly. He set her on the edge of the bed and helped her undress, then helped her put on her favorite night slip. She lay down as he undressed. Not at all surprising, she was sound asleep when he climbed in next to her. He kissed her temple and lay down. *Only three weeks until exams.* He felt frustrated, but fully understood, which didn't really help ease his libido's desires any. But time seemed to go by so quickly these days.

Three more weeks, he assured himself before trying to fall asleep himself.

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He set aside the final arrangements for the dates and times for the Apparition lessons in Hogsmeade to be sent to the Heads of Houses and the Magical Exam Proctors from the Ministry on top of his parchments coordinating the schedule for the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams, specifying the dates, times and locations in the castle. He still had to sort out where the exam proctors from the Wizarding Examinations Authority would be residing within the castle. *Or I could simply pass this on to Minerva to handle* he smirked.

He picked up his report he needed to approve, regarding all the plans for the summer holiday work and the maintenance for the school and grounds, and saw Talfryn's letter in the old man's shaky, spiky script sticking out from under Severus' rebuttal about bursaries with the Bursar in regards to his decisions with the Bursar of whom would get what. He wanted to have that finalized so he could file it with the school governors as soon as possible. He picked up the letter and put it aside to return it to Hermione.

Today was visit number three to visit to his great-grandfather's house. Naturally Hermione had shown him the first letter from his great-grandfather extending, if not gruffly, an invitation for Hermione's friends (plural, as if expecting more than Ginny and Narcissa to be involved in the wedding planning) to view the house. Not that Severus had been surprised his great-grandfather had agreed to Hermione's request; it seemed that the old man was becoming quite taken with his Bonded mate, soon to be spouse.

The first week of the wedding nonsense, Hermione had been so busy keeping up on all her schoolwork and projects that by the time Saturday came around, Hermione had wanted to stave off leaving and finish the Wolfsbane Potion. Only Ginny wouldn't hear of it; she positively couldn't wait to see the house and meet Severus' 'only surviving' family member. It amused him that Ginny completely disregarded Charles Prince and John Osgood as family, considering they were both incarcerated in Azkaban, as Severus was wont to do.

Naturally, Hermione and Ginny had spent the evening finishing the Wolfsbane Potion, which Reginald sent to St. Mungo's for testing.

But then Narcissa's insistence that she, Hermione and the girls (again plural, meaning this time all five girls in the wedding party be included) simply had to meet at Prince Manor (which in his opinion was an overly eloquent title for the nine bedroom, grey stone Queen Anne county house on the fringe of Yorkshire dales, but Narcissa insisted would sound better in the invitations) a second time to finalize details. Severus hadn't understood why he had to release the other four students, but he had, simply to avoid riling up Narcissa's temper. At least Narcissa knew better than to involve him in all these bloody details.

Naturally, Talfryn wrote to Severus extending his permission for the girls visit. He'd even invited them to take tea with him.

However, Narcissa sent another request to Ginny and Hermione that her bridesmaids and matron of honor needed to meet at the house a third time. And because of Ginny's enthusiastic desire to see the house again, Severus had relented and he, Hermione and Ginny had Apparated the other four girls to the front garden. Ginny apparently loved the old house, excitedly leading the other girls through each room as they discussed its entertainment potential and took them upstairs to show them where they'd all stay to prepare for the ceremony an announcement that had irritated Severus.

Apparently, Talfryn had offered to have the wedding party stay at the house the night before, so the ladies could have plenty of time for their preparations. Not even Narcissa or Ginny could be persuaded to forgo the superfluous tradition as dispensable since, as he'd so eloquently argued, he and Hermione already lived together.

After that, during each subsequent visit to the house, Severus had merely stood back and allowed the conversation to flow around him as if uninterested, but with each suggestion made by either Ginny or Narcissa, his chest had seized up a little more.

He hated being the central focus of attention.

He liked being on the fringes, in the shadows and corners, watching.

He was only doing this for Hermione's sake, anyway.

At least Hermione seemed to be keeping a level head, politely declining some of the trivial nonsense mentioned in favor of a simple ceremony and reception.

Nevertheless, he had to solve one problematic part of the wedding plans; he had to name *his* attendants. Hermione had too many bridesmaids in his opinion, which carried no weight what-so-ever in all of this planning, five total, and they needed partners, apparently.

Lucius was a given. So was Reginald. That was where he fell at a loss; he didn't have any other close friends ask to stand up for him, and he had to choose three more groomsmen. He would've asked Draco, but the boy would be playing accompaniment with Evelyn Asby. He supposed asking Harry would please Hermione. Tigran was a possibility, but Severus remembered something mentioned about his going to Zabaykalsky on the east side of Lake Baikal this summer.

Upstairs, Hermione, Narcissa and Ginny were still reviewing wedding plans, again, and he wondered what new thing had been decided for him. Severus had no idea that weddings had so many complicated elements. He'd been under the impression he simply needed to purchase new robes, polished his shoes and arranged a location, flowers and catering. He was lucky that Narcissa was quite capable of planning a conservative affair with the upmost discretion, otherwise this entire thing would be blown across the papers in less times than one could Floo to the Ministry.

He got up from his desk to retrieve a book from the shelves that held all the magical law books, to get a copy of the school bylaws and protocols pertaining to Access Requests. Passing by the stairs to his sitting room, he paused upon hearing his name.

"Talfryn said the Prince family colors are green and cordovan. Dark burgundy is in both of your color pallets, but I don't think Severus will like the idea of wearing red even a dark red hue. Personally, I'd stay away from red or green," Ginny said, and Severus felt a sense of relief until Hermione stated, "I always loved periwinkle, and I saw

pictures of a wedding in light olive and periwinkle and thought it would be perfect for my own wedding."

"They were holding hydrangea flowers in lavender and olive it was lovely," Ginny agreed.

"The men can wear charcoal and periwinkle ties... I think Severus will be handsome in dark charcoal, but olive is not his color," he heard Hermione say.

"Best be an icy periwinkle, and the groomsmen can have darker periwinkle, I think," Narcissa stated.

He sighed. *No black. Damn. Although charcoal isn't too bad, especially if she will allow me to wear dark charcoal robes.*

"Lavender she opened a dress shop she has some bridesmaid dresses that she's designing for me. I have pictures. Lavender said that each girl can have a slightly different neckline, if they want, with the same full skirt. See, she has this woven crisscross bit here on the bodice and waterfall skirt in layers..."

"The dining room is done in greens," Ginny pointed out.

"Drapery can be exchanged," Narcissa pointed out, "and it's fortunate for you that I happen to have a plentiful amount of Peruvian dragon lilies and some delphinium that I can turn a lovely shade of periwinkle blue, and the white lilacs should be in bloom. I should be able to have some orchids for the bridal bouquet as well. Katherine generally grows a fragrant strain of hydrangea that can be colored a lovely lavender and olive hue."

Severus shook his head to dispel the nausea developing in his gut. He retrieved the book he needed and quickly returned to his desk, to continue going over the requirements for the end of year exams.

He was doing his for Hermione.

He only had to do this once.

Once it was over, he'd never have to do this again.

He looked in the direction of the sitting room. In a month he'd be married to Hermione. Married. It still amazed him that for all the horrors in his life, all the terrible things he'd done, he would be married to the most amazing witch in all of England.

Shaking his head again to dispel any more distractions, he returned his complete focus his report to the governors and filling out the forms for the bursary payments and projected increases needed for next year's estimated expenditures for the students on scholarships to be sent to the school Bursary and Board of Governors.

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The week before the exams, the seventh years who hadn't all ready, presented their N.E.W.T. projects for grading.

Hermione had finished her Ancient Runes project well in advance, and both girls had already completed their Potions project: the recreation of the Médousa Potion and validating Severus' improvement on the efficacy of the Wolfsbane Potion and Polyjuice Potion. The same for Charms, Hermione had already been given her marks for the spell to revive a live person from the Inferi spells, and Ginny received her marks for creating cognitive responses in a Transfigured animate object.

On Friday, Hermione turned in her Arithmancy work on the Translocation and Transference Spells and submitted her paper in which she disproved Frederic Penhallow's fifth principal exception to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration. Hermione's work invalidated Penhallow's calculations; she was able to finally recreate his Arithmancy (a feat in of itself) but she found that he'd made certain errors in the mathematics, which carried forward through the rest of his work. So in effect she disproved Penhallow's fifth principle exception to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, an interest in both the Arithmancy journals as well as in the Transfiguration community.

The girls turned in their final results of their Transfiguration project: improving the transfiguration of an inanimate object to a fully animated one without the transformation reverting back shortly afterward. Minerva gushed at Severus all through dinner about the amazing work the girls did, although Severus knew that Hermione was intensely disappointed in the fact she'd failed in changing an inanimate object into an self-aware animate object.

As expected, Severus didn't see much of Hermione the entire week of exams. If she hadn't been in one for the rooms designated for one of her N.E.W.T exams, she had been in her study or the library, revising. The first night of exams, she'd snuck out of the room in the middle of the night to slip down to her study, and Severus literally had to drag her back to bed. Each night after that, he had to practically carry the witch to their bedroom and had even taken to giving her a mild sleeping potion to make her get enough much needed rest. At least she was not eschewing meals, and she was choosing sensible foods to keep up her physical strength, according to the Dezzy.

Josephina Buckhurst, proctor for the Hermione's Transfiguration exam had been extremely pleased with Hermione's impressive animation of a transfigured inanimate object, turning a log into a fully animated wolfhound, that she was certain to receive top marks. Likewise, Christopher Talbot, who proctored Hermione's Arithmancy exam, had asked Hermione about her work on Penhallow's theory and they ended up talking about it all through lunch.

Her last exam was History of Magic. Severus knew Hermione felt utterly unprepared before going into the exam, but he'd heard her in the corridor with several of the other students quizzing each other on names, dates, places and important legislation and treaties, and he knew she would do fine in her exam. Professor Avoian, had mentioned that Hermione had done well on all of his pop quizzes, not that Severus was at all surprised.

In order to allow the students to blow off steam and to relax after a trying week of exams, he had informed the staff that dinner would be informal and that he'd not be present. Instead he'd asked Mispy to set up the sitting room to his exact specifications, complete with a platter of foods to dip into fondue and small finger sandwiches. He sat in his office, waiting for the sound of the stairs announcing Hermione's arrival. He rose as soon as he heard the stairs move and stood in the center of his office for her to burst through the door.

"Oh, gods, Severus, I blew my exam," she announced even before the door closed.

"I can hardly believe you could have failed," he said calmly, taking her in his arms. Merlin, but he missed holding her. "In all the years I've taught here at Hogwarts, rarely have I had a student that could regurgitate facts and quote books the way you can."

She leaned back, looking up at him. "But I completely spaced on the fourth essay. It was all gibberish, I just know it," she whinged.

"Five short essays and one hundred questions in only two hours the only part I know you may have blown was by not making your essays short," he teased her, holding her firmly. The trouble was, his body was reacting to their proximity. "As I recall you have penchant for excessive writing. I'm sure you crammed in every detail you can recall into each essay. My deepest sympathies are for the proctor who has to read your tiny script."

"How can you say that?" she screeched. "I..."

He cupped her face and silenced her with a kiss. He tightened his arms around her, trying to fight back the urge to lift her up and set her on his desk to ravage her. She started to murmur something, but it only allowed him to deep their kiss. "Sev-er...sev-rus," she managed before he stopped. "This is serious!"

"Yes, it's serious," he agreed. "I've missed you, woman."

"I haven't been anywhere," she said. "As headmaster won't you get the results first?"

He chuffed a laugh. *There is no swaying her if she is this riled up.* "No. I won't see them until the students do the Wizarding Examinations Authority will send me their report, listing the results the same day they mail out the results to all of the students." If anything, those who are residing London would see theirs before the students who

lived farther away, but he wasn't going to tell her that, she'd demand to move in with Potter until the results were sent. Severus would have none of that. "So, since you'll have to wait like all the other students, I suggest that you find something else to occupy your mind," he said, lowering his voice to his most seductive drawl while stroking her back and trying not to rub himself on her. Merlin, days of abstinence had made him a leech.

"But dinner is in only in half an hour and I want to change," she said.

He stepped aside and raised his arm, smiling in anticipation of her reaction to his surprise. "You do know as headmaster I can delay dinner," he said as she turned to walk upstairs.

"You wouldn't just to have sex?" she stammered.

He raised his eyebrow. "Wouldn't I? I thought you knew me by now," he replied following her up. She stopped in the doorway, and he had to shuffle her forward so he could enter the room. The lamb's wool rug covered the floor with small cushions and pillows placed on it for lounging, small cool blue ball flames played in the fireplace, and the fondue stood proudly amongst the food Mispy had prepared. He smiled at the widening of her eyes as she surveyed the scene, one he hoped would work in his favor tonight.

"Or we could simply eat in?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound as smooth as he could. The way he knew turned her on.

He removed his robes and draped it on a chair, wearing only his shirtsleeves and trousers. She liked this look, she'd admitted to him before, she thought it casual and approachable. He hoped it would work to his advantage. "How about it, spend dinner alone with me?" he asked, easing her robes off her shoulders as she let her bag fall to the floor.

She turned to face him as her robe joined his. "Yes."

He clutched her to him, and kissed her, all his pent up frustration from the last two weeks pouring from him. She'd said yes. She clung to him, swaying slightly, and he used her imbalance to move her further into the room, then swept her up in his arms and carried her to the rug. In his eagerness to be laying down on the rug with her, he nearly dropped her as he attempted to kneel on the rug with her in his arms, making her chuckle. He didn't care, she could laugh as long as she let him have her. He leaned over her, capturing her mouth again, or it could have been the other way as they bumped teeth, before melding in another heated kiss. He started unfastening her buttons, feeling her fingers on his. After several seconds of fumbling hands, he swore softly and used his Unfastening Charm, making their clothes hang open.

"Eager?" she breathed.

"Desperately," he said, sliding her top and bra off. "Get out of these woman, or I'll ruin them," he said indicating her skirt as her nails raked over his bare bum. A lot was said for being as lean as he was, his trousers and pants literally slid down to his knees. As she pulled off her skirt and knickers, divesting herself of her socks and shoes, he removed his own clothes, his eyes taking in her perfect body and eager smile.

He moved over her again, widening her legs, or did she open up to him, he was too far gone to care, and positioned his throbbing penis to thrust into her. She lay back fully, reaching out to pull him close, and he felt his tip press into her lips. "You're not wet," he said, sliding himself against her, trying to spread the developing moisture.

"It isn't going to take much," she replied. "I've been so negligent lately."

"No, you've been overly focused and frantically driven in your studies," he said as he eased into her. "Oh gods, Hermione, I need you too much."

"It's all right," she said, her back arching as he slid in little more.

He thrust forward and pulled back, each time able to sink in a little further and her moisture increased with each attempt, but not enough. He knew that he should be paying her more attention, doing something to make her ready but he couldn't help himself.

"More," she hissed as he sunk into her again, thankful that her body was easing more to accommodate him.

He drew back, finally feeling a slick sensation suggesting she was becoming aroused. The problem was he was so desperate for this, had been denying himself in order to allow her as much focus on her exams, that he felt like a randy teenager with little control. He thrust into her hard, burying himself to the hilt. "Oh, gods you feel incredible!"

"You too. Now move," she demanded. He didn't have to be told; he was already withdrawing enough to be able to plunge back in. She moaned deliciously, tilting her pelvis to meet him as he sank back into her. He tried desperately to keep up the slower pace, but his own needs only grew, and his cock so hard and the sensation of being sheathed in her too great, the soft, hot, wetness making thought, any thought, difficult. He began to move in more earnest, his body seemingly to take control. He felt her fingernails trail painfully down his back and he moved faster, urged on by the moans and pleadings coming from the witch below him.

"Gods, Severus, yes!" she said, raising her hip up to meet his thrusts.

"I can...oh, gods, I'm-gods...I," he stammered as his orgasm ripped through him like a tsunami, gushing through him and into her with a raging force. He froze as the aftershocks pulsed down and out of him, taking all of his strength with it. As his heartbeat slowed down so did his realization of what had happened.

"Hermione, I'm..." What could he say? He'd fucked her, let out his own pent up sexual tension and taken what he'd needed, in complete disregard to her needs. He hung his head in shame. "I'm sorry," he murmured, feeling like a complete cad.

"For what?" she asked, and he looked at her. "I have to admit, you were... you needed this." He nodded and made to move off her, but she grasped his arms. "So, that was what? Round one?"

He laughed. Only she'd see it as a round.

"So next time, it's my turn," she stated.

"I need a...I'm not ready to," he admitted as his penis fell out of her.

"So we have our first course, and then, when you've your strength back, we have another go," she said with a grin.

He kissed her nose, already feeling his penis twitch. "Sounds good," he stated, still trying to catch his breath. He looked over at the selections of food, picked out a sliced strawberry and placed it on her nipple. "I could use a little nourishment if we're to have another go at it," he said, sucking on her nipple as he took the strawberry in his mouth. "Now lie there while I gain my strength back," he said, putting a few pieces of cheese on her chest. He picked up a few tiny sandwiches, pulled them open and set them down on carefully selected parts of her body.

"So I'm to be your plate?" she asked as he leaned down and laved the half of tuna sandwich off one of her ribs.

"Yes," he said, eating another that he'd put on a sensitive spot, making her giggle.

"I think I'm going to like this dinner," she replied.

"Good, because you're going to be my desert," he said smoothly, smiling as she squirmed while he took another bite.

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Author's notes:

Sorry, short lemon, but we've almost come to the end here. Two more to go!

I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.

Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!

# The Great Retrieval Quest

Chapter 62 of 63

School is over so Hermione's concerns turn toward her parents.



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## The Great Retrieval Quest

On the first Monday after the students left Hogwarts for the summer holiday, Hermione and Severus had risen early and dressed in casual robes to go to the Ministry of Magic. Severus had reviewed her memories in a Pensive with her several times in the last few days, as well as read the books she'd used to bind her parents' memories and listened to her explanation with amazing patience. She showed him her transfigured shoe box, which contained about a hundred blood-drawing tubes with red stoppers, each holding a memory thread, and a dozen shrunken photo albums full of pictures of Hermione or her and family. It was a treasure trove of memories, but hardly helpful if the binding of her parents' memories couldn't be undone. Severus had his doubts in regards to their being able to remove what she'd done without help.

They had already had been to St. Mungo's to have a conference with Healers Michelle Rearrick and Timothy Lin, two of the top Mind Healers from the Spell Damage ward, and Alfetina Penchuck and Gerald Faulkner, two of the Memory Restorers from the Obliviator's Office who were highly recommended by Kingsley Shacklebolt. Together they had spent half the afternoon reviewing Hermione's memories several times and discussing the spells she'd used on her parents.

The Healers had both been very sympathetic, but could not offer any assistance unless her parents were brought back to England and both Memory Restorers fully agreed. Mrs. Penchuck said they'd have to perform tests on her parents before any attempt of retrieval could be attempted, which Healer Lim offered to perform.

But in a surprise move, Kingsley offered the Memory Restorers permission to travel to Australia in an official capacity to help Hermione and Severus in the restoration of Hermione's parents' memories.

So now Hermione and Severus stood in the long line in the International Magical Transportation Office waiting to receive their Portkey, map and instructions. Hermione had no idea how it would all work; Severus had been the one to come to the Ministry earlier in the week to obtain the necessary authorization for the international transportation. She'd sent her parents by plane to Melbourne, Australia, and that had been an eighteen-hour flight plus a two-hour layover in Dubai and one in Perth. Her unease grew as the line moved forward. She had no idea how she'd be able to hold her breath for eighteen hours. Sure enough, Severus and Madam Pomfrey had managed to use a potion and stasis charm to allow her to float fully asleep under the lake, but that had only been for a few hours at best. Thankfully, her Muggle passport was still valid.

Behind them a woman hissed, "It is him, Merle. I'm certain of it."

Up ahead a little boy leaned around his father's legs to stare at them. Severus raised an eyebrow, and the little boy promptly disappeared behind his father's legs.

"But this girl is too petite to be her," the woman's companion behind them said. "She rode a dragon, after all, Arleen!"

The little boy with the family ahead of Hermione and Severus peered around his father's legs at Severus again, and Severus made a slight scowl, making the boy's eyes widen before he ducked back. "You're going to traumatize the boy before he even gets to Hogwarts," Hermione said as the child leaned around his father for a third time.

"Hardly," Severus stated as he curled his lip in a sneer at the child. This time his sister, a girl Hermione recognized from Hogwarts, pulled him back and mouthed an apology to Severus, blushing like any first-year student. He nodded once in acknowledgement, and the father clamped a hand on his son when he tried to do it again.

Behind them a woman hissed, "It is him. I'm certain of it."

The woman, Merle said, "Where do you think they are..." then flushed as Hermione turned around to look at her. "Merlin's stars, it's you! See, Arleen, it's Mrs. and Mr. Snape!"

"Yes, I'm Hermione Snape," Hermione said, trying to be polite, but really, she hated being famous at times.

"I've you've I can't believe I'm meeting you!" Merle stammered. Severus turned, and both ladies giggled nervously. "Are you going on a honeymoon?" she asked boldly.

"They're not married, Merle it would've been announced in the *Prophet* if they were," her friend Arleen said. "Are you going somewhere for holiday?"

"Next?" the clerk called out as Severus drawled out, "Obviously."

Hermione turned back to the front, stifling a laugh, seeing a very thin witch with very short blonde hair watching her. Severus touched her elbow to urge Hermione forward.

"Do you have your passport and papers?" the clerk asked, extending her bony hand when they stopped before her window.

Severus handed the woman their passport and their authorizations. The clerk opened the small booklets and peered at the pictures and personal identification information. "Destination?" she asked expectantly, setting the booklets on her desk.

"Melbourne, Australia," he said softly. "Prepaid and Ministry approved."

The witch looked up at him. "Reason for travel?"

"I'm going to go retrieve my parents," Hermione stated. The clerk's eyes narrowed, so Hermione quickly elaborated. "They went to Australia for their safety. Now that it's safe to come back, I'm going to go get them and bring them home."

"Your papers indicate only two people round trip," the clerk stated.

"The travel documents for Mr. and Mrs. Granger have already been arranged," Severus stated. "They will be traveling from Melbourne back to London with us on our return."

"Very well," the clerk stated, handing them their passports. "Please follow the orange line for the Victoria Room."

Hermione thanked her and followed Severus to a door with a plaque that read, *the Victoria Room* and listed the destinations of: *Australia, Antarctica, Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines*.

The Victoria room looked like a typical office. Several cubicles lined one wall and benches filled up the waiting room. Severus pulled a ticket from the dispenser before sitting next to Hermione on a bench. They didn't wait long. A balding wizard with tufty hair and black-rimmed glasses called out their number. Once Hermione and Severus were seated, a tepid cup of tea appeared as the wizard at the desk checked their passports and asked them to weigh their wands on his scale. He then made several notations on his ledger and handed them their wands. "All seems in order. Have you traveled abroad before?" he asked.

"Yes, to France," Hermione stated, but Severus shook his head.

"My fiancée has traveled the Muggle way," Severus stated. "I have only ever been to the continent."

"*Have you really?*" the wizard gasped in shock at Hermione. "I mean, okay, yes, Muggle transportation. Have you used Portkey transportation before?"

Hermione nodded in assent as Severus answered, "Naturally."

"To travel outside the country?" the wizard asked Hermione.

Hermione shook her head. "Only within the country."

"Very well. To travel as far as Melbourne, you will have to make several layovers. Each Portkey will carry you for three to four minutes, and you will have to recuperate for at least an hour, although a lengthier stay is highly recommended, before moving on to your next destination. Otherwise you can suffer from time and spatial displacement distortion, which can lead to magical depletion or temporary magical instability. Each destination will be in a receiving area in the Ministry of Magic for that country or within twenty meters of the local Magical Customs Office. You will have to check in with the Magical Customs Officer upon arrival and have your wands registered. Don't forget."

He laid two lanyards with several badges on it on the counter. Each badge looked like a tourist souvenir from several countries. Hermione immediately recognized one that had a picture of the Grand Mosque of Dubai, another the limestone pillars of Pinnacles Desert in Perth, and the third was definitely the Thai Royal Grand Palace in Bangkok. "Each Portkey will activate by saying, *profectere*, so you must be holding the proper Portkey for each jump. If you hold the incorrect Portkey, you may suffocate from the length of the transport duration. Even wizards can only hold their breaths up to four minutes at a time in a Portkey vacuum."

Hermione nodded, examining the first badge with an ornate picture of a Catholic icon, wondering where that one would take them. The small boomerang at the end clearly said Melbourne in it, and there was one that resembled the London Bridge on the left side all by its self. "So we make five stops with an hour layover in each... city?" Hermione asked, looking up.

"Exactly," he said. "Now in order, be sure to activate the Portkeys from the first one," he tapped the icon with his pudgy finger, "on downward. Your Portkeys will land you in close proximity of each other, but if the international reception area is crowded, you may get separated so keep your passports with you at all times."

He looked up as Severus scowled. "Just a precaution but it happens," the clerk said, holding up his hand. "I have to give you all warnings." He dropped his hand. "Now, here are the lists of your potions. Submit your form to St.... er... What?" he asked as Severus slid the sheet back.

"I've already brewed all the necessary potions," Severus stated as if addressing a student, and Hermione stifled a laugh at the clerk's expense. "Madam Pomfrey, the Healer at Hogwarts, has already confirmed that we've taken them on the requisite forms."

"Very well," the clerk said, placing a tray of stamps and an inkpad. He opened their passports and selected a rectangle stamp. However, after firmly pressing it on the passport, only a faint impression of 'MAGICAL CUSTOMS' with the word 'approved destination' underneath and below that 'SOFIA, BULGARIA'.

"It's magical, Hermione, the ink will darken once we are in the country and not before. The customs office will likewise validate our arrival in each country," Severus explained as the clerk used an oval stamp for Dubai, U.A.E. on the opposing page, and then added a circle-shaped stamp for Bangkok.

The clerk added two more stamps on the next page, then handed the passports to them. "All right, everything is in order. Your first Portkey is scheduled for eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Please do be on time or there could be complications or a very long delay. Enjoy your trip."

Hermione and Severus left the International Portkey office with their multi-jump international Portkeys in hand, and once in the Ministry atrium, Severus led her by Floo back to the castle. "That's it?" Hermione asked as they entered his office. "We're not leaving until tomorrow?"

He laughed. "I thought you'd want to pack something."

She held up her beaded purse.

"Oh. Well, I have to pack," he started to say but she raised her eyebrow, still holding the beaded bag aloft. "You packed my things?"

"Kirch did," she replied. "I've everything you and I could possibly need."

He walked to his desk and pulled his calendar toward him. "Have a seat." They sat in the chairs facing his desk. "Now, I want to discuss our Portkey itinerary." He began to outline a rough schedule on a piece of parchment. "I propose dividing our departure times every four to six hours, allowing time for sightseeing..."

"Sightseeing?" Hermione gasped. "We have to find my parents, and we only have a week! Narcissa was frantic when I insisted on going to find them and bring them back before the wedding," she said, recalling the conversation they'd had the second time Hermione, Ginny and Narcissa had met to talk about the wedding. "Both Ginny and I had to assure her we still had plenty of time, but I don't know I've only two weeks to find them and get their memories restored."

"Hermione, you said they are in Melbourne. They are dentists. How hard do you think it will be to trace down two dentists by the name of Monica and Wendell Wilkins in one city?"

"Melbourne is huge!" She gaped at him, hardly believing what he was saying. "It could take days weeks! They could be anywhere in Melbourne they could have moved!"

His eyes narrowed. "You do know to whom you are speaking."

She nodded and he relaxed. "Lucius has sent a couple of investigators to Melbourne; they have been there for weeks now, searching for your parents."

"He what?!" she gasped.

"Lucius is my friend. Considering that you would like to have your parents at the wedding, Narcissa insisted that we expedite things as much as possible to find them, so Lucius sent a couple of investigators to Melbourne for me. Lucius wrote to me last week to tell me that he thought that the investigators were close to finding them. We discussed it, and he and I agree that you and I should be in Melbourne for a few days to assist the investigators," Severus said calmly. "I had meant to locate your parents for you as a surprise for you at the end of your exams, but it's taking longer than we'd anticipated."

Hermione sat there for a moment, taking in everything he'd said. He wanted to have her parents at their wedding. He arranged all this for her. ~~Father~~. She recalled that Severus had asked about her parents one evening not long ago: what they looked like, how old they were, what suggestions she'd given them regarding their new lives in Melbourne. "My family photos on the mantel," she said softly, and he shrugged slightly, nodding once. It all made sense now. He'd arranged this, and now... now they would go find her parents. She stood up and threw her arms around him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said as he pulled her onto his lap. "But I know another way to thank me."

"I thought you wanted to plan our trip?" she said, snuggling closer on his lap.

"Right now, I can think of something else I'd rather be doing with you." He looked up at the portraits. "I'd appreciate some privacy."

The painted denizens who had been pretending to sleep, opened their eyes, nodded and walked out of their frames; the two who had actually been asleep, were nudged gently by their neighbors and quickly left as well.

"Now, where were we?" Severus asked, sliding his fingers down her buttons, and she gasped when she felt the air on her skin. "We just have to divest you of your clothing."

"What is it with you and your office? Do you really want to have sex here?" she asked as he tried to pull the bodice of her gown down to expose her breasts.

"Yes, here," he said in his silky smooth voice that sent chills down her spine as his lips grazed the swell of her breast. "Don't tell me you've never fantasized having your professor bend you over his desk and take you?"

"Er, no... but then I didn't like you that way when I was your student" she said as his hands cupped her, squeezing her gently and trying to pinch her through her robe. "Ah and the other options were Professor Flitwick or Hagrid." His hands roamed down her sides, and she felt the seams give, although she'd not heard a tearing sound. "Are you ripping my robe?"

"Removing it off your person," he replied as his hands slid inside the open seams, hot and firm against her skin, and then moved up to cup her breasts again.

"Well rather than destroy my robe," she said, pushing at him so she could stand up.

He tried to restrain her but she managed to gain her footing nonetheless as another seam came undone. "Stop," she insisted, and he looked at her as if affronted. "Let me." She let what was left of the robe fall to the floor at her ankles. "Now add your silencing charm on the portraits, and I may just let you take me on your desk."

He whipped his wand out, and said, "*Muffliato*" without taking his eyes off her. He set his wand down and cupped her breasts, feeling the weight, her nipples pressed to the center of his palms. He squeezed them gently, massaging her breasts with his long fingers, occasionally pulling on her nipples or passing his thumbs over them in lightly enticing circles. It was incredibly tantalizing, and it surprised her that she was being turned on simply by his slightly calloused hands and agile fingers on her breasts.

As if mesmerized, he kissed her one breast, enveloping the areola into his mouth and slowly pulled back, sucking hard on her soft flesh escaped, then letting her nipple go with a pop, and Hermione inhaled at the intense pleasure it gave her. He flicked his tongue over her nipple and then repeated the action on her right side, using his fingers to pinch and pluck the now damp nipple on her left, sending arousing shocks jutting to her core.

Shifting once more, he grasped her one breast with his hand while he raked his tongue over the other; simultaneously sucking hungrily and nipping gently on one while mimicking his actions with his fingers, stroking and pinching the other. It was maddening. Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated on the sensations he aroused, making her quim pulse with want.

As if sensing her need, his free hand slid down under her knickers, expertly tantalizing her and increasing her arousal, making her gasp in desire, "More."

"Turn and face the desk," he said, his voice thick with lust.

She turned slowly and placed her hands on his desk. She felt him move closer to her and smiled at the light tickle of his leg hairs on the back of her calves. He caressed her silently, cupping her bum, then sliding down her thighs and back up. One of his hands stopped at her core while the other cupped her chest and continued his fondling.

"Open up," he said softly, "spread your feet apart and lean forward." She spread her feet, bending forward so her arms rested on the hard wood and heard his intake of breath. As his hands moved up her back, sliding up to her shoulders, she could feel more of his warm skin along her legs. He pressed his groin firmly against her, his penis rigid, and she felt a bit of wetness on her skin, evidence he was as aroused as she. He leaned forward more, pressing down on her and brushed her hair to one side. "You're exquisite."

"So you've said," she responded boldly.

He rubbed his penis against her bum, leaving a hot, sticky trail on her skin. "Will you let me take you this way?" he asked, sliding the head along her crack.

"From behind, yes," she said, trying to hide the sudden flicker of panic, hoping he didn't mean in her little hole, and felt him slide his penis between her legs with relief. After a few strokes, he penetrated her, burying himself fully, and she couldn't hold back her moan at the sensation. He drew back and pushed forward, making her moan louder. "Harder," she brazenly demanded, and he grasped her hips.

He complied, moving faster and harder, and she leaned down more on the desk, allowing him to be able to penetrate her deeper. His scrotum swung with his movements, slapping her with each forward thrust, teasing her cunt with each miss of her clitoris. "Gods, fuck, Hermione, you're I-I'm going to...to..." he stammered through gritted teeth. His pace quickened, his movements became jerky.

She rose up on her toes, jutting her hips higher, and his scrotum patted her clitoris, its impact both startling and stimulating her. Again and again he pounded into her, the soft pat on her clit with the fierce thrust sent her reeling, and she tried to arch her back more, tried to push herself higher, straining to increase the contact with his scrotum on her clit while giving him easier access to fully fuck her senseless. "Yes, harder, gods, harder," she panted to his guttural, "Almost, so close, fuck you, so come."

She wanted to come she was so close, so close the building tightness clenching and drawing her upward, almost there.

"Come with come," he said through clenched teeth, the feral sound of his voice exciting her more, knowing he was losing control and begging her to orgasm with him. "I'm going to..."

She stopped thinking and allowed herself to become lost in what she felt, and the tension deep within her shifted. She cried out as it turned and crashed down, taking her with it, and Severus growled out above her, burying himself into her while holding onto her hips with a tight grip she knew would leave marks. He shook once, then twice and seemed to collapse onto her back.

After her heart began to slow, he moved, bracing his hands on each side of her as he lifted his weight off her back. "Thank you," he breathed as he kissed her shoulder.

She stood and turned, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly, making him chuckle. "So do we take this upstairs?" she asked.

He swatted her bum playfully. "You're going to be the death of me, you little minx."

She pouted at him. "If you're not up for it, I could always go read something."

"Oh, I'm up for it," he snarled and lifted her up in his arms and started to walk for the stairs. "Or I will be shortly."

~o0o~

Early the next morning at 8:00, Severus and Hermione activated the Catholic icon, which took them to a roped off colonnade in the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic at 10:05 due to the two hour time difference. The Bulgarian Aurors in sharp red uniforms, directed them to the Magical International Customs Office. "Vill you spend time in Bulgaria?" the customs clerk asked in rough English as she weighed their wands.

"No, I'd like to move on after the hour waiting period," Hermione said, eager to see her parents.

"We will go to the Vitosha Aleya while we wait," Severus stated.

The clerk nodded. She stamped their passports and gave them a magical map of the Vitosha Aleya while an Auror inspected her beaded purse for illegal possessions and substances with a probe. "You're departure is set for five minutes after eleven," the clerk stated as the Auror handed Hermione her bag. "Please do not be late," she said, handing them back their passports.

When Severus and Hermione exited the building's visitor's exit, they found themselves in Vitosha Aleya off the Vitosha Boulevard in Sofia, Bulgaria, the Bulgarian version of Diagon Alley. It was nice, strolling along past the shops, but after a while Hermione wanted to go back to wait till they could activate the next Portkey and move forward, so they returned to the colonnade to depart.

When they activated the Portkey with the picture of the Grand Mosque of Dubai, they found themselves standing in a cordoned off section of the plaza of the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Magic at 12:09 in the afternoon, and they were herded to the Magical International Customs Office with the other arrivals. U.A.E. Aurors in green robes with white sleeves checked Hermione's bag again, then directed them to the right queue. After having their wands verified and weighed, and their passports stamped, they were told to return at thirteen minutes after one to activate their next Portkey. Severus stopped at the Ministry exchange office and purchased a magical map at a small kiosk. Severus led Hermione out into the balmy heat. They found a place nearby and ordered shawarma wraps with tahini sauce and had very soothing strawberry and banana drinks. They then wandered through some shops before heading back to the Ministry Plaza.

At precisely 1:13 they activated the Portkey with the picture of the Thai Royal Grand Palace, arriving in Bangkok at 4:17 in the afternoon. The Thai Aurors in gold-trimmed robes standing guard at the Thailand Ministry of Magic's magical customs terminus were surprised due to their 'late arrival,' a timing glitch because the previous customs officer hadn't accounted for the three hour time change. The customs officer, who spoke fairly poor English, weighed and registered their wands and provided them with a city map and several brochures of both the local tourist destinations as well as magical ones. "Your activation time will be at five-seventeen this evening. Do not be late," he said stiffly and waved the next traveler over.

At first the sprawling expressways and overpasses of the Skytrain system and crowded streets full of vendors strongly reminded Hermione of the city depicted in the movie, Blade Runner, and it seemed as overwhelming. They decided to ride the new Lavalin Skytrain along the Sukhumvit Line from Mo Chit to On Nut to see the city. Afterwards they Apparated back to the Thailand Ministry of Magic, arriving at the departure terminal with only a minute to spare.

The Portkey with the picture of the limestone pillars of Pinnacles Desert in Perth landed Severus and Hermione in the Fremantle Satellite Offices of the Australian Ministry of Magic at 6:21. The security wizards checked Hermione's bag, asking if she had anything to declare, and then directed them to the queue for the Magical International Customs Office. But being this close to Melbourne, and yet all the way across the Australian continent from her parents, was making Hermione antsy.

Severus suggested going to see the limestone pillars of Pinnacles Desert, but Hermione bit her lower lip and checked her watch and shook her head. "I don't want to miss our departure time," she said, growing impatient as the line slowly progressed. By the time they had finished with the customs officer twenty minutes had passed, and Hermione was reluctant to go anywhere or miss their designated departure time.

Severus asked again once they cleared customs. "I can easily have you back here in time to leave," he said, scowling at a family of five who had two fussy young children.

"But won't there be a queue for wherever they want us to activate the Portkeys?" she asked, eyeing some of the other families and travelers waiting in the annex.

"If you don't want to go, we don't have to," he said, but she could tell that he did, so she agreed. Even though the winter air was chilly, she enjoyed her walk in the desert. She had to admit that the huge jagged pinnacles jutting up out in the yellow sand were very impressive and created a unique landscape that seemed as if they were walking on another planet. And as Severus had promised, they returned back to the annex in plenty of time to activate their boomerang-shaped Portkey.

They arrived in Melbourne at 9:34 exhausted and thirsty. The customs clerks simply stamped their passports and welcomed them to Melbourne. When they exited the terminal, Hermione paused to take in the beautiful high Victorian architecture. The Magical Transportation Department had ornate archway entrances for the reception rooms. The first was designated for Townsville, Mackay and Gladstone, and another for Darwin, Dampier and Cairns, but Perth, Sydney and Adelaide each had their own reception areas. But it was the five story grand foyer that really impressed Hermione. The open sided walkways on each floor of the Ministry looked down upon the atrium designed in the old Second Empire style. Across the way on the ground floor, Hermione could see the grand staircase and the queues for the large Floos.

Severus laughed softly. "The Melbourne Branch of the Australian Ministry of Magic is in what used to be called a temperance hotel. It was converted into the Melbourne Ministry of Magic in 1889, and is naturally protected by spells to ward off Muggles. They simply see an old, rundown, private senior residence building. Lucius told me several of the old hotels have been converted for magical use."

"Much like St. Mungo's," she said, "People only see an old department store front." Once out on the street, Hermione smiled at the familiar feel of the city as trams rattled past in the street.

"Are you hungry?" Severus asked.

"Shouldn't we find a hotel first?" Hermione asked, feeling more drained than hungry.

"Lucius keeps an apartment in Melbourne. He suggested we use it until we find your parents," Severus said.

Hermione nodded. "So food first then bed. I'm exhausted."

Severus smiled and they hailed a cab. The cabby's suggestion of a local restaurant turned out to be a delight. Afterward Severus hailed another cab and gave him the address to the Malfoy's Melbourne residence. The apartment was in a tall apartment building with spectacular views of the city, not that Hermione was surprised.

Their love making was unhurried and slow that night. Tender caresses, light touches, gentle kisses and a slow easy rhythm. Severus let her explore him, caress him as she wanted, kissing, licking and nipping in places she knew made him react, made him hiss in pleasure.

She suckled his cock, running her tongue on his length, stroking him. His hand played softly in her hair, keeping it up and out of his line of sight as he watched her bring him pleasure.

He rose up, before he came, rolling her onto her back and entered her easily, moving in a slow easy rhythm. She ran her nails lightly down his back and arms, her fingertips tracing his muscles and down the ridge of his back. He brought her to climax slowly, teased it from her and then followed her into bliss, collapsing beside her. With a sweep of his hand the covers slid up and covered their bodies, and he pulled her to him and kissed her temple. "I love you," she whispered.

"As I do you," he replied softly.

~oOo~

The next morning, Severus took Hermione to the Melbourne branch of MIC the Malfoy International Conglomerate. The building was another temperance hotel, and the ground floor had an arcade with various shops and cafés, which provided the perfect ruse for the wizarding employees and clients in their wizarding robes or unusual Muggle attire combinations. The front desk receptionist directed Hermione and Severus up the wide marble stairs to the first floor lobby and instructed them to take the lifts marked with the Malfoy 'M' on the left to the third floor reception area.

A very pretty witch greeted them by name when they stepped out of the lift and asked them to take a seat.

Within a few minutes, two wizards in well-tailored robes approached them, followed by a man in more casual attire. "Mr. and Mrs. Snape, I'm Albert Roland," the first wizard said, extending his hand to each of them. "These gentlemen are my associates, John Fitzroy and Curtis Woodford," Mr. Roland added as each man shook their hands as well. "If you'll follow me, we'll take this into one of our conference rooms."

The conference room with its exquisite, tasteful furnishings and lovely views gave off the impression of being much larger in scale than it appeared, yet the lovely mahogany table that sat only six hardly seemed out of place. A woman entered, placed several folders on the table, and demurely departed.

"Please have a seat," Mr. Roland said as Severus pulled out a chair for Hermione and tucked it under her as she sat down.

"As I'm sure you're aware, we have been assigned with the task of locating your Muggle parents, Mrs. Snape," Mr. Roland said as another young lady set a lovely tea service for five on the table and left. He slid a folder over to Hermione. "Mr. Malfoy was quite specific in regards to when your parents immigrated to Australia, and we have some general information about them, but our search has had a few complications."

"Complications?" Hermione echoed as she looked at Severus in confusion. He shrugged, so she turned to Mr. Roland.

"With what limited information Mr. Malfoy had for us, we have searched through the greater Melbourne area, including all further thirty municipalities, and it yielded us several possibilities."

"Possibilities?" she asked, opening the file. The first page had a picture clipped to it of a couple getting out of a car. Not her parents. The second page likewise had a picture of two people exiting the house and stopping, staring at probably the photographer in stunned surprise. They were not her parents either.

"That file has every couple, man and wife, with the surname of Wilkins, Wilkerson or names that seemed similar," Mr. Roland was saying as Hermione flipped through the folder. "None match with your description or the non-moving picture that was sent to us."

The next couple in the file was Nora and Albert Wilkins. Albert was her father's middle name, but Mr. Wilkins was a manager at a grocer. The next couple was Walter and Jamie Wilkerson and looked like a nice young couple, but they were not her parents. He worked for the Melbourne Museum, and she volunteered at the Carlton Gardens.

"So we had John," Mr. Roland was saying, indicating the wizard in the casual robes, "and his partner, Gus, look up every dentist in the greater Melbourne area that started doing... whatever dentists do in 1997. That file contains the..."

But Hermione wasn't listening as she flipped through the wizarding pictures and brief bios of the local dentists. *None of the pictures in here are of my parents* she thought as she flipped through page after page. "How hard could it be to find Monica and Wendell Wilkins?" Hermione asked in frustration. She turned the page, and her breath caught and heart nearly leaped out of her chest. *Dr. Dell Watkinson*. "This is him!" she said, her voice louder than she'd intended with her relieved excitement.

"Excellent," Mr. Roland said, summoning the file to him with a flick of his wand. "We'll notify Mr. Malfoy immediately and then we can proceed." Mr. Woodford got up and left.

"But why why would their name change?" Hermione's hand covered her mouth and then lowered to her chest. "Unless I did the Nom de Guerre Alias Charm wrong?" she asked.

"Hermione, I seriously doubt that you did the spell incorrectly. Altering another's mind is very difficult and complex. In addition, you altered your parents' conscious mind," he pointed out. "You blocked all memory of yourself and that might have also included the specifics arrangements you made for their relocation."

Hermione nodded, remembering what the books she'd found in the Restricted Section had said about layering the mind-altering spells.

"We will have to wait until we go see them to access the extent of the alterations," Severus said.

Hermione read over the brief biography as Severus, Mr. Roland and Mr. Fitzroy discussed the best way to approach her parents. She wondered why there wasn't any mention about where her mother was working when she reached the part in the bio about the baby a baby that was barely eighteen months old. "Mum... she was pregnant." It didn't say if it was a girl or boy, but either way, she had a sibling.

Severus stopped speaking and turned to look at her. "Hermione...?"

She looked up at him, fighting back her tears. "May we go?" she asked, her voice cracking.

Severus nodded and turned to Mr. Roland. "If your report to Lucius stated you've completed your search, I'm sure he's notified the Minister of Magic back home as I requested. We have already made arrangements with Healer Lim and Memory Restorer Penchuck. They are both familiar with the particulars in this situation and have reviewed all pertinent information, and they already know what actions will need to be taken. Either way, they are expected to arrive in Melbourne tomorrow morning at the latest to assist me and my fiancée with her parents." He rose from his seat and stepped over to assist Hermione from hers.

"I understand," Mr. Roland said flatly, indicating anything but. "If you should have need of us, you may contact me at any time."

Hermione thanked the wizard and left the building with Severus, wondering what she should do. She wanted to go immediately, but her logical mind told her to wait for professional assistance.

When they were out on the street, Severus gently touched her arm. "What happened in there?" he asked.

"My mum she was pregnant when I... She had a baby," Hermione said softly. "I didn't know my mum was pregnant. I need to know if the baby is if I could have harmed my her baby!" She turned to face him. "I want to go and see her."

Severus smiled. "And I assume you memorized their address?" he asked as Hermione hailed a taxi.

"I memorized their home address and the office where my father works," she stated as she climbed into the car before he did. Hermione gave the address to the driver and

then told Severus everything she could remember from the bio. Hermione's emotions were in such turmoil that the ride seemed to last for hours, but finally the taxi came to a halt in front of a lovely two-story brick home.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Severus asked as they approached the house.

"She's my mum," Hermione said and rung the bell. "I've waited two years to see her again and I now I find out I have a little brother or sister." She rang the bell again. No one was home. Hermione sighed. "He is a dentist and comes home at seven every night. She is a stay at home mother. The bio said the baby is nearly eighteen months old."

Hermione looked around at the other homes as she and Severus walked back out onto the pavement. It was a nice neighborhood with lovely homes for families. A car approached and turned into the Watkinson's driveway. Hermione stopped and stared at the woman who exited the car. Janet Granger, now Veronica Watkinson, was thinner and her curly chestnut hair was lighter, but there was no mistaking the laugh and the voice. "Here you go, Hermione, we're home now," she said as she took a baby out of a car seat. "It's time for your lunch, sweetie."

Hermione took a step back and collided into Severus. He wrapped his arms around her, and she turned to face him, fighting back her tears. "I've been replaced."

"No, I don't think so," he said smoothly.

Veronica Watkinson smiled politely at them. "May I help you?"

Severus calmly approached, but when he stood before Veronica, neither spoke for several heartbeats.

"I um... I-I have to go?" Veronica stammered, taking a step backward with a confused look on her face. She looked at Hermione, her face puzzled, her eyes searching, staring at her as if Hermione held her breath as if possibly trying to place her face. It was hopeful thinking, but the look was unmistakable. Veronica backed away, not from fear, but definite uncertainty.

Severus drew his wand, holding it casually. Mrs. Watkinson's eyes widened for a second when she saw it and then nervously she said, "I have to get Hermione inside," and turned and walked quickly to her house.

Severus walked up to Hermione with a thoughtful expression, and Hermione couldn't believe he had the audacity to look smug. She stormed after him as he casually walked away. "You've scared her. We should have waited until..."

"I think restoring your parents' memories may be easier than you believe," he interrupted her, and Hermione's mouth opened soundlessly. He stopped walking. "The mind is a very complex maze of neurons, and memories are not linear but tied to various emotions, sensory inputs and shared associations that is why memory alteration is so difficult." He placed a finger under her jaw to close her mouth then, taking her arm, led her away. "I suggest we wait for Healer Lim and Memory Restorer Penchuck to arrive. And I strongly suggest that we should acquire a Pensieve. From what I saw in your mother's mind..."

"You used Legilimency on my mother?!" she exclaimed.

"...we will be able to restore her memories," he finished, then added flatly. "Yes, I did. It was the fastest way to find out the information I required." He paused before continuing. "She recognized you, Hermione. Not that she knew you were her daughter, but she saw resemblances in you, familiarity, and she was trying to place your face like seeing a stranger you think you've seen before somewhere or meeting a relative you hadn't known before."

"I have seen that look on my mum's face when we would run into someone while shopping," Hermione said. "They would greet her by name, and my mum would pretend to remember the person until she recalled where or how she knew them... hazards of having a successful practice for years."

They continued to walk, looking for a safe place to Apparate. "Severus, I have a Pensieve," she said, then blushed when his eyes narrowed. "I took our well Hogwarts' the one from your office. Don't be angry. I brought the memories, memories of the conversations I had with my parents about the war and the dangers they were in and why they had to leave and... What?"

He kissed her. "My brilliant witch," he said, cupping her face. "You surprised me, that's all. Of course you thought to bring the Pensieve."

They Apparated back to the Malfoy's flat in the city, ate a leisurely lunch, and took in some sights as they waited to hear from Healer Lim and Mrs. Penchuck.

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Severus had been right; from her mum's perspective, seeing Hermione was like looking at an older version of her daughter: her mother's curly hair, her nose and the shape of her face, but she had her father's eyes and her father's smile, something Hermione had heard for most of her young life. She was now as tall as her mother as well. When Severus, Hermione, Healer Lim and Mrs. Penchuck arrived on their doorstep, Veronica had been nervous, but her father, always more curious and adventurous than her mother, had welcomed them in and wanted to know why they'd come. He too sensed a familiarity upon seeing Hermione, asking if she was a niece or cousins' daughter that he hadn't met before.

Hermione had cringed, realizing that she'd forgotten to alter her parents' memories of her aunts and uncles. Walking from the kitchen to the living room, it was obvious that this was her parents' home. The furnishings might be different, but they were the same style and colors, and the placement of each piece so eerily similar. Even the still life in the dining room and the paintings of Venice in the living room were similar. Her parents both agreed to having Healer Lim, a 'medical practitioner', brought to their home specifically to help them regain memories they didn't know had been tampered with. Both parents sat stiffly as first Healer Lim and then Mrs. Penchuck 'examined' them, then pronounced their diagnosis.

"Let me get this straight. You're wizards, magic exists, and she's my daughter?" Dell asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion, after Hermione and Mrs. Penchuck tried to explain why they were there.

"Yes," Hermione said with a nod. "You were in grave danger, there was a war a horrible dark wizard who hated people like me people with non-magical parents. You because of who I knew, people I made friends with it was the only way to keep you safe."

"As difficult as it may seem, as improbable as it sounds, yes. However, I assure you, what Hermione did saved your life," Severus stated assuredly. "If I may..."

Hermione sat on the chair facing her parents while Severus explained the events of the war from his perspective. Listening to his side of the war, how Muggle-borns and their families were targeted and eliminated, sent a chill through her. She could only imagine how hard it had to be for her parents to absorb.

Even Mrs. Penchuck added in her recollection of the war and the horrors they faced and endured. "My dearest friend, Emily, and her family were sent to Azkaban, along with hundreds others. People I worked with people I'd known for years. It was horrible. Many didn't survive."

When Severus pulled up his sleeve and showed them his Dark Mark, her father shook his head. "Rather gruesome tattoo."

"It had magical properties that bound me to this Dark Lord," he said.

"Voldemort." Hermione added and squeezed Severus' hand, knowing he still hated hearing the name. "I spoke to you about him. There are I have several memories of years about our conversations about him. My teacher, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster of my school, names that don't mean much to you now, kept telling you I was perfectly safe, but in the end... I had to go on the run into hiding for my life. I couldn't take you with me... this," she indicated the room, "was our solution the choice was made by all three of us. I assure you dad, mum, I would never have raised my wand against you! I love you."

The Pensieve sat on the coffee table, casting a soft glow that baby Hermione found utterly fascinating, but made her mother nervous. "And the stick sorry, wand he has, do you have one too?" her mother asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I have one you bought it for me when I was eleven. It's all in here, these are your memories," she said as she reached into her bag and pulled out a magically altered shoebox and removed the lid. The box contained one hundred blood glass tubes with red rubber stoppers held in Styrofoam and several shrunken photo albums. "These are tubes are were from your office before we, er, I modified your memories." Hermione pulled out a tube. "You helped me with these. You and mum. These are ones you wanted back, so..." Hermione handed Dell a tube with his name on the label. "The spell I used to extract the memory this silver substance can be viewed in this." She pointed to the Pensieve. "I read that these memories can be reintroduced," she looked at Healer Lim, who nodded, "after you view them, and you'll remember this happening."

"It's a good thing your daughter did this," Healer Lim stated with a warm smile. "Even though the block can be reversed, with your existing memories fractured as they are, it would be impossible to restore them."

"So all I have to do is put my face in the bowl...?" Veronica asked, looking at the four people holding wands with skepticism. "Won't I drown?"

"It's not really a liquid, it's an airy substance, a medium for the memory thread it's quite harmless," Mrs. Penchuck assured her, although her mum didn't look reassured. "If it at all helps, Healer Lim can go in with you the first few times."

"Can we go together?" Dell asked.

Severus smiled. "Of course you may," he said but Hermione looked at him questioningly.

"It might be best to view it individually since we are trying to restore your memories. Some of these memories are yours, dad, fifty of them, but the other fifty are mum's. If you go into one of mum's, you'll be seeing the memory from her point of view."

"You can always view them together at another time. It's what a Pensieve is for," Mrs. Penchuck stated.

In the end, Hermione's father chose to go first. Hermione and her mum watched on anxiously, for different reasons, and waited as her father watched five memories sequentially, then had them magically restored in his mind by the Healer and Memory Restorer. He was then asked to let them settle before proceeding. "It's not so bad, Veronica. It's a little disorientating, but not... It's hard to explain. But you'll be all right."

Veronica agreed and watched her first two memories, then had them restored. "These really are my memories," she said, looking at Hermione.

Hermione nodded.

"Okay, then," she said and leaned in to see the other two in procession.

It took three days to assimilate all fifty memories back into her parents' minds. Mrs. Penchuck only allowed her parents to view four or five memories at a time, less if they were long ones, then insisted that her parents wait, let the new memories settle and to give Dell and Veronica time to reflect and accept. Healer Lim checked her parents progress, pleased that with their logical minds and reasonable acceptance of the reintroduced memories that everything was going well. That was a huge relief to Hermione. Severus and Hermione spoke quietly with her parents in turn, answering questions about the school, the war, his and Hermione's involvement in it, even having to repeat themselves more than a few times. That in of itself pleased Hermione that he would be so patient with her mum and dad since she knew how much he hated repeating himself.

Hermione also took some time to play with her little sister, Minnie, as their father called her affectionately. It was awkward to be called big Hermione and her sister baby Hermione, so having her parents fall back on familiar pet names seemed only logical. Little Minnie was a sweet baby. She seemed fascinated with her big sister's hair and the necklace around her neck, and Veronica and Dell kept staring at the pair in wonderment.

That second night, Healer Lim and Mrs. Penchuck left to their hotel to give Severus and Hermione time alone to get better acquainted.

"So why now," her father asked when they all sat down together at the dinner table for dinner.

"Well, I have news," Hermione said. "I'm getting married. To Severus."

"Your teacher?" her mother asked astounded.

"I assure you there was no impropriety perpetrated while Hermione was a student of mine," Severus said. "Hermione didn't pursue me until, well, she was eighteen. I refuted her at first, but then... well, she won me over."

Hermione's eyebrow rose at his comment. "I won you over? You were horrible at first."

"They don't need to know that," Severus said with a scowl.

Hermione turned to her parents, who were both eyeing them with suspicion. "It was a spell, dad," she said, blushing. "This may take awhile."

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*I created a new spell using my favorite Latin translator:*

*profectere means: to start forward , set out, depart; to arise or spring from an origin.*

## School Is Over

School is over. Wedding bells ring. Is this happily ever after?



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Hermione carefully adjusted Harry's tie and smiled at him. He looked nervous, although why he'd be so nervous amused her. It wasn't as if they didn't know this day would come; it had been an inevitable conclusion ever since that ridiculously irrational act she, Ginny and Luna had done in the stream near the old Burrow on that fateful full moon night one year ago in fact, almost literally one year ago to the day! Something both Hermione and Ginny had laughed about the night before. "Oh, Harry, you look so handsome."

"So do you," he replied, smiling fondly at her. "Pretty I mean. Who would have thought, both of us getting married in the same month?"

"Except you always knew you would marry Ginny," she replied. "My relationship with Severus well, it definitely got off to a slow, rocky start with more downs than ups. If anyone had told me two years ago that I would marry Professor Severus Snape, I'd have thought them insane." She still couldn't believe it, even after everything that had happened to her in the last twelve months: casting the Moon-Song Charm, the horribly rough beginning after their consummation, fighting to keep Severus out of Azkaban and then reviving him from the Inferi Curse... It still amazed her how things had turned out. However, Hermione was eternally grateful that it had turned out this way. "And even then it almost didn't happen. But you and Ginny you are meant for each other you're perfect together in every way."

Harry's face bloomed into a goofy grin. "Yeah, we are. I think she has always known even if I took a while to see it. But in school, she was always Ron's little sister to me. It didn't see it until I realized she'd grown up, and I thought I had lost my chance with her. It took me seeing her with Dean to make me realize I wanted her."

"Sooo like a typical boy, you want that which you can't have," Hermione said, remembering all the talks she and Ginny had on her bed in school back then. "But even then, in our sixth year, she still talked about you just not as much."

"Hermione, I knew it would work out between you and Severus. Somehow I believed it would be all right," Harry said, touching her arm. "Ginny kept assuring me it would work out for you. She was convinced that it would, even when you picked up the annulment papers, I knew you'd never fill them out."

"I did fill them out," she confessed softly.

"*You didn't?*" He gaped at her in astonishment. "I thought I thought it would be like admitting failure. And I know how you hate failure."

She shook her head. "Relationships sometimes don't work out that's not a failure that's just how it goes sometimes. My mum told me that back in my sixth year when... Well, it was some motherly advice she gave me, the same advice I passed onto Ginny the night, and... Never mind that, it's behind us now. But I never signed the annulment forms, and several months ago I found them in my desk in my study. I immediately burned them in the fireplace. Don't tell Severus, he doesn't know how close I got to signing them."

Harry held up his hands and shook his head as he said, "Never. I plan on staying on his good side. I've seen him angry and it's frightening." His mouth stretched into a lopsided grin. "And we all thought him frightening in school, remember? But any first-year would have died of a heart attack if they'd seen the look he had on his face when Dragen abducted you. You know, he's not the same at all he's mellowed so much thanks to you."

"We both had to change in order for our relationship to work, and I do think we've both changed for the better," Hermione admitted. "Thank you, Harry, for always being my friend."

"Hermione, it's you I have to thank. You've stood by me no matter what, even when things seemed the most desperate, you were there for me. How could I not do the same for you when you needed my support?"

They both turned as Mr. Weasley peered into the room. "I'm looking for George. Sorry to disturb," he said before walking away.

"I can't believe in a few minutes I'm going to be a Weasley. Can you believe it? Ron and me brothers."

She could tell he was starting to feel nervous again. "You've been best mates for nine years now, and Molly and Arthur love you like a son. George admitted to me that he and Fred had bets on your marrying their sister, and I heard George telling Charlie that Fred owed him on that one. In fact, I think even Bill had a bet with Charlie that you'd get back together after the war. He said it was because of something that was said when we were at Shell Cottage...? I think the whole family was hoping for this day."

Ron and Seamus poked their heads into the small library, looking for someone. "I think everyone is here, mate. The house is full," Ron said. "We should probably start in a few minutes, don't you think?"

"Aren't you supposed to be escorting people to their seats? Don't worry about which side you put them on, just make sure you follow the seating plan for immediate family," Hermione said, taking charge once again since Fleur and Molly were upstairs helping Ginny get ready, and Arthur was so nervous, he couldn't stand still. "Oh, and make sure you seat Hagrid on the bench, not a folding chair he'll collapse it and there is a magical chair for Professor Flitwick that should be set up next to Professor Sprout so he can see properly. Make sure Kreacher knows so Baylie and Rylie..."

"Hermione, enough! They know! They have been listening for you and Mum all day," Ron said and ducked out. "Honestly!"

"Still the same bossy witch, aren't you?" Seamus commented with a grin, shaking his head as he followed Ron.

"What if I trip up?" Harry asked, his eyes darting away from hers and back.

Hermione touched his arm. "Harry, you'll do just fine." Her smile widened at her friend's nervousness. "You won't. I've charmed your shoes. You'll be sure-footed all evening." He smiled at that. "And you've only one line, 'I do.' Besides, you know everyone here." She was right. Harry's wedding included only fifty-five guests, eight more than she and Severus had at their wedding and forty of those present today had been at her wedding to Severus. "Now go and find Kingsley so he can walk you to the front as soon as everyone is seated, and I'll go and tell your bride we're ready."

"Thanks, Hermione," he said, kissing her cheek.

She saw Kingsley in the foyer, talking to Auror Blume, Harry's training instructor, and Auror Loraine Matsuno. Kingsley had readily agreed to officiate at Harry's and Ginny's wedding, just as he'd done for her and Severus. In a way, it had made it special for her and Severus, considering all Kingsley had done for them during Severus' trial and in insuring Severus got his job back at Hogwarts. That and actually having her parents present, so her father could walk her down the aisle. She still got choked up when she thought about everything Severus and Lucius had done to reunite her with them. Having her mum and dad with her the week leading up to her wedding had been magical,



even if her parents had decided to keep their new names and their residence in Australia.

"I've been told that everyone is here, so I'm going up to see if Ginny's ready," she told Kingsley. "Harry's in the library when you're ready to go down front."

"I'll tell George to corner Arthur and then join Harry. Let me know when we're starting," Kingsley said.

"Arthur had to find George. I think Percy turned yellow or has yellow feathers... or something like that," Auror Blume said, making Hermione gape at him in astonishment. "Percy ate a trick cream, I believe. Percy and Angelina are in the kitchen, working it out."

"Thank you," Kingsley said with a polite smile. "Hermione, it will be fine. I'll go and help Arthur and Angelina and then take Harry up front to start the show. Loraine, you might as well join Burt."

"And I'll see if I can help persuade people to take their seats," Auror Blume offered, walking away quickly

"It will be fine, Hermione, I promise," Kingsley said, his assured tone easing her nerves somewhat. "Every wedding has something to laugh about later and I'm sure it's only one of George's trick treats. Go and tell Ginny we are ready to start in ten minutes."

"Yeah, right, alright," she stammered. "It's probably one of his Canary Creams. It only lasts five minutes. Just tell George that no one else had better turn yellow or burst out in feathers or he'll have to face me."

"I'll be sure to tell him," Kingsley said, laughing as he turned to go. She watched him weave through the guests who were all being ushered toward the back garden.

She turned to go upstairs to let Ginny know that everything was almost ready and that they should all go downstairs, hoping Arthur and Kingsley would have Percy sorted out quickly. Luckily she hadn't had any of George's trick treats at her wedding; she'd have killed George if he had. Everyone had been on their best behavior, especially since Hermione's parents had been present and thus magic had to be kept to the barest minimum.

Hermione smiled as she walked up the stairs, careful not to step on the hem of her gown and trip. She recalled standing in the upstairs guest suite in Prince Manor with her mum, Luna, Ginny, Alestra, Wendlynne and Veronica while waiting for her own wedding to begin. Narcissa had been wonderful, and everything had flowed perfectly.

Hermione opened the door to the master suite and smiled at her friend. Ginny looked positively radiant in her off-the-shoulder wedding robes with the long, flowing skirt made it look like she was floating along the carpet. Her lace and cross-woven bodice was heavily decorated with pearls and crystals, making her glitter as she moved. Wendlynne was finishing up small touches to her hair and makeup, and Veronica was making sure their dresses hung properly. Alestra stood by Fleur, holding Ginny's bouquet.

Alestra, Wendlynne and Veronica were all peachy-pink off-the-shoulder, sweetheart neckline bridesmaid dresses with beaded ruched bodices and a floral detailed ruffle from their left shoulder that crossed to the right side of the waist and full flouncy skirts. Hermione and Luna both wore the same, only in a darker peach, designating the matrons from the bridesmaids. Victorie wore a gently ruched gown with a sweetheart neckline and flouncy layered skirt in a soft peach.

Molly and Fleur, Ginny's 'happily married witches,' according to Luna, helped Ginny with her veil and secured Aunt Muriel's tiara in place in her upswept hairdo. "You look so lovely, Ginny," Fleur said, standing back. She was wearing pale peach robes, and Molly a soft russet color that looked wonderful with her coloring.

However, Ginny was patiently telling Luna that, "Yes, I have something blue, something cheerful, something old and something new, and I have two Sickles from my aunts in my purse, but I'm not going to walk around with a Knut in my shoe."

Wendlynne leaned into Hermione and whispered, "The Irish and their superstitions, eh?"

"I remember Luna going through the same thing at her wedding," Hermione said with a conspiratorial laugh. "Luna insisted that Severus be the first person to greet Ginny this morning, and Aideen's perch was placed in Ginny's and my room so her trill would be the first sound we heard at sunrise."

"Is that why Luna has a phoenix feather in her hair?" Alestra asked.

"Good gracious, no," Hermione said, turning to Luna, but she needn't have worried. Luna had a tiny orange feather tucked into her hair. Apparently Aideen had given Luna a small breast feather, so Hermione allowed her to keep it.

"Ladies, it's time," Severus said from the doorway.

Molly hurried out to find Arthur, and the ladies exited the room to meet up with their partners in the lounge.

It had been very tricky keeping all of the wedding preparations a secret, for both weddings, Harry's and Ginny's as well as Hermione's and Severus', since they were all still quite news worthy. But Severus had devised a very complicated layering of enchantments on the invitations, some questionable in their legality or morality: the recipient and their guest had to read the vow written on the outside of the envelope aloud while tapping the wax seal with their wand, thus enacting the confidential charms and binding enchantments to keep the location, date and time absolutely secret. Therefore, each invitation had been presented to the intended guests in person, quite an undertaking, actually.

And all the deliveries were made to a different address, to Malfoy Manor for Hermione's wedding and to Shell Cottage for Ginny's, and the house-elves then brought everything to the site. The precautions did ensure that everyone involved in or attending the wedding kept mum of the event, so no one else would know until the following Monday morning when Mrs. Shelton looked at their names recorded in the Marriage and Magical Unions ledger.

As the wedding party all gathered in the family room, Mr. Weasley began to look teary-eyed, so similar to Dell's reaction at Hermione's wedding. Just as Hermione had at the time, Ginny leaned in close to her father and reassured him that she would always be his little girl. Mr. Weasley kissed her cheek gently and patted her hand. "I know, sweetheart. I'm just happy," he said.

"Do all father's cry at their daughter's weddings?" Severus asked, placing his hand on the small of Hermione's back.

Hermione smiled up at him. He looked so handsome in his charcoal dress robes and pale peach shirt and tie. "Sometimes it's the mothers that cry instead," she said softly. "You look handsome, by the way."

"You're delusional," he said with a soft smirk. "Do not get used to seeing me in this dreadful color. I'm likely to burn it later."

"No you won't, I made yours flame retardant," she replied. "Besides, it never hurts to have a touch of color every now and again. You can always wear it when we go out to dinner. Besides, I actually like this color on you."

He simply scowled at her, then relaxed as the partners lined up to walk down the aisle. Hermione and Severus stood waiting for the music to begin. In front of them, Alestra and Ron, who ready did the same thing only a month ago for Hermione, were talking with Wendlynne and Seamus. Today, Ginny stood in the back talking softly with Luna and Neville as Veronica conversed with George.

In Hermione's wedding to Severus, Ginny had been escorted by Lucius Malfoy, Luna by Reginald, and Harry had escorted Wendlynne. The surprise had been seeing Veronica paired with Harland Gabnold, whom Severus asked to be a groomsman at the very last minute.

The music started, and everyone straightened up. Wendlynne and Seamus hurried to the front, and began walking stately outside, under the bright, sunlit canopy that shielded the back garden from view by air, a very thoughtful gesture lent to Harry and Ginny from the Malfoys. Narcissa had used the canopy for Hermione's wedding;

gossamer thin so the stars could be seen from underneath, but completely opaque from above to prevent spying or accidental discovery.

Veronica and George followed next and then Luna and Neville exited. Alestra made one last check of Ron's tie, before they exited. Hermione gave Severus' arm a light squeeze, and he looked down at her as if not believing he'd actually agreed to this. "They will all be watching Harry and Ginny," she reassured him.

"Thank goodness," he intoned softly. Severus kept his eyes forward as they walked past the rows of seated guests. Several steps in front of them, Ron smiled at Susan Bones, Ron's date for his sister's wedding, and she waved back discreetly.

Hermione saw Bryan Randell, Thornton Bronte and Dresden Penwalter sitting together. She smiled at the sight of Flitterbloom flowers on Pomona's hat and Minerva's thistle in her brooch. Even Hagrid, who'd allowed Severus and Mr. Malfoy to buy him formal robes for Hermione's wedding, looked rather handsome in his stylish charcoal grey robes with a wide sunflower tie.

"Reminiscing?" Severus asked.

"Hard not to considering how much I enjoyed my wedding to you," she replied. She gave his arm another squeeze and turned, taking her place to wait for Ginny's grand entrance. Little Victorie and Teddy were walking down the aisle, Victorie delicately dropping either one rose peddle or one yellow feather (obviously from Percy's molt) at a time from her little basket with each step she took.

Then there was Ginny, standing on the arm of her father in the doorway, and everyone rose as Victorie and Teddy were swept up into Bill's and Charlie's arms.

The ceremony itself was simple because both Harry and Ginny had already signed the Bonding acknowledgement forms for Maggie. There was an eloquent but short sentiment from Kingsley, a poem read by Luna, a blessing read by Arthur and Molly and then Harry exchanged vows with Ginny. It had been much the same for Severus and Hermione since Severus said that their Bonding was a legalized union in of itself, which had suited Hermione just fine. Simple. Sweet. Memorable.

After Kingsley announced, "May I present Mr. and Mrs. Potter," the wedding party matched up in pairs as they followed the bride and groom into Harry's house. Hermione knew that the house-elves borrowed from Hogwarts (*asked* if they would like to help out and given little gift baskets of cocoa mints, fancy buttons and doilies as payment) would be setting up tables, chairs and a dance floor for the reception.

Severus' arm wrapped around Hermione's waist, and she leaned into him, taking pleasure in the seldom given public display of their love. "Should we go and congratulate the happy couple?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Later, they are surrounded right now. Besides, they are coming over for lunch tomorrow, and we'll see them before we all leave for the Ministry on Monday."

"Oh, right, how can I forget," he replied with a smirk. "I finally get to sweep you away for our honeymoon."

"I can't believe I'm going to visit my parents in Australia again so soon," she said, really looking forward to the trip.

"It's the three days in each city I'm looking forward to," he said sultrily in her ear. "Lucius is even allowing us the use of his flat again."

"Can we really afford the trip?" she asked softly so as not to be overheard. "Three weeks abroad is really expensive?"

"Between my book advances, the monies we received for our discoveries, inventions and innovations, I'm sure we can afford it," he said, kissing her softly. "Besides, you've yet to validate all the potions in my *Magical Drafts and Potions*. Arsenius Jigger's work is an excellent directory of ingredients and potions, but I've made improvements or variations on each of those potions as well. And Ginny has accepted an apprenticeship from me."

"You know she wants to be a Healer," Hermione stated as the house began to fill with guests.

"By the time I'm done with your friend, she'll fly circles around many of the Healers in St. Mungo's," he stated softly. "I intend to broaden her knowledge in many fields that are pertinent, including a comprehensive understanding of the Dark Arts with the intent of showing her the power and dangers to expect from Dark witches and wizards and how to counter them and their works. She will be the best Dark Arts Healer in the United Kingdom."

"Do I get to study under you as well?" she asked in as sultry a voice as she could muster. It had the desired effect, his pupils dilated and his breathing became momentarily labored.

"Be very careful what you ask for, Hermione," he countered in a very low silky vice.

She leaned in close as if sharing a secret. "I'm asking. Take me under your wing teach me."

"Witch."

"My dark bat of the dungeons," she replied.

"Not anymore," he said with a smirk. "Although... I know those dungeons like no other." He stood straighter as the guests around them began to file out again once it was announced that the food was served. "We'll speak on this later."

He led her back out under the canopy and together they located their table, finding herself being seated with Luna and Neville and Veronica and Dresden Penwalter. Thinking Severus might prefer talking to Luna and Neville, she took the seat next to Dresden, ignoring Severus' scowl. "It's better than being seated with Seamus and Ronald, don't you think?" she asked him when he sat down.

"Tolerable," he intoned as George and Angelina took their seats.

"Ask Neville about the Glacialine lichen of the Alps, or the Pumoyong snails and Lhakpawhigs discovered in Tibet," she suggested, placing her napkin on her lap. "He's been on expedition with Felix Marchbanks to the northern Mediterranean mountains and the Alps, and to Tibet with Ejnar Askgard from Denmark this year. He's now an apprentice to Esben Brage and Hans Blunkfod at Lé Blanche Herbal, that nursery you like that specialized in exotic and foreign plants for potion ingredients."

"Brage and Blunfod don't accept apprentices," Severus said flatly as the first course materialized on their plates.

"Exactly what he wrote, but it's true," Hermione said, slicing her wrapped asparagus spear in half. "Aren't you at all curious now? Even for the sake of having a direct personal connection for those rare ingredients."

His head tilted slightly, his eyes narrowing a fraction as he regarded her, then, with great dignity, he turned to Neville and inquired as to what he'd been doing all year. Neville nearly choked on his wine, but he began to answer Severus, amazingly without stammering at all. Hermione turned and asked George how the shop was doing. The rest of the meal passed well with pleasant conversation over good wine and delicious food.

All too soon, Harry and Ginny were called out onto the dance floor for their first official dance. "We're expected to dance next," she told Severus, seeing Ginny lead Harry to the dance floor.

"Naturally," he intoned.

As she watched Harry and Ginny dance to the music, Hermione reminisced on her first official dance with Severus. But as soon as the song was over, Severus led her out

onto the dance floor. When he swept her up in his arms, it was so easy to get lost in her own thoughts, following his lead. She loved dancing with him and wished there were more opportunities to do so. His movements were fluid and sure, and she always felt like a princess with her prince in his arms. At one point she saw Neville worm his way over to Luna, and Ron left Alestra to seek out Susan.

The music swayed and changed, but Hermione hardly noticed until it came to a halt three songs later. "Don't you want to stop?" Severus asked.

"No, I could do this all night," she replied with a dreamy smile.

He laughed softly. "Well, I can't."

"Spoil sport," she said with a teasing huff. She saw Seamus and Dean approach Ron and Susan, engaging them in some funny exchange that had them all laughing. It was good to see Ron happy at last.

"Odd, seeing my brother with her," George said as he and Angelina appeared beside Hermione. "He's still vague on how long they've been dating."

"They're not not officially. Susan has been coming around the Ministry a lot, trying to sort out her inheritance," Angelina said.

"Her inheritance?" Hermione asked.

Angelina nodded. "She's to inherit her late aunt's estate, but there was a problem one of the Death Eaters had taken residency and placed some charms on the house. Ron and Auror Blume have been trying to sort it out for her, but they haven't had much luck. Bill said he'd help out."

"Auror Blume asked for my assistance since they are having so much difficulty," Severus said, watching the pair. Dean apparently had asked Susan to dance since she had taken his hand; she said something to Ron and then followed Dean to the dance floor. George excused himself and led Angelina to dance.

"I think I'll go see Ron," she said, chuffing a laugh at Severus' arched eyebrow. "Ron's well past me now, so you won't have to hex him," she added.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "As long as he realizes your mine."

"As if he could forget." Hermione walked up to her friend as he turned to greet Auror Blume.

"Hi, Ron," she said as the Auror moved away.

"Hermione," he said and gave her a quick hug. "Sorry, I shouldn't have..." he stammered as turned to look for Severus.

Hermione laughed at his reactions. "It's all right; he's not going to hex you."

"This is Snape you're talking about the wizard who wanted to hex my bits off at Christmas," Ron pointed out.

"A lot has happened since Christmas," Hermione countered. "I see you've brought Susan? Are you seeing her now?"

His ears turned pink as his gaze darted in Susan's direction, then glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard. "Yes, for a while now," he looked back at Hermione, "unofficially of course. I'm still helping her with the curses on her house." He shoved his hands in his pockets and moved closer to her and lowered his voice. "I really like her. She's been through so much in the war and yet she's come out of it strong, and she's an incredible woman. We want many of the same things, her and me." He looked up at Hermione through his fringe and hunched his shoulders boyishly. "I wish I could be as assured as you, Luna and my sister are about your spouse's not that I could ever doubt that Harry loves my sister, but... I-I really like her, Hermione."

"You're not asking me to help you cast a pairing enchantment to verify...?" She couldn't finish the question, it was too absurd to think about, and remembered he'd asked her to once a long time ago.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "But, I've never felt this way before." He straightened up as he turned to look at Susan, then glanced around again. "I know we've only been... I've been helping her with her case since January, and we only started seeing each other because of the curses and such." He looked at Hermione, and she could see the conflict in his eyes. "But we meet for other times too, making excuses to get together, even though I'm not supposed to."

"Have you told her how you feel?" Hermione asked, hoping that the attraction was mutual.

"Yeah, we've we've been... together you know," he confessed softly. "You can't tell anyone. Merlin, I miss this, being able to talk to you."

Out on the dance floor, Susan was swept away by Professor Flitwick. "Ron, you can send me a letter or come over anytime. I never wanted this to come between us," she said emphatically. "We've been friends for so long. I don't want us to become estranged."

"I wasn't sure about him," he said, jutting his chin. Hermione turned, seeing Severus talking with Kingsley and Bill.

"It's all right," she tried to assure him. "He knows he has to accept my friends. Why don't you ask him to help with Susan's house? He mentioned that Kingsley spoke to him about it."

"Do you think he will?" Ron asked, still staring at Severus.

She could tell he really wanted to. "Yes, I'm sure he would if you ask him," she said and smiled when he turned to look at her. "We leave Monday morning for Australia. If you want to come by Sunday evening, I'm sure he will look over what you've done and offer suggestions."

"How long will you be gone?" he asked.

"We will return on the twenty-fifth, in plenty of time to plan Harry's birthday party," she said, and Ron smirked.

"You had best include Snape in whatever you and Ginny plan this year. I'd hate to have a repeat of what happened last year."

"Oh, the plans were fine, the aftermath was the problem," she said with a laugh. "He was not at all happy about my bathing suit, and he saw it as being couples in his opinion. Nope, even though Ginny is planning on doing things that Harry missed out in his childhood living with the Dursleys, Severus will be included."

"Oh, I can't wait to see him in a go-cart or at the water park," Ron said, stifling his laugh when Severus turned to look at them.

She knew Ginny's list so far was as elaborate as last year's: eating cupcakes at Bea's of Bloomsbury, going to Splashdown Pool for the day, dinner at Sarastro, a restaurant with an iconic reputation in London's West End known for its opulent décor and flamboyant food, staying at The Croft in Cornwall and spending a day at the beach... "If I go, so will he," she stated. "Ginny's determined to have us all do all the things Harry had been denied doing while he lived under the Dursley's stairs."

"Like I said, it will be interesting seeing him..." Ron said, but something across the room got his attention. "Thank you, Hermione. For, well, everything." He leaned forward, as if to kiss her cheek, then straightened stiffly. She laughed softly as he walked away.

The rest of the evening went well. Severus even danced with Ginny, because she didn't take no for an answer, and with Luna, although Hermione had no idea how that came about, but it had been hilarious to watch. Likewise, Hermione danced with Harry and every Weasley present, including Ginny at one confusing point, as well as with Hagrid and Professor Flitwick.

At the end of the evening, Ginny and Harry Apparated away under cover of some huge fireworks, courtesy of George.

Taking that as his cue, Severus whisked Hermione away to their home, a small house the Hogwarts house-elves called the Summer Cottage. Hermione loved it.

Sometime after the horror on Valentine's Day in Hogsmeade, Lucius had 'encouraged' a developer to want the houses in Severus' old neighborhood for a reclamation project, which had made Severus' childhood home increase in value. The old factory had been turned into a school, and the entire town had been renovated. Severus had held out to the last minute before selling, giving him a sizable profit. Likewise, Lucius managed a sizable profit somehow.

Severus, it turned out, had spent part of his Saturdays in May searching for a suitable house. The week after their wedding, he took Hermione and her parents to view the ones he'd selected, intending it as a wedding present. Although Hermione had been put off by not being included in the initial search, she had to admit, he did take everything into account: a place for his potion lab, a work space for her projects, a large kitchen, a large fireplace with ample floor space before it for a fluffy rug and a back garden for growing plants, and close to a suitable Apparition point.

Hermione fell in love with the sixth property the agent showed them the moment she saw it. The two-story, four bedroom house sat on the end of the street. It had a room above the garage for Severus' potion lab and a large shed in the back for Hermione's projects, plus there was lovely back garden for the plants Severus liked to have growing for his use. The driveway was lined with planters for the herbs Hermione thought she'd like to maintain for the three months they lived in the house. But the views of the fields from the upstairs windows were lovely, and there was a stream meandering to the left of the property with a long walking path.

As Severus had promised, Mispy had organized the removal of all their possessions from Spinner's End and had carefully rearranged them all in the new house with tremendous care. Not a flower was chipped on her precious figurines, and her family photos sat on tables in the lounge and on the mantelpiece, the braided rugs lay on the floor in the kitchen, her mother's still-life painting hung on the wall in the dining area, her crystal vase and her grandmother's china tea set on the dish cupboard, and her ceramic bowl on the table all exactly as Hermione had done in Spinner's End.

So, their first night in their new house had felt like home from the moment they had arrived. The next day, Hermione and Severus had gone for a walk, coming home with a new tort-colored, squashed-faced, brandy-legged half-kneazle she lovingly called Harlequin for the masklike patch of fawn fur on one fourth of the feline's face.

~oOo~

Another year had passed and the last days of August were once again upon them, heralding in another year of school at Hogwarts. Severus was once again busy with the demands of being Headmaster and the tutelage of his apprentice, Ginny Potter's, continued education. (Not to mention that of his wife's as well.) The previous year, Minerva had stepped down from the position of Deputy Head of Hogwarts, and the position had gone to Filius, although Minerva had maintained her title of Head of Gryffindor. Since the new school charter amendments specified that the Deputy of the school would be responsible for inter-house disputes and house favoritism wouldn't be allowed, Professor Vector became Head of Ravenclaw. This new school year, since Minerva decided to retire this previous summer, Professor Hagrid was expected to take her place as Head of Gryffindor, and a new professor, Amelia Hart, had signed on as Professor of Transfiguration for the upcoming term.

Harry, Ron, Cho and Seamus were full Aurors now, and with all the experience Harry and Ron had acquired over the last few years, they'd had been promoted within the department in only one year.

Ron was engaged to Susan. After months of keeping their relationship a secret, they'd finally admitted being together in October (hardly a secret to their closest friends and family), and two months later, they announced at Easter that they were going to be married on the night of the Harvest Moon in September, one of the rare times it fell on a Friday. This, according to Professor Sinistra, would be especially fortuitous for the couple considering the fact that a sporadic meteor shower was expected that particular night, lasting until early Saturday morning.

Neville and Luna went on an expedition to Sweden with Rolf Scamander, the grandson of Newt Scamander, upon her leaving Hogwarts. In a shocking discovery, Luna was able to capture photographs of the extremely elusive Crumple-Horned Snorkack, which turned out to resemble a white rhino crossed with a Swedish Landrace pig (the head of a rhino with the body shape and curled tail of the pig) and a Dutch Landrace goat (the long coat, it's sturdy legs) with two horns, one long curling horn below a curved one that greatly resembled the horns of the white rhino. But the most amazing thing was that the shorter horn did, in fact, cure some forms of cancer and would, over time, regenerate. However, all attempts to capture the creature for study the previous year had failed miserably. The Crumple-Horned Snorkack's longer curled horn became brittle when in captivity and it would explode violently, killing the creature and anyone standing too close to the animal's enclosure. They were immediately put on the endangered creature list by the Department for the Preservation, Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and Beasts of the Scandinavian Ministries of Magic.

After finishing at Hogwarts, Hermione had opted to train under Severus, Reginald and Professor Flitwick, accepting apprenticeships in both Potions and Charms, still unsure as to what she wanted to do, although Lucius had indicated that she'd have a place in any of his research and development companies, as well as several other companies who had expressed an interest in her when she was ready. Ginny studied under Severus, learning everything a true Dark Arts Healer needed to know about the Dark Arts as well as carrying her preliminary Healer's training schedule. Not surprising, their study course and curriculum was as strenuous as their N.E.W.T. year had been.

~oOo~

Hermione had invited Ginny and Luna over to have tea, and they ended up pulling out the Scrabble game Severus had given Hermione. The board game had become a favorite of Hermione and Severus' over the years, since they both had extensive vocabularies. However, Severus, frustrated with the number of tiles for some of the letters, had added quite a few extra tiles to the box, to make the use of Latin words easier on their Latin only nights.

"Neville wants a baby, and I think I'd like being a mother," Luna said as she leaned against the windowpane, staring wistfully out at the view.

"Are you ready to?" Hermione asked, knowing that she and Severus wanted to put off parenthood for at least a few more years. She put **T**, **I**, **S**, and an **E** on Luna's **U**. "Tissue, double word score," she said with a smile as she added up her points.

"Oh, yes, and Grandmother Longbottom fully agrees. She'd like to have many grandchildren." Luna turned to look at her friends sitting cross-legged at the coffee table. "But I want a girl first Neville wants a son or two, then a girl."

"Harry and I don't care which we have, boys or girls; we simply disagree on the number of children. I keep reminding him that I'm the one who has to carry it for nine agonizing months," Ginny stated, using Hermione's **T** to spell out *taller* with her tiles. "Triple word score." She looked up. "I still only want three or four he wants a full Quidditch team of kids. I think it's because he wants a big family like I grew up in."

"Could very well be," Hermione said, examining the board. "He was jealous of Ron, having a family that loved and cared about him and all the magic you and Ron grew up around. He wanted Ron's life as much as Ron wanted the acknowledgement and favors Harry seemed to have."

Luna glanced at her tiles on her tray, then the board, concentrating on her next move. "If you're fertile and there are no impediments, why wait. It would be so fun to become mothers together, don't you think? Having our children grow up together, starting off at Hogwarts already friends." She flicked her wand and several tiles floated upward, then landed on the board, spelling *nargle* with Ginny's **L**. "There are spells and potions to ensure what sex you have," she said as she turned back to the window, not caring about her score in typical Luna fashion. Both Ginny and Hermione knew that for her it was the fun of playing the game with them, not who won.

"But aren't they risky?" Hermione asked, remembering what she and Ginny had read about birth control and prenatal potions.

"They are not recommended, and only the best Potion masters should brew them," Ginny said, laying down **C**, **R**, **C**, **K**, **I**, **N**, **G** on Luna's **A**. "Cracking," she announced.

"It was upon a summers shynie day, when Titan faire his beams did display, in a fresh fountain, far from all men's view, she bathed her breast in the boyling heat t'allay; she bathed with roses red, viola's violet hue, with yellow archangel and bluebells blue... in hope he makes her wish come true."

"Oh I know this one! I read it while researching for the unidentified seed for the Médousa Potion," Ginny exclaimed. "She scents herself with the sweetest flowers that in the forest grew, and there is a line 'chestnut and mallow sweet, and sweet woodruff, too'."

"Yes, it's a fertility potion. You mix the ingredients, rub leavings on yourself in a mountain stream, drink the potion and then lean over the water in the moonlight to see your child's face, then make love to your man or is it after... I'd have to look it up in my diary. Although why it's connected to Titan, I don't know. Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation," Luna said, taking her seat at the enlarged coffee table. "I think it has Foxglove, Lady fern, harts tongue, wild garlic, wood anemones and..."

"No, no no!" Hermione said, holding up her hands. "Not again. If, and I mean *F* and when Severus and I have a baby, I'll do it the natural way. No more old potion triad spells for me."

"That is very smart of you, my dear," a rich silky voice said smoothly from the direction of the stairs behind her.

Hermione turned to see Severus and Harry standing inside of the doorway. "If I ever hear of you participating in a triad spell on yourself again, I fully expect to be consulted."

"I fully agree with him, Ginny ask me first," Harry said, walking forward as Ginny and Hermione clamored to their feet. "I thought you wanted to wait a few years until you finish your apprenticeship with Severus and your Healer training?"

"Of course I do," she replied. "We were simply talking about it nothing more. I swear!" She hugged Harry, who in turn placed his hands on her hips. "There's no way I'm going to mess up everything I have with you by casting some ancient rhyming spell again."

"And that goes for me, as well," Hermione said, wrapping her arms around Severus's waist.

Although he still hated affectionate demonstrations in front of others, he put up with them in front of her friends. He grasped her waist, holding her tightly. "I'm going to hold you to that," he drawled out slowly in a warning tone.

Hermione smiled and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I'm glad you are."

~ Finite Incantatem ~

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*Author's notes:*

*I want to thank Arabellabloodgood, my alpha-reader, Proulxes for adding a bit of British flare to my chapter, and my beta, FrankQ, for giving this a read and helping me clean up all my mistakes. I really appreciate it very much.*

*Thank you also to Jay for my beautiful banner. I really love it!*

*Luna's poem is a mix of verses; The first lines are from the 1590 poem by Sir Edmund Spenser from his epic The Faerie Queene (Book Three, Canto 6, Stanza 6). The rest came from various satirical versions of the "Roses are red" poem and some doggerel poems inspired by that poem that have apparently circulated among children and loves for centuries.*

*So to say adieu:*

*Rose are red, violets are blue*

*That's what they say but it just isn't true!*

*Roses are red and apples are too*

*But violets are violet, violet aren't blue*

*An orange is orange, but Greenland's not green*

*A pinky's not pink, so what does it mean?*

*To call something blue when it's not, we defile it,*

*But aww, what the heck, it's hard to rhyme violet!*