

A Secret Worth Keeping

by Red Writing Hood

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

Letters of Interest

Chapter 1 of 16

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A Secret Worth Keeping

Chapter One: Letters of Interest

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Forgive me for not keeping in touch since my abrupt departure last September. I had wanted to speak with you, but unfortunately, other things happened that were beyond my control. The reason I am writing to you now is because I am in a bit of a confusing dilemma arising from my last night there and I think you will be able to help clear my mind. I do not know if you know anything about the reason I left that September night, but my problem started on that evening. I can't go into details about what happened exactly at this time, but suffice to say that I am now the mother of a beautiful five-day-old son. I have named him Sebastian Samuel Snape, and yes, as you can tell by the name, Severus Snape is his father. There, you can see, lies the problem. Professor Snape doesn't know, and for the most part doesn't even know what happened that night. You see, I made sure that the incident was obliterated from his memories.

Please don't ask what happened, just know that it wasn't something either of us were looking for. He took what happened very badly and I was forced to erase it from his mind. It never occurred to me that I could have gotten pregnant, but then I now have Sebastian so that is a moot point.

Now I come to the problem that is tearing me apart. Do I tell Professor Snape that he has a son, or do I keep this quiet? I want him to know, but not if it puts him or our son at any risk. Under those circumstances I would demand that he not know.

Please, Professor Dumbledore, I sure could use your wisdom right about now, for I truly do not know what to do. I am staying at the Leaky Cauldron for a little while. Please owl me there.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

~00~

Dear Miss Granger,

I was overjoyed to receive your letter and equally shocked to learn that you now have a child. However, shocks are common and I recover quite easily nowadays. As for

informing Severus about the child, that is indeed a dilemma. With Voldemort in such high power at this time, I fear for your son's life if his paternal parentage is found out. I do agree that, as Sebastian's father, he has a right to know.

Perhaps you could tell me a little of what happened that night. I know you asked me not to ask, but it may help me with my decision on what action to take, if any.

Yours truly,

Prof. Albus Dumbledore

~00~

Dear Professor,

I really don't know how much to tell you or where to start. I have gone over it time and time again, and that night is firmly fused into my brain, but how much should I say?

They say to always start at the beginning, but then that would make this letter much too long and boring, so I will begin with my detention. I was to have detention with Professor Snape that evening and I was to assist in his laboratory. The problem was that when I arrived, Professor Snape wasn't alone. Mr. Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy, that is, was with him. They were fighting. I walked into the midst of a very angry argument. I don't think I have ever seen Professor Snape so enraged. Mr. Malfoy, who was equally as livid as Professor Snape was, grabbed onto my arm and started pulling me toward the fireplace. I don't know what the fight was about, but by the way they looked at me, I had a sick feeling it was about me. I just don't know; it could have been my imagination, but that is what seems to make the most sense.

Anyway, when Mr. Malfoy was dragging me away, Professor Snape cursed him, sending him flying. I remember falling and I must have hit my head because I blacked out. I only remember that when I reopened my eyes, Professor Snape was kneeling over me. Mr. Malfoy had him in the Imperius Curse. It is enough to say that Professor Snape was forced to rape me. It wasn't long after Professor Snape finished when Mr. Malfoy left, leaving Professor Snape a broken man lying next to me.

Professor Snape was highly devastated at what he was forced to do to me. He was so guilt-ridden that I took it upon myself to erase his memory. I took him back to his personal chambers then left. I decided that evening that not only was I to leave him in his chambers, but I had to leave Hogwarts. I still to this day do not know what their argument was about, but I didn't feel safe there anymore. I was scared that it would happen again, and I didn't want to put either Professor Snape or myself through that another time.

That is the story. What do you recommend I do now? Should I tell Professor Snape about Sebastian? I am worried about his mental state if he should learn the whole story.

Sincerely,

Hermione

~00~

Dear Hermione,

My dear, I am so sorry that you had to endure such devastating circumstances, and all alone, too. It is a testimony of how strong you really are to have survived this horrible situation and with your memories intact. It is sad that the memories could have not been erased from you as well. I am assuming you obliterated Severus before he could perform the contraceptive spell? An obvious statement, since you are now a mother to his child. I'm sure you weren't thinking of getting pregnant at the time.

I have also taken it upon myself to check Hogwarts magical register and was delighted to see the child's name on the list. It is wonderful to know that your son will be attending here in eleven years.

Now, as to telling Severus, I highly believe it is the right thing to do. I am certain that he would want to know, although I am at a loss as to how to approach him on such a serious topic. I will consider our options and will owl you when I have come up with something.

Yours truly,

Albus

~00~

Dear Professor,

Thank you! I'm sure you will help me come up with a less strenuous way of telling the professor the truth. I look forward to your next letter. It eases my mind.

Love,

Hermione

~00~

Dear Hermione,

I have decided that the best way to tell Severus is by the direct approach. I am going to give him copies of our letters and the register's notice of Sebastian's birth, with your permission of course. If you feel there is another way, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Albus

~00~

Dear Professor,

No, you are right, Professor Snape has always been a direct man. The direct approach would probably be the best. Should I be there? It would be difficult to get someone to watch an infant of this age, and I would hate to bring him along, but again I will bow to your judgment.

Hermione

~00~

Hermione,

That will not be necessary. Severus has accidentally discovered our letters. I'm sure you will be hearing from him soon.

Sincerely,

Albus

~00~

SHIT

~00~

Professor Dumbledore,

He did? Was he angry? Upset? Oh no! What do I do now?

Hermione

~00~

Miss Granger:

I believe we have an issue to discuss. I shall be at the Leaky Cauldron this evening at seven.

Severus Snape

~00~

CRAP

~00~

Professor Snape,

I will be there if I can find a sitter otherwise I am in room four on the upper level.

Hermione

~00~

Miss Granger:

Room four. I will come directly to the room. There is no reason to draw attention to ourselves or the baby in the common room. I shall see you there. I look forward to meeting my son.

Severus Snape

~00~

GULP

The Meeting

Chapter 2 of 16

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A Secret Worth Keeping

Chapter Two: The Meeting

Hermione was a wreck, both physically and mentally. Her rumpled clothing looked slept in, and her hair refused to remain in the braid she had it in that morning. It stuck out in wild corkscrews all along her forehead and neck. At the moment, she was pacing the floor of her room with her newborn in her arms. Sebastian wouldn't stop crying. Somehow, she felt that he had picked up on her apprehension about Professor Snape coming to see them. Her hands sweated profusely as she tried to walk the baby into slumber, but he was having none of it.

She was still so new at being a mother at such a young age; she felt helpless, and there was no one to turn to, no one to ask advice of, no one to help her so she could rest. She had fed Sebastian, burped him, changed and rocked him, but the child continued to cry. Loudly. She was beginning to reach the end of her tether. That single threadlike strand of sanity was almost frayed beyond repair.

She had hoped to have Sebastian sleeping for Snape's arrival. It would give them time to talk in peace, and possibly give her time to clean herself up as well. She thought that maybe she'd tidy the room if she'd enough energy at that point. At least Sebastian was clean, dressed in a green onesy that usually contrasted nicely with his fair skin.

"Don't cry, Sebastian. Please don't cry," she spoke softly as she rocked him, tears falling down her red-rimmed eyes. The hour was drawing close and Snape would be by soon. She looked down at the baby draped in his blue thread-worn baby blanket she'd found for him in a thrift store during her sixth month of pregnancy. That worn out blanket had seen its fair share of tears. Both Mother and baby. The new tears mixed with the tearstains of several days' worth of crying.

She was so tired... just so tired.

~00~

Severus paused at the door marked as number four; inside he could hear the sounds of a baby's cry. The sound sent a jolt cascading across his spine and made his

stomach roll. He had to lean against the wall for a moment to gather his thoughts as well as his strength. He still couldn't believe it. When he discovered those letters between Albus and Hermione, it was like someone doused him with ice cold water. His heart seemed to stop. It seemed surreal.

He remembered reading the first letter from Miss Granger and felt the jolt of disbelief. Reading of his own son, a son he had no idea existed until that morning. For many minutes after reading that first missive, he tried to think back nine months. Back to the time when Miss Granger had abruptly left without reason or explanation to anyone. He remembered Albus talking about her departure at the staff meeting and remembered feeling a sense of foreboding... but that was it.

He did have a faint memory of the time she wrote about. The time that Lucius visited and they argued. But he didn't remember Miss Granger being there. In truth, he barely remembered the argument at all. As a matter of fact, he couldn't remember what the argument was even about. Severus closed his eyes and tried to recall that night, but all he could come up with was a very dark and very black blank. The mark of a very well placed Obliviate spell. Miss Granger obviously mastered that one.

The most important fact now to consider was the baby. True, he didn't remember anything that could or would pertain to conceiving a child with Hermione Granger. But he did know that she would never stoop so low as to falsely accuse anyone of fathering her child, especially a child from a man whom she thought despised her. She was wrong about that. He never despised her, but rather her friends. They had a disconcerting ability to put everyone around them in danger. Without a thought of consequences to their safety. He was constantly after Miss Granger to work harder, hoping it would keep her and others out of harm's way when the Potter brat and the Weasley idiot got into more trouble. Unfortunately, Miss Granger always seemed to be right there in the middle of it all. To his and the other teachers' dismay.

No, he didn't hate her. He just wanted her and everyone to be safe from the horrors that lay beyond the protective haven that was Hogwarts. He sighed and approached the door once more. Obviously, the Haven wasn't safe enough from him. He was the one that ended up hurting her after all. It was obvious that Albus had accidentally left the letters on his desk in full view, especially when the old man knew full well that he would be using his office today. The Headmaster, in one of his most obvious shows of pretend senility, left them there for him to discover, making it easier for him to discuss the situation with the horrified teacher.

Severus paused again, listening to the crying coming from inside. The soft cries were slowly turning into very loud howling. Concern, at his child's very vocal distress, almost convinced him to force his way into the room to see what the problem was. However, the only thing that stopped him from doing so was the faint words of comfort, which he caught coming from beyond the wooden door. He breathed deeply as he realized that she was trying to soothe the upset child, and that made him calm down a bit.

Severus stood straight, took a deep, cleansing breath and raised his hand. Three times he rapped on the door and waited, trying not to shift anxiously from foot to foot. A deep sense of foreboding ate at him, making him feel slightly uneasy at this meeting. Maybe he shouldn't have come. When he read those letters, he felt like it was the right thing to do, meeting her here, away from Hogwarts. It was just an odd turn of events to be meeting Hermione like this. Hermione Granger. Of all people to mother his child, it had to be her.

The sounds from inside moved closer and after a moment the door opened to the sight of a very disheveled Hermione Granger jostling a bundle of squalling faded blue blanket. His first thought as he cast his eyes on her was, she looks like Hell. From the look in her eyes, he then thought that she probably hadn't slept in days. Maybe even since the baby's birth.

"Professor Snape." There was a look of combined relief and fear in her eyes as she acknowledged him. He nodded to her as she took a step back to allow him entrance into her room. "Come in, please. I'm sorry for my appearance..." She paused as the baby continued to cry, and she began to bounce him again.

Severus watched her wobbling the infant and spoke just enough to be heard over the howling. "I do not concern myself with your appearance, Miss Granger. However, you do look like something Hagrid would adopt."

She gave him a glance, not too sure if he was joking or not. She was on the verge of replying with what she hoped was a smart-assed comment, but an especially loud howl erupted from the bundle of blanket and her brows creased with concern. She began to walk around in a circle, trying her best to quiet him down. Finally she stopped and looked up at the man watching them silently, her eyes shining, as she was so close to crying again. "He won't stop crying. I don't know what to do. What am I doing wrong?"

Snape quietly watched as Hermione stood staring up at him with obvious dismay written all over her exhausted face. The baby's howling rang throughout the room and, he was sure, could be heard down in the tavern. It was indeed a rarity to see this woman at such a loss. The Hermione Granger he had known had the answers to any problem. Any question that he could throw at her during classes was answered in a calm, intelligent way. Now, as he watched her, seeing so plainly that she was scared, he felt something give. Maybe it was because he had never seen her so terrified. He had witnessed her do some very scary things in her few short years at Hogwarts. Who would have guessed that motherhood would be her undoing?

He finally took a step forward and reached out to her. "Let me take him; you look like you could use some respite."

Hermione looked between the two, debating whether to just hand Sebastian over or give it a bit of time first. In truth, the thought only flickered through her mind in a fleeting concern. "Thank you. I'm just so tired," she said as she gently passed the baby over to his father's outstretched arms. Severus took up the child and held it close to his chest. Immediately the child ceased crying, filling the room with a deafening quiet. Hermione stared, eyes widened in amazement at the miracle.

"He... He's stopped. I don't believe it," she whispered, moving closer and gently moving the blanket away from the baby's face. She smiled as she saw that Sebastian was staring up at Severus with a look of peace on his face. She blinked back tears as she moved away. "It seems he prefers you over me." She sniffed back tears of abandonment and sat down heavily on the threadbare sofa. "I'm an awful mother."

Severus looked up from the face of his son and frowned at her. "Don't be ridiculous. You are simply tired. I suggest you go and take a nap while my son and I get acquainted." He indicated the small bed by the window. Hermione's eyes flew between her son and Severus, fear and doubt etched into her expression, causing Severus to sigh loudly. "We both shall be here when you wake, Miss Granger. I will not be taking him away. You will feel better when you wake, I assure you."

Embarrassed that he knew she was worried about him taking her son from her, she gave him a timid smile and stood to her feet. "I'm sorry for doubting you, Professor; I haven't been thinking very clearly lately. I don't think I have ever been so tired." Bringing her hand up to cover a big yawn, she felt every bone in her body shaking with exhaustion. If she didn't get some sleep soon, she thought that she was going to crack under the strain. "Thank you again, Professor. His diapers are in that bag over there." She pointed to a very large blue bag by the door.

"Bottles?" He raised an eyebrow, causing her to blush.

"Uh. He's, uh... breastfed. Just wake me when he gets hungry, which will be in about two hours."

Severus nodded and sank down into the sofa she had vacated, father and son both eyeing each other in awe. Hermione gave them one more glance before sprawling out on the bed. She was fast asleep before her head even made it to the pillow.

Severus watched the young woman fall into sleep with mixed emotions. Because of her, he was now a father. Sebastian. He wondered if she knew that was his middle name. Knowing Hermione, she probably did. Leave it to her to do what she thought was right. But should this baby have the name of Snape? Perhaps he would be safer if he went by Granger instead.

Sebastian Samuel Granger.

He smiled and shook his head. No. Snape fit the boy. Severus watched, intrigued, as the baby seemed to study Severus just as much as the older man was studying him. Grey-black eyes met black. Severus moved aside the blanket to get a better look. He examined each finger and toe, chuckling in amusement as the infant kicked in protest.

"It's all right, Sebastian, Daddy's not going to hurt you." The baby immediately fell still again from the soothing words of his father. Severus paused in his examination to gaze into his son's eyes.

"Daddy. Father. Papa. What are you to call me in time?" He sighed at that thought and finally, satisfied with the overall toe and finger count, Severus covered his son back up, resting him against his chest as he leaned back into the sofa.

For the first time in his life, Severus Sebastian Snape felt content.

AN: A short chapter, I know, but it's getting there.

Understandings

Chapter 3 of 16

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Chapter Three: Understandings

Faint sounds of fussing slowly brought Hermione back to a dull awakening. Subconsciously, she was already starting to filter out the certainty from her dreamscapes. Familiar sounds reverberated in her dreams until, finally, her eyes fluttered open as the real memories worked her back into wakefulness. For a moment she forgot where she was and sat up in bed.

"Sebastian?"

"He's right here, Miss Granger. Quite safe, I assure you."

Severus's voice came from her right and she turned towards it. She raised a hand to her throat, and the apprehension inside of her subsided at the sight that greeted her. The tall, dark-haired wizard stood in shadows next to the bed with a wiggly and fussy Sebastian in his arms.

"How did things go?" She moved to sit with her back against the headboard; she could just make out their form in the darkened room. "Did you two get along well?"

Severus whispered a soft, "*Lumos*," and the candles lit, casting the room in a soft glow. Hermione blinked a few times at the sudden light before turning her eyes back to the man and child. "We got along quite well, until a few moments ago," Severus replied and moved to sit himself down next to her on the bed; in his arms their son's tiny body was a torrent of movement, his small face displaying a familiar redness that she knew all too well. "Did you sleep well?"

She smiled up at him and nodded. "Yes, thank you. I really needed it. I didn't realize how exhausted I was."

"It's nice to see you more rested. However," he indicated the child rustling restlessly in his arms, a semi-hapless expression the elder's face, "I think we have a problem."

"He has your temperament." She chuckled.

"I can see that," Severus replied haughtily, still trying to hang onto the squirming infant.

Hermione smiled as she watched Sebastian's legs kicking furiously in agitation, knowing by his movements that he was just at the beginning of his tantrum. In a few seconds, his warning whimpering would begin, and then, if he weren't eating within a few minutes after that, he would let loose a howl that could bring the ceiling down. This little bit of feet kicking was merely his pre-feeding fussing.

Severus, on the other hand, didn't look too pleased. "I do believe that he is hungry."

"I do believe you are right." She smiled, tucking the comforter more securely around her before holding out her arms for the baby. Hermione ignored the burn that rose on her face at having to expose herself to her former teacher, but there was little choice in the matter. Sebastian's welfare came first, so she concentrated on his needs. "Hand him over."

Severus slowly passed the irritated infant to his mother, carefully and gently so as not to accidentally drop him. He sat motionless on the side of the bed, watching every little movement in silence as Hermione unbuttoned her blouse and proceeded to slip off half of the white fabric to expose herself. With barely a breath, he watched her feed their son.

The sight wasn't as erotic as he would assume it could have been, if things had proceeded as nature intended it to. He leaned forward to watch closer. No, not erotic. This was, by far... different. It was intoxicating. Watching her feeding Sebastian, he felt a stirring, not in his loins, but in his heart.

"He's amazing," Severus whispered as he found that he couldn't take his eyes off of mother and child.

Hermione smiled down at the bundle, oblivious to the fact that Severus was watching him suckle with such an intense gaze.

"He has a hardy appetite," he whispered softly.

She glanced up and nodded. "Yes, he does. I was sore for the first few days, trying to learn to feed him properly. It was quite a task for me. Even the books I read didn't prepare me for the pain that came along with breastfeeding at first. Not having anyone to show me how to do this, I had to learn from experience. I'm still a bit sore," she admitted.

"Your mother didn't give you any advice?" Severus's eyes strayed from his son to Hermione as he spoke.

Hermione's face turned a shade of red, and she looked quickly away. There were many things she tried not to think about, and her parents were one of the many. The last time she saw them, they were sitting at the dinner table staring out the window into the bright sunlight. That morning, her mother had found her curled up by the toilet. Hermione remembered how her mother's eyes had widened then narrowed in suspicion. Not long after that... Hermione thrust those memories deep inside once more and spoke softly, finally admitting aloud one thing that she had denied for too long. "My parents are not in the picture. When they found out the truth, they were very disappointed in me. They have decided that they don't want anything to do with us."

Severus frowned at that. "Nothing? Surely, they were supportive of..."

"No." Hermione interrupted with a sad shake of her head. She kept her gaze firmly on her son, refusing to look up at Severus, in case he could read the pain in her face. "They kicked me out of the house when they found out. I had barely enough time to gather a few essential things before I left. They couldn't even look at me when I walked out of the only home I had."

"Where did you go?" Severus asked, leaning forward. His eyes danced between mother and child. Both were a wonder to him, and he couldn't believe any parents would just toss them out like that, not to their own child.

"Oh, here and there. A few real friends helped me out when they could." She shrugged her shoulder, trying to toss the pain away. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm hoping to be able to get a job in Diagon Alley, or perhaps in Hogsmeade. If I can accomplish that, then Sebastian and I can stay in this world. If I can't, we will have to return to Muggle London."

"Did you tell them what happened? How Sebastian was conceived?"

"I tried to talk to them, tried to explain. But they didn't hear beyond... I'm pregnant." She sighed as she gently tapped on Sebastian's lower lip, breaking the suction. She then deftly removed him from her breast and turned him in her arms. Before he started to howl in protest, she dropped the other side of her blouse to expose her other nipple for him to finish.

Severus watched on in amazed attention as she moved their child with grace and shook his head as the baby attached himself to her other nipple. He had difficulty believing that her parents wouldn't take her back after seeing this bundle she held tightly against her.

"Why didn't you return to Hogwarts? It wouldn't have been ideal, but you would have had a roof over your head."

"And would have had to live with the humiliation of being an unwed mother? I would have been an outcast there as well."

"You would have had a roof over your head."

"Yes, but I would have lost respectability among my peers." Hermione finally looked up. "Then there was you. You would have been there. I couldn't have handled that. It was you who caused my life to be turned upside down. It took me some time to stop blaming you for my predicament. I spent a lot of restless nights cursing you and Malfoy."

Severus sighed and leaned back into the headboard. "I don't know how to apologize for that," he admitted. "I have no memory of the act to be as remorseful as I know I should be."

"I know," Hermione reached out and touched Severus' hand, "and I'm not asking for an apology. I was just stating a fact. I was afraid to go back to Hogwarts."

"The virtual rock and a hard place."

Hermione nodded and looked back down into Sebastian's sleepy, sated face. "Yeah, I didn't have very many choices then, but now, things are beginning to look up."

"Do you think that your parents will take you back once they meet their grandchild?"

"It's doubtful; they haven't spoken to me since October. They're very prideful people. They see the both of us as a disgrace. Me for being unmarried and Sebastian for being born out of wedlock."

"Miss Granger..."

She suddenly looked up at him and felt guilty at her words. Of course, he would start feeling guilty right about now. She really didn't want him to feel that way. None of this was really his fault. Hermione shook her head and gave him a timid smile, trying to sound more sure of herself than what she was actually feeling.

"It's okay. We'll be fine, Professor. I've done all right so far. It's been tough, but we're surviving."

Severus's eyes were focused on his son as the baby's figure was lulled into sleep, sated from a full belly. No, he was not going to allow them to just survive. With a determined grace, he stood slowly from the bed, gazing down at them both. "Allow me to make some inquiries on your behalf? I would feel more secure if I didn't have to worry about your and Sebastian's safety."

"Professor..."

"Severus."

"Sir?" Her questioning gaze locked with his.

"You are the mother of my son. It is only right that you should call me by my given name, Hermione."

"Thank you." She blushed delicately as she removed the baby from her breast and tugged back into her blouse to hide her from his view. "That is kind of you, but I did not want you to come here for your assistance or help. I don't expect anything from you, Profess... um... Severus. I just wanted you to know that Sebastian existed."

"And now that I do, I intend to help in his care; surely you cannot deny me that?" he argued logically as he watched her struggling in her emotions.

"Help in what way?" she managed to whisper under his intense gaze. "... we... don't need much."

He nodded. That was a first step in her accepting his offer. He looked around the room of the Leaky Cauldron and sneered. "A different place for shelter, first. I don't like the idea of raising our son in a pub. After that, we can discuss future endeavors together."

"I... that is..." She sighed and nodded her head. "If that is what you wish."

He reached out to brush his hands over the baby's soft black fuzz of hair on his head. "I'll be back within the hour," he stated and turned on his heels to leave. Striding to the door, he paused and looked back at her with a look that took her breath away.

"Thank you for telling me about him. Even if I can't remember the occasion."

She smiled then, seeing a different man standing there than the man she grew up with. "You're welcome. Daddy."

He flashed her a rare grin and disappeared out of the door, leaving her to smile down at the baby sleeping contently in her arms.

"Things will be fine now, Sebastian. Your daddy will see to it."

Home Sweet Home

Chapter 4 of 16

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A Secret Worth Keeping

Chapter Four: Home Sweet Home

Slightly under an hour later, just as he'd stated, Severus stood before the door of Hermione's room. He paused, looking at the knothole marking on the wood, and listened. There was a silence beyond the door that probably indicated that Sebastian was either sleeping or eating. It was a pleasant non-sound. Hearing his own child screaming earlier had almost rendered him useless, and it was a feeling that he was unfamiliar with. One that he didn't like at all. Being a new father was going to take a bit of getting used to. He hated feeling inept about anything. Thankfully, there were tons of books he could find to help in child raising. He would just have to take an afternoon off soon and buy some.

Hermione must have been standing close by because the door opened rather quickly to his knock. He opened his mouth to speak and was quickly shushed with a raised finger to her lips.

"Shh. He's finally asleep," she explained softly, indicating a finger toward the bundle lying in the middle of the bed. It was a rarity for him to sleep this long at one go, and she wanted more of the silence that followed. The peace and quiet was rare with an innocent newborn to raise.

Severus glanced over at the bed and nodded casually. He took her by the elbow and guided her towards the far window, further away so as their conversation would not disturb the baby. "How soon can you be ready to leave?" He asked quietly, trying hard to whisper.

"I can get what's not packed up in only a few minutes." She glanced over to the baby before looking back up at him. His eyes were narrowed in thought, and she frowned, not exactly sure if she liked the knowing look he was giving her. He had a plan, and she had a feeling she wouldn't like it at all. "Where are we going?"

He turned his face from her to the baby. It was hard to keep this simple conversation going when he couldn't keep his attention off of watching the baby's blanket, which moved so slightly as his son breathed deeply in his sleep.

"Severus?"

He started and returned his gaze back to her, noticing her frowned expression. "My apologies, Hermione, I didn't mean to gather dust there. I'm taking you both someplace safe. Get your things together and I will get Sebastian."

Hermione watched as he walked stealthily over to their son, and she felt a momentary panic. Where in the world was he taking them? It wasn't that she didn't trust him. No, she knew that, inwardly, he was a good man, but as a former student, she still held a respectful fear. After all, it had been drilled into her brain for seven years that this was a mean and angry person. She even had the memory of the rape ingrained in her brain to remind her of how brutal he could be.

She turned her gaze away from him and closed her eyes, forcing that particular memory out of her head. Now was not the time to start falling apart. She had held together and dealt with things thus far. There was no way that she could afford to collapse now. Not when Sebastian's safety was at stake.

"Hermione?"

She jerked as his voice drifted in to her, bringing her out of her dwelling. "Uh. Yes?"

"Are you all right? Do you need help getting your things together?" She thought she saw a sign of compassion in his expression, but as soon as she thought she saw it, she blinked and the emotion was gone from his eyes.

"No. I can manage. I'll be right back." She turned and quickly left the tiny room for the even smaller bathroom. She paused over the sink and closed her eyes. She had to get over this. She had to move on. Her son needed his father and this was the only option she had. It had not been a complete lie when she'd told him that she didn't need him. She didn't need him, but their son did.

Sebastian's parents may not love each other, but they were going to work together to make sure that their son would be raised right. Hopefully. As long as Voldemort never found out about him.

She shivered at his mere name and felt a large wave of apprehension overcome her. What if he did find out about Sebastian? What if Severus couldn't protect him? She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the mirror.

"What have I done? I may have just brought Sebastian into even more danger. I shouldn't have come here. I should never have written to Professor Dumbledore." She looked up, glanced at her reflection, and grimaced at the image staring back at her. She didn't recognize the woman standing before her anymore. That person looked dreadful. Hermione Granger used to be cute, not a beauty by no means, but she was cute. The stranger staring back at her now was barely recognizable. Her body had changed, she was chubbier from giving birth not even a week ago. She had about fifteen pounds to lose to get back to her normal weight, and she doubted that the stretch marks would ever fade away. Her face was frighteningly pale, making her freckles seem to be in more abundance than normal. Her eyes seemingly were forever rimmed in red and held a vacant look.

Knock Knock... anybody home?

Not inside of my brain.

Hogwarts' super-brain had been suddenly derailed and pitched so far off course that she doubted that she would ever be considered intelligent ever again.

She sighed and decided to take a few minutes to freshen up. Severus could just stay with his son for a few more minutes. She ran the water, letting it get cold before wetting a thin washcloth thoroughly. Vigorously she fell to washing her face, trying to scrub away the chilled feelings that raged inside of her, feelings that ultimately left her empty. The cold water made her gasp as she scrubbed, trying to fix whatever damage she could that the last nine months had caused. Eventually she stopped scrubbing and sighed with a glance back into the mirror. It was no use. She still had the vacant, sad eyes and pale features.

She threw the cloth into the sink with a mental curse before taking one last haunted look. Giving in to the inevitable, she finally bent to her task of gathering what few possessions she had.

She heard a rap on the door and finally emerged to a very surprising sight. Her inner turmoil faded away as she saw Severus with Sebastian cradled in his arms. The diaper bag draped across his right shoulder and the baby's pacifier lodged between the fingers of his left hand. The sight was so unlikely to her that she stopped in her tracks and couldn't stop the grin that spread across her face at the image before her.

"What?" He glared at her smile.

"Nothing. It's just that you look so natural."

Severus looked down at the baby, then back to her. "It feels oddly natural. Are you ready?"

"Almost. I just have to get a few more things." Hermione walked over to an old worn dresser and pulled out a couple of shirts and pants and jammed them into the bottom of her satchel. From another drawer, she did the same with Sebastian's clothes. It was apparent that she didn't bring much of her own things with her. Mainly because a mother knew that the child would have more needs and his things would be of more importance. With the satchel stuffed with most of his things, she finally turned back. "Ready."

Severus watched on with a frown. "Is that all you brought for yourself?" He looked pointedly at her small satchel.

"I didn't have much room to bring too many things. Besides, I don't really need that much. It's Sebastian that has more needs than I do," she spoke softly as she draped the bag across her shoulder.

Hermione was embarrassed at his knowledge of her near poverty-laden life, embarrassed at the turn of events that led her down this road into becoming someone that other wizards and witches ignored or spat upon. It was true that she didn't have much in way of possessions, but at least she managed to keep shelter over her head even at the worst of times. That was an accomplishment that benefited her intellectual brain. At least she'd managed to work at a few menial jobs until she got too big with Sebastian where she couldn't stand on her feet anymore. Then she took a simple job answering phones in a Muggle law-firm office. None paid much, but she did manage. She had left most things behind when her parents kicked her out; even her magical things were left in her room. Probably all were now in some storage shed somewhere along with the rest of her things.

Out of sight... out of mind.

Severus watched the emotions playing across Hermione's face. Carefully, he shuffled Sebastian's sleeping form and transferred the pacifier to the hand that cradled his son to his shoulder; he then reached out to her. He had a sharp impression that this woman had the possibility of becoming more difficult than the child. He inwardly sighed at that thought, but they both were his responsibility now. And he was determined to do what he must, for the sake of his son.

"Ready?" he questioned, hand outstretched to her. She hesitated before moving closer and taking his hand in hers.

"As ready as I will ever be"

"Hold on tight. We're Apparating there."

As soon as he said the words, she gasped as she felt the odd tugging and immediately closed her eyes against the wave of dizziness that washed over her. Her hands clung onto him with such discomfited purpose. The feeling was overwhelming to her senses. She had never gotten to her final year and never had the chance to learn how to Apparate on her own. She also never had an opportunity to, what with her abrupt departure from Hogwarts near the end of her seventh year. Her schooling days were now behind her, and she had a much different life to focus on, a life as an adult, an adult with a child.

Life was not fair.

"We're here," his voice whispered close to her ear. Hermione opened her eyes and wobbled. Immediately, Severus reached out to steady her until she regained her balance. The dizziness soon passed and she turned to see where they were.

"Oh..." She raised a shaking hand to her throat as her eyes took in the structure before her. She could feel the tears threatening to build up behind her lids. "Hogwarts?"

"Come along," Severus said and started forward, only to pause when he realized that she wasn't following.

"I can't stay here. Everyone... every one will know..." Hermione backed away from the school, fear evident in her face.

Severus approached her cautiously, speaking in a low, comforting voice. "It's the most logical place for you two. You both will be safe here, Hermione." He reached out and gently placed a hand on her shoulder, halting her retreat. "You can continue your studies when classes begin again. You have several weeks before you have to worry about any of the students returning. August is still some time away. This extra time will give you a chance to catch up on your studies, as well as your rest. If I know you, you probably were already well ahead of them when you left. When August does come around, you will be fine."

Her eyes filled up with tears as she gazed at her beloved home, but the memories scared her. Not to mention the fact that Harry and Ron would be there. She knew they would ask questions and want answers. Questions that she didn't know how to answer. She hadn't spoken to them since she left, and the guilt reached deep into her soul, chilling her to the core. She had no idea what to tell them, let alone how to cope with their reaction when they discovered Sebastian or of his parentage. She shook her head slowly as she took another step back, away from where she really wanted to be. This was the one place she missed greatly, the one place she actually considered her home.

"Does Professor Dumbledore..." Her voice was so soft that he had to lean forward to hear her.

"I have already discussed the situation with him. He has allowed you to have quarters in the dungeon, near my rooms. We can have them connected without anyone knowing they do so. There is plenty of room for you and Sebastian there, and both of your needs will easily be met."

She wrapped her arms around her body, hugging herself tight, trying to ward off the fear that threatened to make her bolt right back to Diagon Alley. She wasn't the same know-it-all Gryffindor that left here nine months ago. That girl was lost and was never to be found again. Did this new person belong here?

"It's not right. I don't belong here anymore." Hermione had to look away from the bright lights of the castle. "I can't afford the tuition. The books. I have no money. I just don't belong here now."

"Nonsense." Severus' voice came out more of a bark than anything. "You, more than anyone else in that damned castle, deserve it. You have possibilities, Hermione. You have a worth far greater than you are giving yourself credit for."

She flinched at his hard reprimand, but turned back towards Hogsmeade, preferring to face the town's twinkling lights than the welcoming glow of Hogwarts. "I can't do this, Severus. The shame..."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of, Hermione." He reached out to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder and was startled when, without warning, she dropped to her knees before him, landing hard on the gravel road. Severus looked down at her in shock as he watched her fall apart before his eyes. Her shoulders shook as the sounds of her sobs echoed out over the open air. Hearing her cries of anguish was just too much for him to bear. This young woman was fast falling apart on him, and if he didn't do something right away, he would need help in bringing both into the castle.

He shifted Sebastian in his arm before dropping to his knees beside her. "Hermione, listen to me. Whatever happened wasn't your fault. You had been used, abused, and had to live with a terrible burden that you should never have had to. This is my fault, my doing. And I want to help you. Help you both in whatever way I can. Let me do this, Hermione. Let me help you two."

Almost distantly she heard Sebastian start to cry, his plaintive wail a counterpoint to hers. She grabbed handfuls of earth and pebbles while gulping large amounts of air back into her pained lungs, trying desperately to return her breathing back under normal control. She was mortified at the way she felt herself falling apart; now was not the time to do this. She didn't want him to see this part of her. This was the part that she kept hidden from the rest of the world and only released in the comfort and solitude of her own room.

She knew that she had to stop, especially for the baby's sake. She took a couple more deep breaths, trying to get her breathing back into synch with her heart. She could feel its furious pounding in her throat. She hated the panic attacks that crept up on her on occasion. Hated feeling out of control like that. Severus' voice seemed to reach out to her, helped in calming them down, both mother and child. His soft voice low and mesmerizing, murmuring low sounds of comfort. If she didn't know better, she could almost believe that he did care.

Once she felt more in control, Hermione glared up at him. "This wasn't your fault, Severus." She wiped her face with her sleeve and cursed vividly, causing Severus' eyebrow to rove into his fringe. "This was Malfoy's fault, not either of ours."

He narrowed his eyes and nodded in agreement. "Not that I want to remember what happened, Hermione, but I think that once you get settled, we will have to discuss what happened."

She bit her lip and shook her head violently. "No. What happened... happened. I don't want to have to be forced to remember it. Neither of us enjoyed it, I can assure you." She took another deep breath and stretched out her hand to allow him to help her back to her feet.

Severus pulled her up, clutching her hand, not wanting to let her go yet. He pulled her closer, staring into her red-rimmed eyes. "I need to examine the whole memory of that night. I need to find out the real reason why Lucius Malfoy was in my chambers that night. I have to remember his part in my actions towards you. Otherwise, he will still be a threat to you, and maybe even Sebastian. I can't let that happen. I know you might need a little time, but soon. I won't let this go on too long."

He knew that he would have to let the topic go for now. They would eventually have to discuss what happened in order to get proper perspective, not to mention revenge. Severus did have some memories of that particular visit, but obviously not all of it. Something heinous had happened that night, and he was determined that Lucius would not get away with it.

Severus found it difficult to believe what he had done to Hermione. To a student under his care, a young student that respected and trusted him. He had tried to protect her for many years against both Malfoys. From Draco, who burned with a jealousy of her intellect, that plagued his pure-blood stereotypical mind, to his father, Lucius, and his lust for young innocent bodies. While Draco yearned to overthrow Hermione in the classrooms, Lucius had always wanted to possess Hermione Granger physically. Snape and Malfoy had fought over Hermione's fate more than once. Lucius' oversized ego couldn't let him understand that Severus wouldn't just simply hand over the girl. He was under the false impression that being a Hogwarts professor came with additional benefits, like the ever supply of young, supple, female students. Severus didn't go for that, however, and refused to allow his friend, or anyone, to use the girls for their own relief, especially Hermione Granger. Lucius hated that he couldn't touch her, hated that he could talk about her, think about her, but not touch her. It prayed on the mind, turning from want to obsession.

But that still left one question open regarding what had happened that night. Lucius had his chance with Hermione. What happened that night? What forced him to take her body like that, instead of Lucius? Did she have to endure both of them? Severus sighed as more and more questions came to him. He had to be patient though. As determined as he was to get those answers, he had to give her some time to come to terms with her arrangements for now. Then he would press her to get the answers he needed. Then he would get his hands around the other man's throat, robbing him of his life essence. Oh, yes, this revenge would be sweet.

He paused in his thoughts and turned her back to the castle. "For now, we will let the matter die. We can discuss it at a later date. Right now it's getting cold, and I'm sure Sebastian will be catching a cold if we do not get inside soon."

"No, Severus. I can't."

He stopped and took a deep breath, as he was beginning to get that irritated feeling behind his right eye right before a major headache hit.

"Hermione..." he growled.

She shuddered, remembering that particular growl from her many days in his classroom. "I. My parents. The tuition. I just can't afford it."

To her surprise, he merely chuckled. "Don't worry about the tuition. I will take care of your financial burdens until the time you are able to care for yourself and for Sebastian," he added sternly.

"We don't need your charity, or money, Severus," she replied slowly, trying to hold on to what little amount of dignity she had left.

Severus reached out, took her chin in his hand, and tilted her face up to meet his eyes. "You may not, Hermione Granger, but my son does. I wish him to be nearby, and if that means helping out his mother financially, then so be it."

She closed her eyes, blocking the view of pain that she knew he could see in her face. In her dismay, she could feel the familiar tears running over and falling down her cheeks yet again. Never in her life had she ever cried as much as she had in the last nine months. Weakness was not a good feeling.

She felt a cloth against her cheek and opened her eyes. She held still as he gently wiped at her tears with a linen handkerchief. Her eyes met his and she took a quick breath. His eyes reflected a concern that she was used to seeing in her friends but not in this dark man. It was an emotion that she never thought he could possess, let alone show.

"Do I have a choice in this?" she whispered, lowering her gaze back to the child in his arm to avoid staring into his dark eyes. She could feel the warmth of his hand on her face as he brushed the linen across her damp cheeks.

"Do you wish to leave?" he asked just as softly as he replaced the handkerchief back into a pocket while continuing to cuddle his son in his arms.

She looked between him, their son, then back to the old school. The call of the old comfort of home was beckoning to her. She would literally feel the warmth and welcome waiting for her there. She couldn't go on like this for the rest of her life, living day to day relying on the kindness of strangers, old friends and bits of odd jobs she could get. She glanced at her son again and made her decision.

"No. I'll stay," she finally decided and gently pushed aside the blanket from Sebastian's face to smile down at his sleeping form. "For his sake, and for yours."

Severus simply nodded and turned back to the gates but was stopped once more by a touch on his arm. He turned back to gaze at her in question.

"Thank you, Severus. I will repay you... someday."

Severus gazed down at the infant in his arm and shook his head. "No, I think giving me a son is payment enough, Hermione. Thank you."

Of Old Friends

Chapter 5 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

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Chapter Five: Of Old Friends

Hogwarts looked the same as it had on the day she fled. The staircase leading up and down moved in the same silent swinging grace as before. The warmth from the flaming sconces lit the stone walls with a cast of yellow flickers. It was nice to be back among the familiar. She paused at the stairs leading up to Gryffindor house, but was gently turned towards the stairs leading down into the dungeon. For a moment she felt like she was at home, really at home.

"Come along, Hermione. You can revisit your old house in the morning. It's getting late." Severus took a step down the stairs when a bellow from above stopped them in mid-step.

"Hermione!"

Hermione looked up sharply as a familiar voice floated down the staircase towards her. She glanced up to see one of her best friends come flying sprightly down the steps heading straight for her like an arrow shot forth from its bow. She took a timid step back and looked back at him, wide-eyed in total shock and fear.

"H...Harry?" Her voice shook as she felt the whole of her body start to tremble. He couldn't be here. Not now, this was too soon. She swung around to face the man that had brought her back to her past and cast an angry and horrified look at him. Her eyes openly accusing Severus of sabotage. "You! You liar! You said they weren't here," she hissed angrily, feeling betrayed.

Severus watched the man come bounding down the stairs, his brows furrowed together in confusion.

"He wasn't earlier," Severus whispered back, "I swear to you. Neither he nor Weasley were here this morning. The last I heard, they were still at the Weasley home. I have nothing to do with this." His words whipped around her as she felt him move back and into the shadows with the baby. Within seconds, she felt arms go around her, and she gasped, finding herself swung around and enveloped in Harry's embrace.

"Hermione! Where have you been? Ron and I have been searching everywhere for you. Not even your parents knew where you were." His voice trailed away as he finally pulled back and held her shoulders at arms length so that he could get a good look at her. He lips turned into a frown as he took in her appearance.

She felt her face flush, and her eyes fell to the floor in shame as he took his time to look over her. She knew she looked like hell and felt like a fool in his scrutiny, and she flinched when she heard him gasp softly. She jerked her shoulders out of his hands and gave him a glare.

"Harry, what are you doing here?"

The young man's gaze swept over her sunken and red-rimmed eyes, the pale face, and the unkempt hair which was haphazardly pulled back into a scrunchie at the nape of her neck. Could this be the same woman who had left in the dead of night almost ten months earlier? Something had to have happened to make her change so much in such a short amount of time. He let his hands fall to his sides as she pulled back from him.

"Geez, Hermione, you look like shit. What happened? Why did you leave like that?"

A snort of disbelief escaped from her lips as she shook her head sadly. "Leave it up to you to say what's really on your mind, Harry."

"You know what I mean." He frowned at her with a sad shake to his head.

"I know, Harry, I know." She raised a hand to his cheek and smiled tightly. "I'm sorry I left, but there were circumstances involved that made the choice for me. I had to leave. I couldn't stay, not then."

"What happened? Are you all right now?" His voice was tight coming from his throat.

His face reflecting his concern, she could see that he was resisting the urge to sweep her into his protective arms. Once a knight in shining armor, always a knight in shining armor.

"It's a long story. I'm not sure you're ready to hear it just yet."

"Try me." The young man's stance said that he wasn't budging until he got the answer he thought he deserved.

Hermione sighed heavily; he wouldn't understand mere words. Harry was a man bent on action more than words, so she raised a silent hand up to Harry's lips to stop any more questions.

"Fine, but I can't tell you. The best thing I can do is to show you," she replied sadly up at him. "Just don't judge me until you hear the whole truth." She waited until Harry nodded in agreement before turning to Severus, who had been watching the exchange silently from the shadowy confines of the wall.

Harry's eyes widened in disbelief when Hermione held out her arms to Snape. Severus approached and, without a word, handed over a bundle of blankets. What the hell was Snape doing here? Harry's mind tumbled over in confusion until Hermione, gently cradling the bundle in her tiny arms, turned back to him. He watched in surprise when, with delicate fingers, Hermione pulled the blanket away from the sleeping figure of a newborn.

"Harry. This is Sebastian. My son." Her words were almost too soft for him to make out and he had to lean closer.

"Your... your son? But when? Who?" His eyes traveled over the sleeping bundle and cautiously brushed a finger across the baby's head. Many things had gone through his head after Hermione disappeared without a trace, but this was something he had never figured on. Nothing could have prepared him for this shock. He finally looked up at her, and she could read the question in his eyes before he asked. "Who's his father?"

"It's a long story, Harry, and one that I would prefer not to go into here in the hallway." She stated simply before she glanced back at Severus. "Can we go to our quarters now?"

"Certainly." Severus nodded in agreement and swept a hand to indicate that they both walk before them. "I believe you know where the dungeon is." His voice was clipped as he saw her pull their son closer to her breast. She nodded and turned to follow the staircase down with Harry close on her heels.

"The dungeons? Hermione, aren't you going to stay in the tower with us anymore? I mean, wouldn't it be better, with the baby and all?"

Hermione shook her head and walked more quickly down the stairs. The sooner they got out of the hallway the better. "Not with this baby, Harry. Please, let's just get into our new quarters first, then I will try to answer your questions."

They walked the rest of the distance in silence. Harry cast glances between Snape and his best friend. What did Snape have to do with all this? And why in God's name did she have to live in the dungeon? That was no place for a baby. It was too cold, too damp. It was idiotic; both Hermione and her baby should be with the rest of her friends where it was safe and there was no Snape to frighten the poor thing to death. He chanced a glance back at Snape and frowned again. Something wasn't adding up right to him. He didn't have to ace Arithmancy to know that this was wrong.

This was going to be a tricky situation.

Ron was going to have a cow when he finds out that Hermione left because she was pregnant. He had always been so sure that Hermione had no boyfriend and was probably still a virgin. He himself had agreed with Ron on that point. Neither of them could have ever imagined Hermione having sex, even if she did appear more adult than they did. It just didn't seem like something she would have done. She had always been the cautious one. The one who would weigh all her options for days until she made a decision. This Hermione simply was not the one he and Ron had known.

In all the years they have known each other, none of them had ever seen her look at a boy, except for Krum during their fourth year but that was it. That was the last romance she had, well, the last one that they were aware of. Obviously, there was much more to her than either he or Ron thought.

Harry frowned in his thoughts. He just couldn't see how this could've happened. Through all her studying, he just couldn't see how Hermione could've pulled this off, even as brilliant as she was. She couldn't have pull off having a lover, then a child, and certainly not during her second to last year of schooling. There has been too much at stake for her to lose.

It just simply didn't add up.

Severus stopped them at the heavy wooden door of his domain and whispered the words that would let them in. Once inside, he lit the candles to illuminate the rooms before turning to her and indicating the baby with a curt nod.

"Allow me to put him down, Hermione. I'm sure you and Mr. Potter have a lot to discuss."

Hermione nodded and moved closer, handing the baby over to his father. "I won't tell him everything, not if you don't want me to." She couldn't look up into his face, but she felt his words on her face as he answered softly.

"Tell him what you wish, Hermione. Tell him the truth if you feel he can understand."

She then glanced up at him and bit her lip before nodding.

"Thank you, Severus, for everything."

Severus simply nodded and turned to leave the room. "I will give you the tour of your new home when you are finished here. Just call. I will be with Sebastian."

Harry watched the exchange silently, their voices too low to overhear, but something in their demeanor had him wondering something. The way Snape took possession of the baby, like it... He pushed the pause button on that thought with a shake of the head.

"Hermione... "

She turned to him and noticed an odd look on his face. With that look, she could tell that he had guessed the truth.

"Take a seat, Harry. This isn't going to be easy to tell."

The Truth Shall Set You Free

Chapter 6 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, nor any of the characters from the books or movies. I do not make any money from the writing of this story.

Chapter Six: The Truth Shall Set You Free

"Please, tell me it's not who I think it is."

Hermione took Harry's hand and indicated the chair next to the fireplace. A magical window seeped mid-morning light, and the sunbeam cast a streak across the floor, even though it was the dead of night outside. The false morning did absolutely nothing to warm her bones. The dread of having to explain all of what had happened to her since her departure, to her best friend, daunted her.

"Sit down, Harry," she commanded and watched as the young man sat heavily onto the overstuffed wingback chair. He looked so forlorn and dejected that she felt her heart rush out to him. This was one of the hardest situations in which she had ever found herself. She paced back and forth between him and the hearth, trying to come up with the best way of saying what she wanted to without sounding like a victim. Yes, she was a victim, but in all honesty, Severus was just as much a victim in this too. She paused before him and spoke softly.

"First off, Harry, it's not what you are thinking—"

"What do you know of what I'm thinking?" Harry burst out angrily, his eyes flashing. He pointed a jabbing finger toward the door where the taller man exited earlier with the baby. "Is it him? Is he the father of your child?"

Hermione turned away from his fury and felt the dense coldness of the dungeon seeping through her clothing. The combination of the cold, damp dungeon, and the fear of losing one of her friends, caused her to shake violently. Immediately, she felt arms encircling her from behind, turning her around and pulling her close against his chest. She found herself sobbing into her best friend's chest.

For several minutes, she stood enveloped in Harry's arms, letting the pain and sorrow out in the form of tears and hiccups. He held onto her and murmured soft words of comfort into her hair. Letting her know that he was there for her and, with just a touch, letting her know also that he always would be.

Forever.

Finally, she pulled back and sniffed loudly. Harry reached into his pocket, pulled out a bright red bandana and handed it to her. She took it gratefully, and wiped at her face with the cloth, giving him a smile of thanks.

"Thank you, Harry. I mean, I think I needed that. I haven't had a good cry in, oh, hours." She gave him a tired grin before tucking the cloth into her sleeve to clean before giving it back.

"Tell me now," said Harry, speaking softly and clamping his hands on her shoulders in a vise-like grip as he did so. "Is Snape the father?"

"Yes, Harry, Professor Snape is the father... but..."

"What happened?" Harry whispered as he held her close. "Did he force you? Did he rape you? Come on, Hermione. I know you don't love him or even like him. You wouldn't have just gone to him willingly."

She nodded her head sadly. He had already guessed so much. She swallowed hard and turned her back to him once more, not able to look him directly in the eyes, but felt him pulling her back against his chest. She did not resist it and leaned back into the comfort of his body. "You're partially right, Harry, I was forced. But..." She felt his embrace tighten at her words and felt more than heard the sharp intake of his breath. She clamped down on his arms around her waist to stop him from running out to confront Severus. "But!" she continued. "He wasn't the one that forced me."

"What the hell does that mean, Hermione? Didn't you just say that Snape was the father?" There was confusion in Harry's voice.

"Yes, but, Harry, in a way, Sev... I mean... Snape was raped too."

She felt Harry's arms tighten around her again and felt his breath on the back of her neck as his forehead came down to rest on the top of her head.

"Imperio," said Harry slowly. It was more of a statement than question as the realization of what she was saying sank in.

"Yes, it was Lucius Malfoy." She felt a hiss of breath escape from him and she turned back to face the anger in his expression. "So, you see, it's not Severus's fault nor mine. It was Malfoy's."

His eyes bored into hers. "You're sure it's Snape's? There's absolutely no room for doubt? I mean, Malfoy didn't..."

She shook her head at that and looked down at the ground. "No, it's Severus's, Harry. I haven't... ever... before him, and Malfoy, well, he just watched."

"But why didn't Snape... I mean, when you disappeared he kind of seemed to revel in it."

She felt her blood run cold at that and looked back towards the door that the man in question had passed through with their son.

"Reveled?"

"Well, maybe not reveled, but he didn't seem too concerned that you ran away."

She sighed again and turned away from him once more. "Because, as far as he was concerned he had no reason to be... worried."

"But he had just raped you! How the fuck could he not be concerned?" Harry bellowed angrily.

"Because I erased his memory of it!" she bellowed back at him.

Harry paused and stared at her as if she had lost her mind. "Are you mental? Why did you do that?"

"Because..." she started. She sat heavily in the chair he had abandoned and gave him such a lost expression that he crossed back to her and knelt before her taking her hand in his. "You didn't see him after it was over." She let him run his fingers over her palm as she allowed her mind go back to that fateful day, if only briefly, to remember the face of the broken man who had hidden from her that night. "You didn't see the man that Malfoy left behind."

"Tell me," Harry encouraged but she shook her head.

"I can't. At least not until I tell him first." She indicated the door with a nod of her head.

"You mean he still has no idea?"

She frowned and nodded. "He knows that he's Sebastian's father, he knows that he took me. But he doesn't know what happened or how it happened. I haven't given him back the memories yet. But I will... soon."

"How soon?"

She looked back at the door as soft sounds started to come from beyond indicating that Sebastian was once more awake.

"Tonight. I don't think Severus will want to wait too long. I don't think he's happy not knowing what happened."

"Do you want me to... uh..."

She gave him a smile and patted his hand with her free one. "No, Harry, you won't have to be here. But I may need you afterward. Are you staying here for good?"

Harry grinned and nodded. "Yeah. Professor Dumbledore owed me this morning, telling me to come back. He said that he felt that something major was going to happen. He pretty much stated that I was to be brought back without fuss. So, what could I do? Here I am, and Ron will be here next week. He was a bit muddled as to why I was asked to return and not him, but now I understand. I think Professor Dumbledore knew that Ron wouldn't understand this."

She closed her eyes wondering how she was going to explain all of this to Ron next week.

"Will you help me with Ron? Help me to explain?"

"Of course, Hermione... I—"

They both looked up as the door opened and a very white knuckled Severus stood standing there with a howling baby in his arms.

"Hermione... Help."

To Lead or Follow

Chapter 7 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, nor any of the characters from the books or movies. I do not make any money from the writing of this story.

Chapter Seven: To Lead or Follow

Hermione was over to Snape in a flash, taking her son from the taller man.

"Excuse me, but I have to feed and change him," she explained, giving both Severus and Harry a pointed look. "I don't want either of you fighting over this until I get back."

She heard Severus snort and Harry grumble as she closed the door behind her. As soon as the door closed, she glanced around and gasped. The chamber was so unlike anything she expected, unlike anything she could imagine Severus to come up with. The room was painted in a pale green color with hints of red. Gold and silver adorned the furnishings. It was obvious that he had tried to combine the two House colors that they shared, and she was touched by that. How in the world did he do this in a few hours? She giggled softly. Probably Professor Dumbledore's doing, now that she thought about it.

There was an elegant hand-carved wooden crib sitting underneath a fabricated window, which allowed in the evening moon's brilliance. Next to the chair on the other side of the window was a glider, a combination rocking chair with a gliding feature. It had a matching ottoman as well. Her eyes wandered the room to the other side where she noticed the changing table with her giant nappy bag sitting next to it. Her attention was then diverted back to Sebastian as he let loose with another howl.

"It's all right, honey. Mummy's gonna make it all better," she cooed and quickly scooped up the nappy bag. She brought out all the necessary tools required for the task and slowly changed the kicking newborn.

Still a novice at the job, it took her a few minutes to rid him of the soiled nappy. Finding a bucket at the back of the table she quickly tossed the used nappy in it and watched as it disappeared, probably going straight to the laundry room. This was going to be much easier than the way life was in the Muggle world. She doubted she would ever run out of nappies here, nor ever have to resort to napkins in times of trouble. She sighed trying to push those memories away. That little flub-up only happened the second day after she left the hospital, but it was one day too many for her, and she didn't want to ever have to try to improvise like that again. In the days since Sebastian's delivery, she continued to astound herself as to how creative she could become in a pinch.

She pulled out the last clean nappy and sighed. She had forgotten about the soiled ones. Quickly she found the plastic bag with the dirty diapers and placed them into the pail as well. She intended on cleaning them earlier after Snape left but never got around to it. Things had progressed rapidly in the last few hours, and she had just forgotten to do it. The bag disappeared from the basket, and she smiled down at her squirming son.

"I think you are going to like it here, Sebastian."

The baby cooed, kicking his feet in all directions as he waited patiently for her to finish.

Hermione leaned over to kiss his tiny cheek and sighed. Had it only been five days since she'd had her son? It felt like a lifetime ago. Technically, it was six days now since his birth. It was well after midnight on the thirteenth of July. Sebastian was born exactly on the stroke of midnight on Saturday, the seventh of July, almost a full week past her due date. She had been miserable during the last trimester and was finally glad to be able to see her feet again, even if she still had to bend over a little to look over her still stretched belly. It would take forever for her to get back into shape.

"Oh well, its not like I'm going to get a date anytime soon, so no need to worry about getting fat... right honey?" The baby gurgled in response, and she went to work finishing getting him changed. Gently, she rubbed a cream on Sebastian's bare bottom to prevent rashes, then applied a liberal amount of powder before securing the clean nappy.

His cries had died down, but she knew that he would start up again soon as his feeding time was quickly approaching. She glanced once more at the door, wondering how the other two were getting along but then shrugged. They would have to start to get along if they both wanted her to stay.

She picked up the newly cleaned child, settled into the rocker, and quickly unbuttoned her shirt to feed Sebastian. She wanted to get the baby back to sleep so she could go out and see what Harry and Snape were up to.

Leaning back into the chair, she allowed her eyes to close as Sebastian started to feed.

~00~

In the adjoining room, Severus Snape sat brooding across from Harry, both men trying their best to ignore the other. Sebastian's cries drifted from the other room and had Severus's full attention. He wanted to get up and toss the boy out of the room so he could just be alone with his son and Hermione.

This was not the way he wanted it to be. He wanted nothing more than to go into that room and just be with the two of them, not sitting out here with the bane of his existence, Mr. Bloody Harry 'Pain in the Ass' Potter. His future was in that room, and he was stuck out here with a boy he couldn't stand. Life was going on beyond that door, and he wanted to be a part of it. So absorbed was he in his door watching, he was completely unaware of the other man studying him obtrusively.

Harry leaned back and watched the Professor. It was weird to see him so focused on one single solitary object such as a closed door. He was used to action and precise movements from Snape that watching him sitting silently seemed to be a freak of nature.

To Harry's amusement, the man's attention barely wavered from the other room for more than a second at a time. When the older man did happen to look away, he caught Harry's gaze and managed to look menacing at Harry and sneer in his traditional way. Harry simply shook his head, and the man's gaze would return to the door.

Harry couldn't stop his wonderings. This was a part of Snape which he'd never expected to see in his lifetime. This worried man was the same person that had tormented him, Ron and Hermione for years during school. Snape was a bastard, then and now. Nothing had ever changed the man's demeanor, no matter how hard they all tried. He and Ron had decided long ago, Snape was incapable of being happy.

He didn't think Snape capable of any emotions except hate and anger, yet, it was the look in his face, the yearning in the older man's eyes. An obvious yearning to be in the other room and not here that had gained Harry's attention.

The young man leaned forward as the sounds of Sebastian died down. Whatever Hermione was doing, it was working, and he noted with a small grin that Snape seemed to relax a bit when the crying stopped. This was a worried man sitting before him, and one not used to showing his feelings.

"So..." Harry cleared his throat causing Severus to jump slightly and flash his dark eyes to him.

"So... " He let his eyes return to the younger man.

"How long are you going to let them stay here?"

"As long as Hermione wishes to."

Harry nodded and leaned back once again into the leather. "For how long? She can't stay here forever. I mean, after the school year ends she'll have to leave with the rest of us, won't she? And her parents have to be wondering where she is. From the last time I talked to them... "

Severus's eyes narrowed at his words.

"You talked to her parents? When?"

Harry frowned turning inward to think. "I'd say about a couple of months ago. Ron and I were determined to find her, and we contacted them at their office. They said that she took off and they didn't know where she was." He frowned, turning his gaze back to the closed door. "That's not like Hermione, to just run off like that without any word on where she is or how she's doing."

"No, not unless she was forced out." Severus spat out and gave the boy a pointed look.

"Forced out?" Harry looked confused, and Snape shook his head at the idiocy of the boy.

"Her parents threw her out, Potter, tossed her into the world without a care." Snape snarled and stood to his feet. He had no idea that he felt such anger toward her parents until now. Thanks to those selfish, moralistic and prejudiced Muggles, his son could have easily never come to be.

"They... " Harry stood up to face the other man. "Who told you that? They acted very... "

"Hermione herself told me, and you know that she does not lie, especially about things like that."

"They never said... never gave any clue. Those Bastards! I could kill them."

"You will have to stand in line, Mr. Potter. I do believe I have first claim in their blood letting."

Harry watched as the man paced the room in agitation as they both waited to Hermione to return from the other room.

"Anyway... you didn't answer my question." Harry prompted.

"Which was?" Snape retorted with a snarl, causing Harry to grin good-naturedly.

"Are you going to let Hermione and the baby stay, after school ends?"

Severus sighed heavily and promptly collapsed back onto the leather chair. "The offer will stand to her, Potter. I am fully aware that she will be graduating along with the rest of you, but I will extend the offer of my home as hers as long as she wants or needs it. I refuse to let her and our child live in the poverty of which I found her."

Harry nodded, convinced that Snape would indeed take care of Hermione and Sebastian as long as she wanted it. However, knowing Hermione, this wouldn't be a permanent position. She was too headstrong and independent to trust her life to anyone other than herself.

"What will you do if she decides to leave?" he asked, watching the man intently for his reaction. To his surprise, Severus's dark eyes found his, and the man's answer threw him into complete disbelief.

"Follow her, of course."

The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter 8 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

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Chapter Eight: The Calm Before the Storm

"She's been in there an awfully long time," Harry stated as he glanced at the closed door with a look of concern.

Severus agreed inwardly and rose to his feet, and crossing the room, he paused to knock lightly on the door, not wanting to scare the baby inside.

"Hermione?"

There were no answering words from inside, and he pushed the door open farther. The door barely made a squeaking sound as he pushed it open to poke his head inside. His eyes scanned the room quickly, and he breathed deeply when they settled on the woman in question by the window. She sat quietly in the false moonlight, leaning back into the rocker with the baby securely attached to one breast. Both appeared to be deep in sleep. He glanced back at Harry who had walked behind him and was viewing the sleeping pair as well.

"Poor thing, she must be exhausted," Harry whispered.

"Indeed, she's had a hard life up until now. Let me get them into bed and I will be out in a moment."

"Need any help?" Harry offered while watching Severus approach mother and child, gently removing the baby from her breast and covering her back up.

"No, Mr. Potter, this will take only a moment. Please wait outside."

Harry nodded and turned, leaving Severus to gaze down at the baby in his arms, and the mother still sleeping soundly in the chair. The older man gently swept a brown curl from her tired face before carrying his son to the crib, laying him gently onto his back. He picked up a cotton blanket and draped it loosely over the baby.

"There you go, little man, now Daddy has to attend to Mummy," he whispered softly to his son before leaning down to kiss the tiny head. With an uncharacteristic smile, he turned back to Hermione, studying her as she slept. She did indeed look exhausted. This would be the first time she would ever get help with Sebastian and would actually be able to get full night's rest. With him being next door, he intended to be there for the two of them. Carefully he stepped before her, deftly shifted her to where he could tuck his hands under her knees and slip his other hand behind her back. With a bit more effort than he expected, he rose with her in his arms. She was heavier than she appeared, it would seem. Her eyes fluttered for a moment before she fell back into sleep.

"That's it, Hermione, get some sleep. Things will be fine in the morning," he whispered into her ear and was rewarded with a contented sigh, her arms snaking around his neck as she settled into his chest.

He gazed into her sleeping face and sighed regretfully. If things had been different, if fate had not interfered in both of their lives, this could have been different. Things could have gone in another direction.

But then, if they had, he would not have his son, and Hermione wouldn't be sleeping in his arms.

Almost.

He gazed at her once more as he carried her to her bed. Laying her down tenderly, he paused and rested a hand on her cheek. Maybe not completely sleeping in his arms, but at the moment, it was the closest he would ever get. He doubted that she would ever let him get any closer to her after what he'd done to her last year.

Soon he was going to have to have her give him back his memory. He dreaded that day, but he had to know, had to know what kind of revenge to foist on Lucius.

He covered her up and lingered a moment more, just watching her sleep. She could be a beauty if she wanted to be. He noted the long thick lashes that curled slightly at the tips, the rosy glow on her cheeks, and the healthy pink tint of her lips as she smiled in her sleep. No, this woman was already a beauty; no amount of makeup could recreate the natural condition of her complexion.

He pulled his gaze from her and turned toward the door. He was barely two steps away when he paused, turned back, and silently bent down to kiss her forehead.

"Sleep well, my sleeping beauty," he whispered softly before quickly crossing the room and meeting Potter just as he closed the door.

"Everything all right?" the younger man asked, catching a peek inside before the door closed firmly blocking his view.

"Yes, they are both sleeping peacefully."

"Good... I..." Harry started to speak when a crackling noise erupted from behind them. Severus quickly stepped in front of Harry to block his form from whoever was trying to communicate through the Floo, just in case it was Lucius doing his weekly interruption.

"Severus?"

Severus tried not to breathe too audibly in relief as he recognized the voice. He stepped towards the hearth as Albus Dumbledore's head popped through. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Ah, I was just seeing if you came in yet. Did Miss Granger make it in as well?"

"She did, sir. They are both sleeping at the moment."

Albus smiled, and then noticed Harry in the room. "Ah, Harry, my boy, I'm glad that you have also returned. All is well I assume?"

Harry glanced at Severus, then the nursery door, before turning back to the head floating in the fire.

"Yes, sir. I see why you asked me to return so early."

"Good, good. Severus, I wish to see both you and Hermione in my office later this morning."

Severus glanced at his watch, only then realizing that dawn was beginning to creep in.

"Of course. Let me get a few hours sleep and we both will be there."

"Certainly. I shall leave you to it." He grinned. "Goodnight, Severus, and Harry, I do believe you are out past curfew."

Harry tried not to grin but failed at the good-humored attempt to be authoritative. "Yes, sir, I'm heading out now anyway."

"Good, all young men need their sleep. Good night, I'll see you at breakfast. Oh, and Severus, do please bring your son. I would love to see him."

Severus nodded silently at the older man's head before the fire died out, leaving the room in a dank coolness.

Severus and Harry bid each other a curt farewell. Harry left quietly, allowing Severus to close the door behind him.

Severus headed towards his room but first made a detour back into Hermione's room to check on them first. He saw that Hermione and his son had kicked off their blankets. He quickly re-covered her before walking over to the crib to re-cover the baby. Like mother like son. He grinned.

"Good night," he whispered as he paused at the door, taking in the scene before him.

Tranquility.

The calm before the storm.

I Need to Know

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

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Chapter Nine: I Need to Know

The high, unadorned windows in the tower lit up the room brightly amidst the early morning sunlight. All around her, she could see the looks of astonishment on the faces of all the past headmasters that hung on the office's walls. The looks weren't for her but for the man who carried their child following behind her.

"I would have never"

"Can you believe "

"Incredible! Severus Snape! With a child no less."

Voices whispered among the portraits as the two entered. Hermione smiled a bit at the whispers before taking a moment to gaze around at her surroundings. It had been a while since she had been inside the office. The comfort that surrounded her as soon as she stepped in brought back feelings of safety that she had lost in the outside world; it was a room she thought she would never again see.

Her gaze settled on the man sitting quietly behind his desk. He didn't say anything but watched the young woman take in her surroundings with an expression of wonder and relief. His smile widened as her eyes settled on him.

She felt her eyes tear up yet again as she looked at the one man that she respected more than anyone else, Albus Dumbledore, Wizard Extraordinaire, Headmaster of Hogwarts, and one of her favorite people in the world.

The man got to his feet and rounded the desk with a large smile and his arms outstretched in welcome. She quickly stepped into them letting the elder man hug her tightly.

"Hermione. It's wonderful to see you home again." He smiled down at her tenderly, brushing away a tear before looking over at Severus and his bundle, grinning wider. "I take it this is little Sebastian?" He let go of the mother and indicated for Severus to come closer so he could have a peek at the sleeping baby all bundled up in his father's arms. One look at the baby and the Headmaster sniffed loudly. "Precious, simply precious." His eyes glittered as he gazed at the trio.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hermione spoke up softly. "I don't know... I mean... "

The Headmaster turned his wet eyes on her and raised a hand to stop her from speaking. He reached into his cloak, pulled out a starry handkerchief, which he used to dab at the corners of his eye. This tender display caught the others unaware, and they glanced at each other uncomfortably.

"Professor?" she tried again, feeling concerned.

"I'm fine. It's been so long since I've seen such a small person, and knowing that both of you are his parents, I'm simply overjoyed for the both of you."

She heard a strange sound come from Severus and turned to look at him, but saw that he had turned his back towards them. She frowned and gently touched his back, feeling him relax slightly at her touch.

"Are you all right?" she whispered softly and saw him nod.

She didn't question farther, not wanting him to appear weak. Even after all she had gone through, she could still reach out and comfort the one man that she never thought she would ever need to comfort. She bit her lip to keep herself from saying anything that would make him even more uncomfortable. Instead she returned her attention to the Headmaster.

"Headmaster, I really don't know what to say. I shouldn't even be here." She floundered, not really knowing what to say.

"Shh, Miss Granger. If it weren't for lack of protection within our walls, you wouldn't have been forced to leave in the first place. It is only right that you be allowed to return to your studies."

"I appreciate the opportunity, Sir, I honestly do, but it's not the same now. I can't give one hundred percent to my studies now. I'll need to give most of my time to Sebastian. I don't see how I can both."

Dumbledore embraced the woman warmly, then tenderly wiped away her tears with his handkerchief. "You can do it, Hermione. If there is anything I have learned about you over the years, it's that you can do anything you set your mind to." He stated firmly looking over his half-moon glasses at her, his blue eyes shining at her.

"I don't know. I want to. I do. But I have to care for Sebastian. How can I do both?"

"With our help, Hermione."

She looked up at the familiar feminine voice and turned toward the door. She felt a catch in her throat as she saw her mentor standing there with a smile on her face.

"Professor McGonagall... I..." Her voice caught as she rushed over and flung herself into the elder witch's arms. Minerva McGonagall hugged her tightly for a moment then, setting her back to her feet before casting her eyes to a silent Severus.

"Let me see your child." The older woman crossed to Severus and silently removed the sleeping bundle from his father's arms, which he allowed her to do without protest.

"Hermione, he's beautiful. How old is he?"

"A week, tomorrow."

Severus turned and gave her a surprised look. Concern flickered over his face as he strode quickly over to her. "I did not realize. Please sit down, Hermione. This traveling has to have taken a toll on you. You must not be recovered enough to handle all this activity."

Her eyes widened a bit in surprise at his obvious concern for her, and she whispered a small thank you.

Severus's head jerked up at Minerva's chuckle as she bounced the baby still in her arms.

"Really, Severus, new mothers in the magical world recover quite quickly. I'm sure that the mediwitch Hermione saw... "

"Actually, I didn't see a mediwitch. Sebastian was born in a Muggle hospital," Hermione interrupted softly, taking the proffered seat. Her legs did feel like they were going to let her down at any moment, and it was true, she still hurt. Sebastian's birth wasn't an easy one. She had been in hard labor for almost 32 hours before he decided to grace the world with his howling appearance.

Minerva gave her an alarmed look and quickly handed Sebastian back to Snape. "I'm going to fetch Poppy. Don't allow her to do anything more strenuous."

"I'm fine, Professor, really. I'm just a bit sore, but I'm healing well enough on my own."

"Have you seen a doctor since Sebastian's arrival?" she queried, already knowing the answer, confirmed by the woman's reddened face and shake of the head. "That's what I thought. I'm getting her," the elder exclaimed as she swept out of the office.

Hermione shook her head at her departure and smiled at Albus's chuckle. "She always was very protective of you, Hermione"

"Not just to me, Headmaster. She's a mother hen to us all."

"True. True." His eyes turned more serious as he indicated another chair for Severus to take. Once the taller man settled down, Albus started on the topic he called them here to discuss. "I realize that there are many things that need to be settled between the two of you."

Hermione and Severus exchanged glances but kept quiet.

"I think that the first obstacle you need to cross is the attack. "

Hermione started to shake her head but stopped when Severus tenderly touched her hand. She glanced down at his hand, then up into his dark eyes, gazing intensely at her. She felt guilty at the small contact, knowing that he wanted to remember, but that would also mean bringing back the memories for herself. No matter what she said to the others, she didn't want to remember that day.

"I can't, Severus. Please don't make me."

"I understand why you don't want to do this, Hermione, but I need to know. I need to get back my memories of what transpired that night."

Her eyes flashed as she looked back at him, pleading with him to understand her reasoning. Brown eyes clashing with black, one in anger the other in desperation. She gasped at the despair gleaming in his eyes and sat back into the chair. She didn't need to see that there.

"Are you sure you want to know?" she finally whispered in near compliance. "I did take them away for a reason. You couldn't handle them then, what makes you think you can now?"

"I'm well prepared, Miss Granger," he sneered, falling back to his past temperament. "I do not know what it was that broke me that evening, and it is imperative that I discover what it was so that I can avoid it in the future."

She sat quietly as she contemplated his words. If he truly knew what had broken him, what he had said and done...

"It wouldn't help you, Severus. Truly."

"Let me be the judge of that."

She glanced between the two men, flustered completely. She didn't want to remember, and giving Severus back his memories would only be an antagonist to him, to them. This was just one way of trying to get her to face it. She knew she should, but the pain was still too fresh in her mind.

"I... can't..."

Albus felt the strong emotions that swirled inside her and kneeled before her. He took her shaking hands in his, willing her to remain calm. His blue eyes calmly gazed into her scared brown ones. "You can, my dear. I know there are vast amounts of pain involved here, but you must realize, these memories that you hold do not belong to you."

"Headmaster..."

"You must do it, Hermione."

She closed her eyes, wishing with all her might to be somewhere else. The memories would come rushing back when she reversed the spell, and she didn't relish that thought at all. It wasn't just her own pain that she wouldn't be able to control. It was what she knew Severus would do when the secret came out. She didn't want to cause him pain and horror, but Dumbledore was right. Those memories that she held captive were not hers, and they needed to be returned to their owner. She breathed in a deep breath before opening her eyes and looking at the man kneeling before her.

"All right, when?" She stiffened, feeling Severus's hand tighten on hers.

"Now," Severus's voice whispered, and she turned to see him gazing down at his son. "I need to know what happened."

"Not with Sebastian in the room, and I want Professor McGonagall here too," she replied, moving to push the blanket away from the baby and kissing his head. "I want to feel secure when we do this. I want you to feel comfortable with what you discover," she finished, glancing shyly up into his dark, unreadable eyes. He frowned again at her words and nodded.

"As you wish."

Both men agreed, and before another word was spoken, the door swung inwards, allowing two witches to enter. McGonagall had returned with Madam Pomfrey, following.

"What's this I hear about you having a baby in a Muggle hosp?" The woman's voice stopped suddenly, and her expression softened at the sight of the baby sleeping in Severus's arms. "Oh, may I?" Severus chuckled and shook his head while handing over the bundle to the woman. It amused him how much one infant could affect a completely intelligent witch and make her seem almost idiotic.

Hermione watched her fuss over the baby, then approached her with a wary eye.

"I'm fine, Madam Pomfrey, honestly." She smiled at the stern woman, hoping to avoid any confrontations. She knew the woman had no respect for the Muggle way of medicine, and let it be known to the whole school often enough.

"I will be the judge of that. I want you in the Hospital Wing as soon as you are finished here. There is no telling what those Muggle doctors did to you."

Hermione blushed but nodded. "All right, Poppy. I promise."

"Poppy, I wonder if you would be so kind as to take little Sebastian with you for a short while? We have some important business to conduct and would prefer that the baby not be amidst it."

Poppy nodded, and after extracting another promise from Hermione to see her after it was over, she left with Sebastian cradled in her arms.

"Minerva, if you would be so kind as to stay?" Albus spoke quickly as the woman had started to follow the mediwitch. She turned and, with a curt nod, took a seat to Hermione's left.

"Now?"

Albus nodded and she held out a hand.

"I'll need a wand."

"You don't have one?" Minerva's eyes widened at the request.

"No. Not anymore. I assume that my parents got rid of any magical items I've had once I was gone."

"What exactly happened, child?" Minerva took her other hand in hers and frowned. She had no idea what had transpired in the last nine months. The look on her favorite student's face held such pain that it reached the depths of her heart.

"We'll get back into that in a little while, Minnie. Right now, we have other business to attend to." Albus opened a desk drawer, rummaged inside for a few moments before removing an old knotted wand, and handed it over to the younger woman. "I happen to keep a used wand in here for emergencies. It's pretty tame and is fairly tolerable to multiple users. You may use it for the time being. We will have to get you a new one before the school term starts." Albus smiled and handed the magical stick of wood to the young woman.

Hermione nodded in silence and turned to the man to her right. Her eyes lowered sadly and she whispered.

"I'm sorry."

He nodded at her apology and gasped when she whispered the restoring spell.

"Remembra!"

There was a profound silence for a few seconds, and then the room boomed with a loud, indignant bellow.

"OH, BLOODY HELL!"

AN: The next chapter contains the rape and will hold a strong warning.

The Truth Hurts, Doesn't It?

Chapter 10 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

STRONG WARNING! This is the rape scene in this story. If reading things like this disturbs you please skip it.

Chapter Ten: The Truth Hurts Doesn't it?

The images assaulted him instantaneously, along with a barrage of emotions. Oblivious of everyone in the room, the images came flooding back to him.

~Flashback~

Dinner was finally over and he had just entered his classroom, anticipating the arrival of Miss Granger. She was due in less than fifteen minutes, and he still had to think of something for her to do for her punishment. He had told her that she would be assisting him this evening. The problem was that there wasn't anything with which to assist. All the cauldrons were cleaned thanks to Longbottom's detention yesterday. The desks were scrubbed with the help of Weasley the evening before. He grinned at the thought that if he could catch Potter out soon he would have a good week of torturing the Golden Trio. He chuckled to himself at that, knowing that with Potter it was only a matter of time. Potter loved to get into trouble and despised it when Snape caught the busybody boy in action.

He moved into the stockroom and looked around. No... no good. Everything was in order there as well. Closing and warding the door, he paused, scanning the room. His gaze settled on the jars aligning the wall and he grinned maliciously.

"Ah, perfect."

A sudden popping at the hearth got his attention, and he turned to see Lucius Malfoy's head floating amidst the green flames. Severus scowled and muttered. 'Just great. Just what I need right now.'

"Do you have a minute?" the head asked.

Severus looked at the clock and nodded. "Yes, but only a minute, Lucius."

"Won't take long, Severus." The man spoke and the head disappeared, only to be replaced by the man himself as he stepped into the cold dungeon.

"I have a detention coming. Lucius, what is on your mind?" Severus asked, crossing his arms across his chest waiting none so patiently.

"What else, Severus. Hermione Granger."

Severus growled, shaking his head slowly. Damn it! How the hell did he know Hermione was coming now? He had to get rid of him now, before she walked in. "Now is not the time to discuss this, Lucius."

"I know she is your detention, Severus, that is why I am here. I've come for her." Determined gray eyes met angry black ones.

"I'm not going through this with you again, Lucius. I am not handing her over to you."

"I have been promised her and I want what is mine." Lucius's eyes darkened while he fingered the silver wolf's head on the tip of his cane. "I have certain plans for the girl."

Severus growled again and, with silent movements, approached and stood nose to nose with the other man. There was no way in Hades that he was going to let Hermione be alone with this sadist. His eyes glared into the other man's as he forced his voice to lower dangerously. "She is not mine to give, Lucius. I will not risk my position for your blasted libido."

To his surprise, the other man simply smiled and stepped back, raising his cane before him, not showing the least bit of intimidation. Severus eyed the cane but stood firm. "I am not asking, old buddy, I am taking. Draco informed me that she is due here at any minute now."

"You are not leaving here with her, Malfoy. I will not allow it," Severus restated, crossing his hands across his chest once more in determination.

Lucius Malfoy blinked several times before he bared his teeth threateningly. The anger now apparent in his eyes overpowered his regality. "You will not allow? This is the Master's order, Severus. She is my reward, and I demand what is mine."

Severus stood before him and glared, ready to fight if he had to, and it was getting to look like that was going to happen. "The master will have to find another reward for you Lucius. I am not handing Hermione over to you."

Lucius's eyes narrowed for a split second before a smirk crossed his face. "Why, Severus... Hermione? Don't tell me you have something for the little Muddblood of your own?" Severus's eyes flashed, causing Lucius to laugh. "You do! You have your own designs on the wench."

"Don't be absurd." The darker man frowned, lashing out.

"You want her for yourself." The blond man began to laugh loudly. "And to think, you've had your chance. Too bad it's too late, Severus, because she's mine. Perhaps if you are a good boy, I will share her with you... eventually."

"Shut up, Lucius."

"Or what?" the man cackled back. "You'll tell your precious Dumbledore? Tell him what exactly, Severus, that you don't want to give up the girl because you want to fuck her yourself?"

Severus growled and whipped out his wand, pointing it at the man's throat. He was immediately presented with the business end of the other's wand in reply.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it, Severus? It's too bad, though, because after I'm through with her, she won't be able to peddle her wares to anyone else. She be so well-used not even you would want her."

Severus's eyes glazed over, and with a roar, he launched himself at the other man. Confused by the sudden attack, Malfoy stumbled and fell over the side of a desk, landing hard. Severus quickly came around and reached out to wrap his hand around the man's throat. "You. Will. Not. Touch. Her."

Lucius raised his cane and brought it down heavily onto the Potion's master's back sharply, causing Severus to break his grip. Quickly, Severus danced away before Lucius could strike again.

"Hermione is coming with me. Now!" Lucius roared as he raised his wand at the other man.

"Professor?"

"Ah, the proverbial lamb." Malfoy grinned, tilting his head towards the door at the unsuspecting interrupter.

Severus's wand hand wavered slightly as he inwardly groaned at the familiar voice drifting to him. Turning his head slightly, he felt his heart stop, seeing the woman in question standing in the doorway, her bright brown eyes wide in shock.

"Wait outside, Miss Granger," he commanded.

However, before Hermione could nod and turn away, she felt a hand on her arm, pulling her back into the room.

"Uh, Uh, Uh. Now, Severus, is that anyway to talk to her?"

"Get your hands off her, Lucius."

"I don't think so. I win, Severus. You lose. See you at the next meeting."

The blond man made for the fireplace with a very confused and very scared woman in his embrace. Her eyes met Severus's, pleading with him to do something.

"Expelliarmus!"

An unaware Lucius was sent flying into the wall, and before Severus could reach her, Hermione lost her balance and fell into the corner of a side table. He heard a sickening crunch and saw her go slack as she fell to the floor unconscious.

Severus rushed over and felt for the woman's pulse, relieved to feel it throbbing strongly beneath his fingertips. She was merely knocked out, not dead as he had feared.

In his moment of fear for her life, he had let the enemy get behind him. A harshly spoken word from behind reminded him.

"Crucio!"

Severus screamed as the flash of light enveloped him. Falling to the floor, he withered as the pain jumped through his body like electricity.

He fought the pain, tried to block the power racing through his bloodstream that was causing the agony. Thrashing and screaming, he stumbled around for his mind, trying to take his body back over from the sudden attack of the Cruciatius Curse. Normally, he could prepare for the curse and could fight it, but this time he was not ready. This time he let his defenses down at the most inopportune time.

Lucius finally ended the curse and lowered his wand, glaring menacingly down at the man lying, panting on the floor. "Really, Severus. Is she worth that much to you?"

"Leave. Her. Alone." Severus managed to gasp between the lingering shocks, causing his body to jerk uncontrollably.

"I don't know; she looks very inviting splayed out like that. Don't you think, Severus, old boy?" Malfoy bent down and harshly shoved Hermione into the centre of the room. "Not quite that alluring yet, Severus?" He grinned, looking back at the man still trying to recover from the curse.

"Lucius... Don't..." Severus had just managed to get to his knees.

"Well, let's see what she looks like in all her natural glory, shall we?"

Lucius raised his wand, and with a muttered word, the uniform that previously covered the girl disappeared, leaving her completely naked to both men's eyes. "Not too bad, eh, Severus?"

Severus's gaze lingered on her for a moment, before he looked back at his ex-friend. He felt a rush invading his head that had nothing to do with the curse. She did look good, too good.

"Lucius, I'm warning you."

"Warning me? Oh, my dear friend, and here I am willing to do you a favor."

"What favor?" Severus gave him a wary look as he climbed unsteadily to his feet, trying to figure out where his wand had fallen.

Lucius knelt over Hermione and started to caress her firm, small breasts. He heard the other man growl and knew that he was gaining strength. Lucius palmed his wand tighter in his free hand as he allowed his hand to travel over her body, stroking her softly.

"I'm willing to let you go first."

Severus's eyes widened and he shook his head.

"No... "

"Oh, I think you both would enjoy that, Severus, my friend. I think you've been celibate for far too long. You definitely need to get laid, and I think Miss Granger here will be well-suited for you. Look at her, Severus." Lucius pushed the woman's legs apart and gently ran a hand over her dark curls. "All yours, and I even bet she's still fresh for the taking. Do you think she's still a virgin? You could tell me, Severus. Just think..." Lucius ran a hand down between her legs and caressed her folds, eliciting a moan from the unconscious woman. "Your cock buried deep in her, pounding into her tight cunt. I know you want it. I can see it in your eyes. I can see your arousal from here."

Severus's eyes were glued to the man's hand between Hermione's thighs, and he felt his cock jerk at the sight. He was starting to get turned on just watching what Lucius was doing with his hand. He jerked his head up at the man's last sentence, and he tore his eyes away from the sordid scene before him.

"No, Malfoy, I'm not playing your sick games."

Severus heard the deep sigh of resignation from the other and grimaced, his eyes searching for his wand frantically.

"Too bad, Severus. It looks like we're going to have to do this the hard way. I don't think you're going to enjoy this as much as you would have willingly."

Severus's eyes fell onto his wand, sticking out from under one of the desks, and he flung himself towards it.

"*Stupefy!*" Lucius's voice rang out and Snape fell to the ground in a heap, unable to move.

'Shit! Shit! Shit!' Severus's mind screamed as he lay immobile, forced to lie helpless as the other, a man that he once thought of as a friend, approached and knelt down next to him.

He inwardly groaned as Lucius picked up the wand that ended up lying just at his side, just inches from his fingers. Severus glared angrily as he heard the chuckle coming from Lucius and saw him toss the wand to the desk.

"What am I to do with you my friend? I give you heaven on legs and you say no? I don't think so. I don't give gifts so freely." Lucius stood once more, pointing his wand down at him. A sinking feeling overcame Severus as a single word came from Lucius's smirking lips.

"*Imperio!*"

Severus felt a tingle rush throughout his body and he groaned at the sensation.

"No... Lucius..."

"Oh, yes, Severus, if you won't do it for yourself, I just have to take matters into my own hands. Now, stand up."

Severus closed his eyes, willing himself to stay on the floor, but the insistent challenge in his head fought for him to rise to his knees. He moaned in exasperation as his body defied his mind. His hands trembled in his tense battle over the right of command over his own body.

"Stand up, Severus, and walk over here. Now!"

His head snapped up and he struggled to his feet, giving the man the best hate-filled look he could manage under the circumstances. He did everything in his being not to look down at his feet where Hermione still lay, unconscious, prone and naked. Spread out for the world to see, for the taking.

"You like what you see, don't you, Severus?" Lucius laughed and Snape snapped his head up, not realizing that he was staring at her like a dog in heat. "Take it, Severus, she will never know. Take all of her and feel the power."

"I... can't... It's not... right..." He struggled to speak through the curse.

"Who said anything about it being right? This is nothing but carnal pleasure, Severus. Savage, intense pleasure that you haven't delved into in a long time. Give into it, Severus. I can see your cock already at attention. Give into the pleasures of the flesh, my friend. Fuck her."

Severus's eyes drifted down to her, and his unwilling body fell to his knees beside her. He allowed his eyes to travel over her before raising a hand to her soft skin, feeling the silkiness of her flesh, the pliability of her heavy breast in his hand. Suddenly he pulled away with a shake of his head. He couldn't do it.

He loved her.

"No."

Lucius growled out a roar of anger and once more placed the wand at his friend's throat.

"More coaxing is needed, then. Remove your trousers."

Severus tried to fight it, but the power to do what was said overwhelmed him. He reached down to unbutton his waistband and slipped off his trousers along with his boxers, leaving him standing in his cloak and shirt. He stood motionless, trying not to look down at the girl he was being forced to take against her will.

"You know what to do, Severus. Place yourself between her legs."

Severus closed his eyes once more trying to fight off the curse, but Lucius raised his wand higher and muttered *Imperio!* again to reinstate the power he'd held. Severus felt his body move over Hermione and settle between her thighs. His breath caught in his throat when he heard her moan and her eyelashes started to flutter. To his horror, she was waking.

"Shit!"

"Do it, Severus!" Lucius spoke harshly.

"She's... waking... I... can't..."

"Good, let her wake. I want to hear her scream when you plunge into her."

Severus felt his body tremble as he placed his cock at her entrance. His hand moving over her skin without conscious thought. His own body was betraying him.

He wanted her, but not this way.

Hermione felt the hands on her, and she opened her eyes, staring up in horror at the man laying over her. Realizing her situation, she reached up and tried to push him off.

"Professor! No!"

"I'm... sorry... Hermione," the man whispered and, without warning, plunged himself deep inside her. He felt her rip as he tore past her hymen and buried his cock to the hilt.

Her scream echoed around the room as he stilled, feeling the tightness of her. She struggled against him, fighting to get away, to get him out of her. He bought up one hand and captured her flailing wrists, pinning them above her head while his other grabbed brutally onto her hip.

Lucius's laughter vibrated in his ears as he started to thrust into her hard and fast, not giving her time to adjust to his girth. Her tightness caused him to lose all form of thought, and her screams turned into soft whimpers as tears streamed down her face. He closed his eyes, relishing in the feeling of being inside her, the warmth of her walls as they surrounded him.

It had not felt this good in years.

Lucius leaned over and chuckled at the pair.

"Feels good, doesn't it, my friend? Makes you wonder what you have been denying yourself. Right?"

"Oh! Fuck! Yes!" Severus growled and, released her hands. He immediately grabbed her by the ankles and pushed her knees towards her chest, giving him better access to her sweetness. He delved in deeper, causing Hermione to cry out loudly in pain at each bruising thrust.

"I knew you had it in you, buddy." Lucius moved out of the way to continue to watch the rape. He was enjoying the show completely.

Severus growled deep in his throat as he continued to thrust relentlessly into her. She felt so tight, so warm and wet.

He closed his mind to the banter that was taking place in his head. His goodness argued relentlessly with his badness. The good part of him telling that other part that what he was doing was wrong. The bad part that felt the carnal pleasure threatened to 'Crucio!' the other part of him, and that part finally fell silent.

When the voices in his head ended, he felt his balls tighten, and with a ragged cry, he thrust once more into her feeling his release, thrice more, and he pumped his seed into her womb.

Lucius stood and grinned down at the two, reaching out to pat the man on the shoulder.

"Nice show, Severus. I look forward to more in the future, but right now, I need to see my wife. I need some release myself after watching that. Not that I wouldn't mind using your leftovers, Severus, but I'm not into bloody sex. Too messy."

He chuckled as Severus finally looked down at the woman below him and paled at the amount of blood coming from her vagina.

"Oh, fuck! Hermione!"

He glanced up into her eyes, seeing the pain and humiliation there, and he scrambled quickly away from her.

Lucius chuckled and whispered into his ear. "You know I took the Imperius off of you just before you entered her? Right?"

Severus stood shakily to his feet still staring down at his victim in horror. What did he just do? He had just hurt the one woman he could have loved.

"It felt good, didn't it, Severus? You took something that you wanted, and it felt good."

"Get out, before I kill you," Severus whispered in a low, dangerous voice.

"Oh, I'm going, my friend, but you can't deny what you did. You raped your love. All on your own."

Severus swallowed as he continued to stare down at the bruised body of Hermione Granger. His mind did not register when Malfoy Flooed away, nor heard the laughter that echoed as the man disappeared. His mind was only on her, watching as her eyes filled with a pain beyond her physical hurt. Her emotions had taken a beating along with her body.

She curled up sideways and moaned as her body resented the movement. He knelt down next to her, yearning to touch her, to comfort her in some way.

"Hermione, I... "

Her voice sounded tiny to his ear when she whispered, "Why, Professor? Why did you do it?" He flinched hearing her sobs amidst her question.

His hand wavered over her, not sure where or if he should touch her. "Hermione, this wasn't supposed to happen." His voice was thick as he struggled to speak.

She stiffened her back and sniffed loudly. "But it did. You raped me. You... you... hurt me."

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I didn't want it like this." He finally ended up kneeling next to her, looking like he had been beaten himself, his expression full of remorse. He could feel the words forming, but couldn't stop them from spilling out. "I wanted to wait..."

She turned to look at him, and he felt a blow in his guts at the look of hatred on her face.

"Wait? Wait for what exactly, Professor?" She nearly hissed.

Severus sat heavily on the floor and placed his head in his hands, feeling the despair that he would never be able to do what he yearned for now.

"I wanted to wait for you."

Hermione tentatively reached out and picked up his trousers to cover her nakedness, not knowing where her clothing was. His words pricked at her and she cast him a side look. Always the curious one, she asked, "I don't understand. Wait for me to do what?"

Severus glanced up into her sad, yet inquisitive eyes. He could feel his heart beating rapidly in his chest. "Wait for you to graduate," he replied hanging his head again.

Hermione's eyes widened for a moment, and she tried to cover herself up a bit more. "Why? Why would you want to wait for me to graduate?"

"Because... " He glanced up at her and she gasped as the tears flowed down his face. "I wanted to... I was going to... because, I love you..."

And then he broke down.

AN: Whew... thats my longest chapter to date, and the hardest to write. I hope I did it justice.

Red

The Truth is Out

Chapter 11 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

Disclaimer: I do not own any JK's characters. Thank you.

Chapter Eleven: The Truth Is Out

Severus's eyes snapped open as the vivid images flowed in, flooding his senses.

"Oh, Bloody Hell!" he bellowed as the final image came to him. His eyes immediately turned on the young woman who stood silently, staring down at the ground. Tears falling silently down her face. He felt his pulse speed up and felt the blood rushing to his face.

She knows, Oh, Gods... she knows.

He took a step towards her but stopped as the image of her, lying naked and bloodied, invaded his brain. His breath started to speed up, and he clutched at his shirt as an unfamiliar pressure formed in his chest. He also found that his legs wouldn't hold him anymore, and he slid, unceremoniously, to the floor. An anguished sob threatened to emerge from deep within his soul.

Minerva and Albus were immediately at the man's side, but he thrashed his arms, forcing them back.

"DO NOT TOUCH ME!" he roared with flashing eyes. "I do not deserve your concern!"

"Severus, perhaps..." Albus started, trying to reach out again to soothe the disheveled man before him.

"NO!" Severus's head sank to his hands, shoulders shaking in his misery. He had blown it completely. He had silently hoped, prayed, that the memory wouldn't keep him from forming some kind of relationship with Hermione in the future, But now... now there was no way in heaven or hell he could hope for that. Not after he had violently raped her, taken her, free of the Imperious Curse. He had willingly taken her against her will. Willingly caused her harm and pain just for his own sick pleasure.

Malfoy wasn't the only monster here.

Albus and Minerva cast worried glances at each other, for once, neither person had a clue what to do.

"Professors..." A soft voice spoke up, and the elders glanced at the speaker. "May I... may we... be alone for a few minutes? Please?"

Albus nodded silently and, without another word, escorted Professor McGonagall from the room leaving the two alone. Once the two elders were gone, Hermione approached Severus, kneeling down next to him.

"Severus?"

The man on the floor didn't respond.

"Severus, please... I'm sorry." Her voice wavered in emotion. She wanted to reach out to him but fear kept her hands firmly at her side.

"For what? This is all my fault." He seemed so small, so unlike his forceful self that it made her want to take him in her arms and give him comfort, despite what he had done to her.

"No. Severus, it isn't. It's"

"It is! I did it." His voice was barely above a whisper, and she had to lean closer to hear him better.

"You were forced to do it."

"You don't understand, Hermione." He raised his head to look at her, and she felt her heart ache at his expression of angst and despair. "I... wasn't... forced..." The words didn't feel right coming out, each one was clipped with anger. He winced inward as she sank back onto her heels to move fractionally away from him. Her mouth opened and closed silently as she processed what he had just said. He could see the confusion in her eyes. His throat tried to tighten up but he forced the confession out. "After... after it was over... I realized..." His eyes closed as he remembered the feel of her in his arms and the way she felt around him. "I wasn't under the curse... when I took you."

Her eyes narrowed as the meaning of what he was saying hit her, and a dawning of understanding registered. "You... you mean..."

Severus dropped his gaze back to the floor and nodded sadly. "Lucius removed the curse just after you woke up, and I... I couldn't stop! Oh, Gods, Hermione... I couldn't stop. I wanted you so bad. I've loved you for so long... I..." His eyes pleaded with her. "I'm so sorry. I've ruined everything in just one fucking evening." His voice died down to a whisper. "You were right to take these memories away. How can I live with the thought that I raped the one woman that I have ever loved? I'm so sorry... so... so sorry."

Hermione was shocked. This was news to her. After all this time, she assumed that he was completely under the influence of the curse, and therefore didn't blame him, but now...

"Oh... My... God..." she voiced shakily.

"Hermione... Please..." he pleaded again, reaching out to her in his desperation.

"Oh... My... GOD!" She backed away from his reach, and a fresh batch of tears filled her eyes.

Severus stopped at the pain in her face and voice. His already broken heart shredded into shards at the expression on her face, the expression of disbelief and pain and mostly horror.

"You will never know how sorry I am." His eyes pleaded with her, still extending a hand towards her.

"Why?" she whispered.

Severus shook his head at the question. How in God's name can he answer that? He had no idea where or how to explain it to himself, let alone her.

After a few agonizing minutes, he finally looked up at her, relieved to see the horror gone from her face, but the tense way she held her body showed that she didn't trust him anymore. He sighed and maneuvered himself to sit with his back against a chair. There was only one way left to try to win her back. If that was at all possible.

The truth.

He watched her for another moment before taking courage, and speaking softly in a tone of voice that he rarely used. His true voice, the voice of his heart.

"Will you listen to all of it first? Before you decide that you hate me?"

She considered his words, fighting the urge to run and to take her son far away from his father. Her thoughts faltered at the look on his face, and the thought ended just as soon as it entered her head. The debate only lasted about three heartbeats before she finally nodded an affirmation. Retreating to a chair, across from where he was currently sitting on the cold stone floor, she sat quietly, waiting.

After he was fairly sure that she wasn't going to bolt; he rose unsteadily to resettle his tall form onto the comfort of the padded chair. He ran a shaking hand through his disheveled hair and looked around the room, trying to pull his jig-sawed mind together, wondering exactly where to start. His gaze caught on the fireplace and stopped, mesmerized by the flames.

You can do this... just don't look right at her, he mused inwardly and, with a deep breath, he found himself speaking.

"Let me start... no... I have to go back a bit..." He took a deep, cleansing breath before speaking, keeping his gaze on the roaring fire. "I'm not a romantic man, Hermione, I have never claimed to be. I have always had problems showing any emotion other than anger. Anger is an easy emotion to display. It never needs coaxing and it keeps others at arm's length. I have always had problems with positive emotions. Love, adoration, happiness, they're all... alien... to me. So, when I felt myself... invaded... with an sudden unfamiliar sense of... longing... I didn't know what to do with myself."

He paused to glance at her and frowned as she seemed to slide back into her chair as if to move farther away. He sighed and stood up, starting to pace the room restlessly.

"I have always admired you, Hermione. I know that sounds strange coming from me after all this time. After all these years of my constant verbal abuse to both you and your friends, however, I have always admired your intellect. It wasn't until, I would say your fourth year here, during the Yule Ball." He choked out a snort of clipped laughter. "Another form of torture that Albus insists on throwing every blasted year." He gave her a quick glance to make sure that she wasn't upset with that little side quip; it didn't appear that she was so he continued. "That was the year that you were being escorted by Viktor Krum..." Here he paused and glared into the distance as the memory returned.

Hermione leaned closer at his expression and wondered just what, exactly, was in his mind at this moment in time. She didn't have long to wait for he was back talking again.

"I remember that day vividly. I remember the color and cut of the dress you wore. The way your hair glimmered in the candlelight. The smile you had on your face. You were radiant. You just... shone... that night. Your moment had come, and you were barely fifteen-years-old." He stopped and turned his attention back to her and noticed that he had all of her attention now. He stealthily moved to stand before her, gazing down into her face, yet not touching her. "Despite feeling like a disgusting old pedophile, I think I fell for you that night. Don't misunderstand, I knew you were still a child then, but I watched you. Over the last few years, you have grown into an exciting, vibrant and very lovely woman. I... I longed for you every day... every night since you've come to age. I wanted to tell you so during every fucking detention that I forced upon you. I wanted to tell you that I wanted you. That I loved you. I hated forcing you to be around me. I wanted nothing more than to have you stand with me, voluntarily." He choked on that and stopped still, gazing down into her wide eyes. She didn't look scared anymore, but she didn't look accepting to him either. He closed his eyes and forced himself to kneel before her, yet still not touching her for fear that she would bolt in fright.

"That last night, the night of the attack. I was going to talk to you. To finally confess to you of what I wanted, what I truly longed for. I couldn't keep it inside any longer. Yes, you still had a year to go in school, yes, you were still so very young, but I wanted to clear the air about my feelings towards you. I wanted to test the grounds for any... future... relationship."

Hermione couldn't help herself, she reached out and touched his arm. "What about Mr. Malfoy? Why was he there?"

He lifted his gaze from her hand on his arm into her questioning eyes. He didn't see the hate that he expected to see, but there was still fear present.

"Lucius had own obsession with you, however it's not a love based obsession. I think the whole Malfoy line is incapable of that emotion, but he did have something, he had Lord Voldemort's promise. The Dark Lord had promised you to Lucius in return to his faithful service over the years."

She gasped at that revelation, and he wanted to reach out to comfort her but stayed his hand before he did anything to make her retreat. Once he was certain that she had no further questions at the moment, he continued.

"Lucius was there that evening to try to collect on the promise. Draco had informed him that you were to serve detention that evening, and he Flooed in to collect what he thought was his prize for his services to the Dark Lord. I, of course, refused his request. I had other plans for us that evening." He allowed his hand to cover the one on his arm, pleased that she didn't pull away. "Lucius and I fought and unfortunately, you decided to enter the classroom at the most inopportune time. I couldn't let him take you. I couldn't stand the thought of him touching you that way. You didn't belong to him, and I was damned if I was going to just hand you over to him without a fight."

He felt her tiny hand squeeze his own and felt encouraged continuing.

"I almost had a heart attack when I heard your voice at the door. I wanted to run and push you out, to tell you to come back later, just to get you away from that monster, but I was too late to get you away. When Lucius took your arm and was leading you to the hearth, I panicked. I saw the fear in your eyes and I attacked him. I wasn't fast enough to catch you when you fell and knocked yourself out. I lost all train of thought, running to you to see if you were badly hurt. Thankfully, you had just knocked yourself out, but that was the only distraction that Lucius needed. He took that opportunity to place me under Imperious."

He felt her stiffen slightly but didn't remove her hand, so he felt sure that she could finish hearing this.

"I fought it, Hermione... I did... as long as I could. But I guess my subconscious wanted it more than I thought. I don't..." He paused, not sure how to continue. "Hermione, I have no excuse for what I did. I'm not completely sure if I was under the Imperious Curse when I took you or not. My mind was too befuddled to tell. Lucius could have lied about removing the curse at that... moment... to make the act worse, but then he could be telling the truth. I just don't know. I don't know anything for sure anymore."

"Severus..." He stopped as her tiny voice and paused while she contemplated what she was going to say.

"Yes?" His voice cracked with emotion.

"What... what do you think happened?"

He frowned. "I thought I'd explained... " Perhaps he didn't.

"No." She paused taking courage from a deep breath. "Do you feel... in your heart or in your... soul, that you were under the curse when you raped me?"

He looked down at her hand interlocked now with his. He didn't know what to think. He didn't want to know what he was thinking at that time.

"I don't know, Hermione... I really... I was too confused at the time."

"In your heart, Severus, did you want to rape me?"

"Gods, no!" His face darkened slightly at that comment.

She smiled slightly and, taking a deep breath, leaned forward to kiss him gently on the cheek.

"Then you were under the curse, Severus. I don't think that you would have willingly done that to me. Not if you claim to love me so much."

He raised a hand to her cheek and stared at her in disbelief. His heart skipped a beat at her words.

"I do love you, Hermione."

"I know, but..." She took a deep breath. "I need some time to work this out, Severus. This is a lot of information that I need to work through."

"I understand. I wouldn't ask anything else of you. I waited this long, I can wait as long as possible. As long as there is a fraction of a possibility for an... us... in the future."

She nodded and released his hand. "I think we both need some time alone to think about this. I need time to accept my own... feelings... towards you."

He moved back, allowing her room to stand.

"Is there even a chance of an us someday?" he whispered staring down into her beautiful brown eyes.

She smiled up at him and once more kissed his cheek.

"Anything's possible. It may take some time, but I'm sure there could be if we want it badly enough."

He allowed the breath he was holding to release.

She stepped around him. "I need to go get Sebastian. Are you coming?"

He shook his head at her request. "I need to speak with Albus regarding Lucius. But I will stop by the chambers later if that is all right with you?"

She nodded, and with one last smile at him, she left leaving him trembling in relief.

The truth was out... and she didn't hate him.

Show Me the Way of My Heart

Chapter 12 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation bring her back.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, nor any of the characters from the books or movies. I do not make any money from the writing of this story.

Chapter Twelve: Show Me the Way of My Heart

Hermione left the Headmaster's office to retrieve Sebastian from Poppy and Professor McGonagall. She had so much to think about now, so much to process with all the new revelations she had discovered within the last hour. She let her thoughts stray, not even noticing the headmaster's silent pass, or remembering exiting the gargoyle's passage, until she found herself at the infirmary's door.

She stopped short as voices and laughter drifted through the heavy wood, and she realized where she was. She felt silly wondering around the castle in a half-dazed trance, but as the affable laughter floated to her, she felt something warm caress over her. A calming, relief-like feeling of... contentment? She shook her head. No, perhaps 'safe' would be a better description of how she felt now. She knew that whatever happened from now on, she would never have to worry about her or Sebastian's safety.

Severus would be there to care for and to protect them. Of that, she had no doubt. He was fiercely loyal, and from what she knew of him, he didn't like things he loved being taken advantaged of or destroyed. She smiled at that. Severus did have an honorable streak in him. Albeit one that he preferred to hide from the rest of the world.

But could she love him?

She blinked at that thought, just as an especially loud laugh came from beyond the infirmary door. Curious, she opened the door to see the two witches cooing and laughing at the tiny antics of the newborn. The sight was amusing, and she tried her best to dispel the grin on her face as she entered.

"I hope he hasn't been too much trouble."

Minerva noticed her first and gently picked up the baby, avoiding his kicking little legs as they flailed helpless in the air, until he was settled in the crook of her arm.

"I take it things went fairly well?" Minerva asked, noting the flush look on the young woman's face.

Hermione nodded. "Things had been discussed. I think Severus and I have a new... perspective on our relationship."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Poppy popped up with the familiar blue diaper bag in hand.

"Only the future will tell, and don't you dare go asking Professor Trelawney," Hermione replied soberly yet with a twinkled gleam.

All women chuckled at that, each understanding the other's thoughts. None really believed in the divinations teacher's true abilities to read the future, but she was family and, therefore, tolerated. Although, Sybil had been spot on, on occasion. By chance or by ability, no one really cared.

Hermione took the diaper bag from Poppy, then reached for her son from Minerva. After a quick yet heart-filled thanks for the both of them, she left the infirmary with Sebastian gurgling happily.

Hermione reached their new chambers without incident. The empty hallways echoed eerily with her footfalls and Sebastian's growing restlessness. Even as emotionally tired as she was, she entered the nursery first, where she promptly fed her fussy son. She then placed him in the bassinet to allow him his after-eating nap. She sang softly to him until his eyes drooped and his belly rose and fell in a rhythmic repetition. As she gently stroked his dark hair, she smiled down at him and pondered his future. He had a mother who loved him and a father who seemed to, from all outward appearances, love him. She now knew that Severus loved her with such deep emotions that it almost scared her.

She had avoided thinking too much on what was on her mind when she was feeding Sebastian. Now, as she sat by the enchanted window and gazed out into the day, the thoughts came, unbidden, into her mind.

It was barely noon, but she felt that a whole week had passed. Was it really a mere half-hour ago when she had released Severus memories back to him? Was it really barely fifteen minutes since she had learned of his true feelings towards her?

Hermione closed her weary eyes and, finally giving in, allowed her emotions come. As the tears began to fall once more, she felt the anguish and the despair ride out with every chest wrenching sob. Thankfully, this was a different form of weeping. A different release of emotion. Almost a cleansing proclamation that seemed to pull every negative aspect about her situation from her inner soul and pushed it to the front of her heart.

In her mind's eye, she remembered how his dark eyes had looked haunted when he'd thought that he'd raped her on his own. That was a possibility that she had never considered. Even through their worst times, she had never thought that he would have hurt her voluntarily. That thought alone made her shiver a bit. Just the idea that he could've thought that chilled her to the bone. If he truly believed himself capable of raping her, what other things had crept through his mind at that time? Could he have really raped her if given the chance?

No.

She shook her head, remembering that look in his eyes, when he actually thought that he could have committed such a horrific crime against her.

No, he couldn't have and wouldn't have. He loved her too much to do something so horrific as to destroy any chance of having her return that love.

But... again...

Could she learn to love him?

Mentally exhausted, she wiped the remaining tears away. Severus' declaration of love confounded her. She never suspected that he may have had any romantic feelings towards her at all during her earlier years. He had kept his feelings very well hidden indeed, through all the verbal bashings and glares he threw towards her at times.

Furthermore, it amazed her that he loved her at all, considering her standing in the wizarding world. She wasn't the most popular among the pureblooded wizards. If any of them found out about a child formed between a Pureblood and a Muggleborn, shit would most definitely hit the fan. Not to mention that Severus would be in even more trouble with Voldemort and that their son would be ostracized as an abomination.

Damn you, Malfoy.

She frowned slightly as the evil-minded, blond man ran through her thoughts. Why was it that Severus hadn't mentioned Lucius Malfoy other than his presence that night? She wondered if Mr. Malfoy had tried to throw that eventful night into Severus's face during any of the evil gatherings that he had hosted. Did Malfoy sneer in pleasure just mentioning that night, or did he just let it rest?

Judging by Severus's reaction to the return of his memories, Malfoy must have never mentioned it, or else Severus would have had some clue as to why she had vanished into thin air. According to Harry, he hadn't appeared all that worried over her disappearance, but appearances could be deceiving from what she has learned over the past hour.

She furled her brows in thought, surprised at the feeling of disappointment that fluttered in her heart. Why hadn't he tried to find her then? If he had loved her as much as he'd said he did, why hadn't he ditched everything and search for her? Perhaps she would never know, or perhaps, she would corner him at some point and get the truth. She didn't disbelieve that he loved her, but she did wonder as to what depth that he did.

She sighed and leaned back into the chair, thinking. She never had any foolish or romantic thoughts towards her professor in any way during her school days. In the past, her overall thoughts of him, if she thought of him at all, were nothing but that of a mean and angry man, who had no obvious life outside of Hogwarts. He appeared cold and unyielding. A seemingly hateful man who got off on extracting points and heaping hours of detention on her housemates.

But looking at the man now, she could now see how wrong she was. This man was a man who needed love. A man who had a hard, cold life and needed someone to care for him for who he was, not what he showed to be on the outside.

But could she be that person?

She honestly didn't know. She never really had any romantic feelings towards anyone. The hormonal wants and needs in normal teenage girls had never effected her in the normal way. She had never felt the yearning for male companionship or felt the need to snog or shag with the rest of her female friends. Her yearning was always for one thing. Learning.

Perhaps she was abnormal. Who knew?

She glanced at the bassinet and smiled softly. One thing was for sure though. If there were to be a possibility of them being a family, a true family, they would have a lot to work through. But, she had a feeling that things would turn out in the end.

Love is too precious to snuff out without an attempt to let it grow.

She smiled at that thought and closed her eyes. It seemed that her heart and her mind found a common ground and she allowed her thoughts to end as she drifted into slumber. Letting her dreams show her the way of her heart.

Honorable and Trustworthy?

Chapter 13 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

A/N: Sorry for the delay, I had to locate a new beta reader. I hope the wait wasn't too long.

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Chapter Thirteen: Honorable and Trustworthy?

Severus's back was to the door as he sat quietly, contemplating what had just happened. He barely heard the door open and soft footsteps cross the carpeted floor. In his peripheral vision, he saw Albus' seemingly frail figure sink into his deep red velvet chair with an audible sigh of contentment.

Albus sank into his chair, noticing that his action did nothing to stir up the man before him. The lines of contemplation and confusion were deeply engraved on the younger man's face. He looked sad and disenchanted and he now knew why.

"You love her." It was not a question.

Snape's head jerked up, and his eyes caught the look in the old man's eye. He knew there was no real reason to lie now. Soon everyone would know what he had done and why Hermione had fled and he doubted anyone would believe that he did love her.

"I do."

"What do you plan on doing now?"

Severus shuffled in his seat and leaned forward resting his arms on his thighs, lacing his fingers to keep from flexing them in agitation. "Woo her, I suppose."

Albus chuckled and pulled out a small flask from his desk and two thimbles which he deftly transfigured into two crystal glasses. He unstopped the flask and poured two glasses of the amber colored liquid, handing one over to Severus. "That is a very old expression. To woo her. How are you going to accomplish it?"

Snape sighed, staring down into the liquid that was swirling around in his goblet. "Not one damned clue. I've never had the need to woo anyone before."

Albus chuckled again, watching the other man over his rim of his own glass of brandy as he sipped. "Does she love you?"

Severus shook his head and placed his glass onto the desk without taking a sip. "No."

"Perhaps not yet."

"Perhaps not ever."

Albus frowned at that and set his own glass down as well. He leaned forward and folded his hands together, leaning on his forearms on the desk, giving Severus a curious look. "Are you willing to do anything possible to help her fall in love with you?"

Severus frowned at that but raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "What are you on about old man? I don't want her to force herself into something that she doesn't want. That's happened already."

Albus merely smiled in his own way that caused Severus's skin to crawl. He hated that all-knowing grin. It caused nothing but trouble. The elder wizard reached into a drawer, pulled out another item from his desk, and placed it before Severus.

"What is this?" Severus asked picking up the cylindrical object and observed its milky white appearance.

"It's a candle... "

Snape sighed loudly and gave him an impatient look. He really didn't have time for fun and games. "I am quite aware that it's a candle, Albus. What exactly are its properties?"

Albus leaned back into his chair and grinned knowingly. "Nothing, other than the normal properties of a simple white candle, my boy. Magic, however, is not the point of this candle." He plucked the candle from the other man's hand and held it up before the other's dark eyes. "For example, if you put a vast amount of candles, similar to this one, together, it can make up for a very romantic... atmosphere." Albus lowered his head and looked at the man over his spectacles. "Do you get my drift?"

Severus let his mouth drop in surprise. He had never expected to get love advice from the old man. "Albus... "

Albus laughed lightly and tossed the candle back onto the desk. The look on Severus's face was priceless. "Now, now, my boy, I know I may be old, but I do remember romance. And I do remember the first time I had such a romantic dinner. It was the most fantastic night in my life."

Severus snorted at the thought of Albus and anyone together romantically. "Don't go there, Albus... I do not need that kind of mental imaging."

Albus grinned and looked back at his friend, perching on the edge of the desk. "Be it as it may. You need to show Hermione that you mean it when you tell her these things. Don't just tell her that you love her. Show her."

Snape rose to his feet and started to pace the floor. "It's not that simple, Albus. In case you have forgotten, I raped her."

Albus sighed at the turn of emotions in his young friend. "From what I gathered, your body did, son, not your mind and spirit. You can not fault yourself for another's actions."

"I'm afraid... "

Albus rose from his perch, approached the taller, younger man, and placed a comforting arm across his shoulders. "Love can indeed be frightening, but love can also be the greatest cure of all. Don't give up simply because another man chose to try to take it away from you."

Severus shook his head sadly. "You should be firing me, not being my friend."

"No. None of this was your fault, as none of this is Hermione's. There is no reason to punish you more than you seem to be punishing yourself."

"She's still a student."

"True, although she is of age. You two will have to practice discretion however."

"I cannot have relations with a student."

"I don't think you have to worry about that now. I don't think it could get physical for some time yet. You both have much to work out together."

"True. I don't think she would let me touch her at all. Not that I blame her."

"Give her time. As they say, time heals all wounds."

Severus gave him a glare and shook his head. "This wound will just continue to get older and will eventually go to school here."

"I don't think Sebastian is a wound, he could be the cure."

"Perhaps."

"You're a father, Severus, rejoice in that. A child is a precious gift. Don't go throwing it away."

Severus's brow furled as he looked up at the elder man. "I wouldn't do that. I love him, he's my son."

"I know you wouldn't, you are a man of honor."

A snort of laughter sounded from him. "Honor... "

"Don't, Severus, you are a man of honor even if you don't believe yourself to be."

"I don't feel honorable."

Albus cocked his head, studying his young friend. "Perhaps you are not allowing yourself that particular emotion."

"I have nothing to feel honorable about. My life is uncertain, it can be forfeited with one word from the Dark Lord. And it could happen soon when he learns of my child. A child that he will think I kept from him intentionally. Sebastian may yet become fatherless."

"I don't think so. I think Voldemort will want you to bring your son into his circle. He would expect you to pass on your darkness to your child."

"Great, wouldn't Hermione be proud." He scoffed.

"I wouldn't worry about it for now. Right now you have to concern yourself with Lucius Malfoy. He will no doubt know that Hermione has returned, with a child, once term starts. I expect young Mr. Malfoy will relate the information to him."

Severus's teeth ground in anger thinking about his ex-friend's betrayal to him. "I just don't understand Lucius. Why did he do this to us?"

Albus' face dropped as he let a small sigh escape. "I don't know, Severus. I don't know what causes a man to do such horrible things to another. I can't even begin to understand it."

Severus glared into the distance. "I used to be like him. I guess I still am to an extent."

"No, my son. You are an honorable and trustworthy man. I know Hermione thinks so."

"I still work for Voldemort, for the dark side."

Albus shook his head, took up the brandy snifters once more, and passed one over to him. "You don't and you know it. Don't try to make it worse. You are trying to make it better."

Severus examined the glass in his hands thoughtfully. "I want to make him pay. I want Malfoy to suffer excruciating pain for the pain he caused her."

Albus nodded and indicated for the other to sit down once more. "And how do you mean to do this? Without Voldemort's knowledge?"

Snape lowered his eyes to the floor in thought. That would be the big question. How to get revenge without invoking the Dark Lord's wrath.

"There's one thing that bothers me." Severus looked up once more at his mentor and friend. "Why hasn't Malfoy thrown this up in my face these last nine months? He's had plenty of times to bring the subject up."

Albus pondered the question for a bit before answering. "Perhaps he knew that you didn't remember. Perhaps he didn't want to bring it up in fear of his own health at your hands. I cannot fathom why he would want to remind you of that particular time. Mr. Malfoy is particularly adept at saving his own neck. He is more than likely living by the old phrase. 'Let sleeping dogs lie!'"

Severus downed the remaining brandy and placed the empty glass onto the desk. "I still want revenge."

"I know, and I'm sure you and Hermione will come up with the perfect solution."

Severus walked to the door and glanced back at him with a worried look. "Do you think I should have gone and looked for her?"

Albus leaned back and laced his fingers together, just below his chin. "Why didn't you?"

Severus looked to the ground unable to meet his eyes. "I don't know. I should have. I should have tracked her down and brought her back home."

"Do you think she would have come back then?"

"Not with what I did still fresh in her mind."

"Then no, you did the best thing by leaving her alone to work out her feelings on the matter."

"She had a very rough time during that point."

"And you are here now to help her get over that."

"If she will let me."

"She will... "

Severus opened the door and looked out, pausing, before turning and striding back to the desk. The white candle now safely placed into his cloak.

"Just in case..."

A Wet Baby is a Cranky Baby

Chapter 14 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

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Chapter Fourteen: A Wet Baby is a Cranky Baby

Hermione woke up in her bed, comforter pulled up to her chest and a pillow tucked under one arm. She looked around, confused as to how she had gotten into bed. The last thing she remembered was sitting in the rocker watching Sebastian sleep. She turned to her other side and felt her lips form into a smile. Severus was sitting in the rocker with Sebastian against his chest. The both of them were sound asleep, and both looked incredibly adorable.

That was what she wanted, wasn't it? For Severus to be the father that she knew he could be. For them to be an actual family. She leaned up on one elbow and watched them for a moment before glancing over at the clock. It was still early, but she knew Poppy would already be up getting prepared for the day. Yesterday, in her confused state of mind, she had forgotten her promise for an examination. Now would likely be the perfect time to pop in. It would be best go now while the men in her life were sleeping soundly.

She sighed and let her eyes linger on the sleeping man. His head rested against the wooden back of the rocker and his expression held nothing. No anger, no hurt, and no pain. He looked at peace with their son sleeping snugly against him. Her gaze traveled him from top to bottom. He had removed his shoes and propped his feet up on the ottoman. His socks were black, like she didn't expect that from him. He had disposed of his heavy cloak and jacket. The white shirt he wore appeared tailored to fit him perfectly. Its stark whiteness was the complete opposite of his inward darkness, but like him, it was spotless, perfect.... well, almost perfect. Sebastian had drooled, leaving a wet spot right on his right shoulder.

Such a domestic vision.

She stifled a giggle and sat up slowly as to not make too much noise. Severus had obviously come back last night and put her into bed. She thought that was a very nice thing to do, with all things taken into consideration. He was so much different than she remembered in the past. Her times in his classrooms seemed like a foreign memory now. She had a hard time putting the two men on the same plate now. Her Severus and her Professor Snape were now two different men. She still hated the Professor Snape, but her Severus she could most certainly learn to love if given time. She knew he was willing to wait for her as long as possible, and that made her feel secure.

Her movements caused the bedsprings to groan in protest. Immediately she stilled, hearing a soft snort coming from the rocker. Severus stirred, blinking his eyes against the fabricated dawning of the sun.

"Hermione?" His voice was deeply husky with sleep. "What time is it?"

"Shh, it's early..."

"Where are you going?"

"I forgot to see Poppy yesterday. I thought I'd do it now while you two were sleeping. Do you mind?"

He shook his head and let his eyes drop to the baby. "We will be fine. Let me know what she says."

She nodded and crossed to them, gently kissing the top of Sebastian's head before pausing. Her gaze found his sleepy one and she smiled, dipped, and kissed his cheek. She couldn't resist, and was glad that she did when she saw the warmth radiating from his surprised smile.

"I will be back soon. You both can use my bed if you want to get comfortable."

"I don't want to wake him. I think it would be best if I stay here."

"All right. I should be back before he gets hungry."

"That will be soon, I hope. He's always hungry when he wakes."

"Tell me about it." She grinned, and with a chuckle, she left the room to shower and dress.

Hermione walked into the infirmary a half an hour later and looked around the familiar room, noticing the long rows of pristine beds and spotless flooring.

"Poppy?" she called out.

The Mediwitch came from a back room and smiled, motioning her forward and into the vast room.

"I was wondering when you were going to come by," the elder spoke in her normal clipped tone that was slightly laced with kindness.

"I'm sorry, I forgot. So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours that I lost track of my thoughts."

"I understand, child." Poppy smiled and motioned to a bed, where she pulled a gown from the side table and handed it to her. "Change, and I will be back in a few minutes."

"Yes, Ma'am." Hermione nodded. Once Poppy left, pulling the curtain around the bed, she changed into the sparse white gown and climbed onto the bed. She hated these kinds of exams, and having had to endure them over the last nine months didn't make her like them any more. Muggle doctors had a lot to learn in the act of treating expecting women and the care up to actual delivery.

Most of the doctors she had seen during her pregnancy had her stretched out on cold metal tables with her feet up in stirrups and legs spread wide. She hated that exposed feeling, but she endured it. She didn't get a lot of chances to see doctors during her pregnancy, so she endured the embarrassment for the baby's sake.

Poppy returned after a few moments and smiled at her. "This won't take long, child. I just want to see the extent of your healing and assist it if I can."

Hermione nodded silently.

"All right, just lie back and relax," Poppy coaxed and bent down to do her job.

A mere ten minutes later she was done and Hermione felt one hundred percent better. The aching and soreness was gone.

"Was it bad?" the younger woman asked as she watched the elder witch tuck her wand away.

"No, it wasn't bad. You had some damage but I was able to heal them without any problems. There was a laceration from the Muggle doctors cutting you, I assume. It was in the process of healing, so I sped it along. Your uterus has returned to normal and your hormones have stabilized. The pain should just be a memory now. But, I have to ask you to refrain from sex for at least a few more days."

Hermione blushed at that and shook her head. "No worries there. I don't want to go through this again."

Poppy laughed and shook her head. "Maybe not yet, but someday you will."

"Doubtful."

Poppy studied her carefully before kneeling down at her bedside. "I don't know what happened between you and the baby's father. However, I do know that you are a wonderful and very intelligent girl, Hermione." Her eyes delved into the younger woman's gaze. "What I do know is that Severus was half mad with grief when you left so unexpectedly."

Hermione's eyes darted to the Mediwitch in disbelief. "He was? How do you know?"

"I'm his caregiver. I am privy a great deal to his mindset and emotions. I know a lot about Severus that others do not. I can tell when he is wracked with grief. He was stricken when you left, Hermione. I have rarely seen him in that much grief and pain, even after his returns from his tortures with Vold... You Know Who..."

"I didn't want to go, Poppy. I had to. You don't understand what happened." She lowered her head in shame.

"True. I haven't been informed of the details. However, I know Severus and I know when he's in love. He loves you, and I don't want to see him hurt again."

Hermione felt an unexpected anger rise in her. "What about me? What about my hurt?"

"Did he hurt you?" the witch asked softly.

Hermione flinched at her query, knowing what the elder woman was doing and not liking it one bit. "He's the father of Sebastian."

Poppy nodded and stood up slowly. "That's what I thought...." She sighed and opened the curtain. "You're free to go, Hermione, but if you feel anything out of order, unexpected pressures, sudden pains... anything, I want you back here as soon as possible."

Hermione nodded, and as Poppy turned to leave, she asked quietly, "What are you thinking?"

Poppy turned to give her a sad gaze. "I think he may have... forced... more upon you than you were ready for."

"He did..." She paused when she saw the look on Poppy's face. "But there were circumstances involved. I don't blame him, and he has forgiven me for leaving. We are trying to work it out. Please don't be angry with him, Poppy. He didn't... I mean."

"It's all right, child. When Severus is ready to confide in me, he will. I just don't like the idea of..." She frowned. "Don't fret yourself about us, Severus and I have been friends for a long time, we can deal with each other appropriately. Now, I want you to go and get some proper rest. I'm sure your son will be calling for you soon."

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione answered meekly and redressed quickly before making her way back to the dungeon she shared with Severus.

She made her way back to their chambers and heard the baby before she walked in. A crying echoed in the chambers as she hurried inside.

"Severus?"

"In here." His voice sounded nervous as she crossed to the bathroom and peered inside. What she found had her grinning.

"Problems?" she giggled moving more inside. Her appreciative gaze wandered over his now bared and soaked chest as he struggled to hold onto a howling baby kicking violently in his grasp. The bath water splashed and a pool of water surrounded his wet bare feet as he attempted to bathe the wriggling infant. His brows burrowed in concentration as he fought for control over the baby. She giggled again. "Something happen?"

"Just don't look at your bed, it's a smelly mess." He cast an amused look at her before returning to his task.

She glanced at the open door but took his advice and didn't go to look. She'd let the house-elves deal with that.

"He was a mess, so I thought I'd try to bathe him. He doesn't like water, does he?" Severus spoke softly as he deftly cupped a palm full of water over the howling baby.

"No, he hates baths. Do you want me to take over?" She stood to the side and watched the struggle between father and son.

"No, I want to do this. It's... I think he's more hungry than anything." He cast a glance at her. "Are you all right now?"

She nodded. "Clean and clear and one hundred percent cured."

"Good."

Hermione watched as Severus finally managed to get the baby clean, and with a sigh of relief handed him over to her. She took a towel and wrapped the squalling baby up, securing his arms, and his howling subsided immediately to a softer whimper. She then passed a towel over to Severus, eyeing his remaining clothing with a wide grin. The trousers he wore were completely soaked, and he looked so damned cute standing in nothing else.

"Here, dry yourself and I'll feed him."

Severus took the towel and allowed his fingers to caress hers for a moment before she dropped her hand. Hermione turned on her heel and crossed the room to take her normal place in the rocker. Severus followed her, casually wiping the excess water from his hair and chest. His gaze lingered on her as she unbuttoned her blouse and exposed herself. His eyes settled on her hungrily as he watched his son attach himself to a nipple.

He watched for a moment before he returned to the bathroom to retrieve his shirt and to cast a drying spell on his pants. He didn't want to see her like that now. They had a long way to go, and he didn't want to push her too far. She knew how he felt, and he had to give her space to come to her own decisions about him.

He returned to the room buttoning up his shirt and she glanced up at him.

"Where are you going?" she asked softly as she watched him dressing.

"I'm going to my office. I still have some things to do before the start of term."

"Anything I can help with?" She gave him a smile as he picked up his shoes and cloak.

"No. I can handle it, but I'll send Mr. Potter in, if I see him. I'll be back later this afternoon."

She nodded and gazed back down at the baby. "Say bye-bye to Daddy, Sebastian," she cooed, causing Severus to smile.

"He may have our intelligence, my love, but even I don't expect him to start talking just yet."

She gave him a big grin. "One never knows, Severus. He may astound us all."

Severus leant down and kissed her lips gently. "He already did me, when I learned of him."

Curiosity and Old Friends

Chapter 15 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

Chapter Fifteen: Curiosity and Old Friends

After Severus had left their chambers, Hermione found herself finally finding the time to explore the adjoining rooms that had been assigned to her. She knew that her chambers had been linked to Severus's, and she was eager to do some snooping now that she had some free time to herself. Before now, she only had two things on her mind: Sebastian and Severus. Exploring didn't even come into mind then.

She stopped at the crib and smiled down into her sleeping son's face. Sebastian had fallen back into sleep after he ate. The happy, contented look on his face spoke volumes. As was his routine, she knew he would sleep soundly and probably wouldn't awaken for a good hour. Plenty of time to explore her surroundings. She crept quietly from the nursery and scanned the various doors that aligned the walls. Two of the doors, she knew where they led. One led obviously to the nursery, and the one to the left led to the bathroom. Two other doors begged for her attention. She crossed to the first mysterious door and opened it cautiously sticking her nose inside.

It seemed to be a very big closet. But at this very moment, it was bare of many garments. Her meager possessions hung from a pole nearest the door. Funny, she could have sworn she put her things in the small dresser by the nursery door.

She let her eyes trail over her diminished wardrobe and sighed sadly. How was she supposed to get her things for school? She had to have all new things, and she really didn't like the idea of Severus buying them for her. It just felt wrong. First, it felt too domesticated and not in the good way either. It felt more like her father buying her the essentials she needed, not like a... a... promised paramour wanting to give her everything she ever wanted. Which, if she thought about it, seemed to be what Severus would more likely prefer to consider.

She smiled slightly at that while closing the closet door. Severus wanted so much to do what he could for her. So who was she to deny herself that luxury? It wasn't that she needed much; Sebastian's needs were of more importance.

They would have to go shopping soon anyway. Sebastian was growing out of some of his things already, and she needed to get a few things to help when she was in classes and had to leave the baby with someone.

Oh, Gods... she would have to leave Sebastian with someone. She hadn't thought of that until now. What would she do then? Who could she leave the baby with who wouldn't take advantage of the situation? This was definitely something that she would have to discuss with Severus tonight. Perhaps he had already thought of that little problem and had an answer on hand. He seemed to be the answer man so far.

Hermione stood silently staring at the last door that led to the back of the adjoining living area. Her curiosity piqued. She approached the door, sure of what lay beyond. She fully expected wards to have been placed on it, but to her amazement the door swung smoothly open at her touch. The view that hit her stunned her.

Severus's own bedroom.

Not that the bedroom itself stunned her, but the décor. She paused at the doorway and cocked her head, listening for any signs of approach or whimpers from the crib. Hearing nothing, she moved further into the bedroom. She stopped just inside of the door and allowed her gaze to wander the furnishings. Severus had magnificent taste, she concluded. Plus, it was most definitely a bachelor's pad.

It was an overtly large room. Dark mahogany wooden furniture with deep hunter green upholstery, and accessories were scattered throughout the room. The walls were bare of wizarding portraits, yet to her amazement, various Muggle paintings were up in their stead, all coddled in the same rich dark mahogany wooden frames as the furniture.

A three-piece entertainment suite adorned the western section of his chambers. Plush, deep green upholstered sofa and matching chairs with ottoman accentuated the vibrancy of the room. Matching mahogany tables gave off the proper touch, lending an air of class.

She padded barefoot across the room. Her gaze was pulled to the giant painting adorning the head of his bed. It was a simple picture of a meadow encircled with trees and a herd of grazing horses, or were they unicorns? She squinted, looking closer. No, there were no such things as black and brown unicorns. She was certain she'd have to ask Hagrid about that one. He would know. Although, she could most definitely see what appeared to be horns sprouting from the foreheads, even at the distance that they were painted.

She pulled her gaze away from the painting and let her attention wander to the bed. It was king-sized, like all the beds in Hogwarts. The sleigh design made her smile. She had loved this style as a child and grew to love it even more as an adult. Her own bed in her old room back in her parents' house was of the same design.

Thinking of her parents, she felt the burden in her chest once more and she sank onto his bed. She missed them, missed her family. She missed everything about being in a family. They have never seen Sebastian and would probably never would. That made her sad, made her mad, and made her ache.

Severus was doing everything in his power to make her feel at home. He was trying to form their own little family, and she felt something swell at that. Not love, she was sure, but perhaps more like gratitude. She needed someone to need her, to want her, and she knew that Severus did, without a doubt that he wanted her. He had told her so repeatedly recently.

Her eyes turned to the side table and she smiled at the books littered there, with a pair of reading spectacles lying on top of one book. She picked them up and placed them on her nose, giggling slightly. She never thought of him wearing glasses. She thought he would probably look adorable in them.

She removed the dark rimmed glasses, replaced them onto his book, and removed herself from the bed. Straightening out the wrinkles she had made, she moved about his chambers again. There was a large desk against a wall, and she went over to get a closer look. Piles of papers adorned the top, scattered in an untidy arc, which was so unlike Severus. He must have been looking for something hurriedly and didn't take the time to straighten it back up before he left.

Taking a quick look at the papers, she smiled, recognizing various potions and assignments that she took during an earlier year. He would probably need these, but she didn't think he would approve of her bringing them to him. That would only prove that she had been snooping around in his chambers without his knowledge.

She shook her head at that and almost grinned. No, he had purposely left his door unwarded and he knew that, to a Gryffindor, that was an open invitation to snoop. She bent to pick up the papers, and as her hand brought them up from the desk, she knocked something over. She bent to retrieve the wooden object but stopped halfway, her eyes catching on a piece of parchment half buried underneath the schedules.

'Dear Professor Dumbledore,' it read. 'Forgive me for not keeping in touch since my abrupt departure last September.'

Her breath caught as she realized it was her first letter to the Headmaster. She reached out and picked up the parchment, allowing her eyes to wander over the words.

This was the start of it all.

There were the other replies as well, which she also allowed to look through. The final reply of hers caught her attention when in the space after she signed her name was the words.

'Sebastian Samuel Snape... my son... and heir.'

She felt her eyes fill with tears at the words printed in black and white. He didn't know the truth of how their son came to being at that time, yet he already took full responsibility for the child. What kind of man would do that?

Severus would. He was just that kind of man.

She sniffed back her tears and replaced the parchments before deciding that she would take them as well. She really wanted to talk to Severus, to figure out for herself where this relationship was heading. He was quickly growing in her heart, but she was afraid of letting him in. She was terrified of having feelings for him, terrified of losing herself if she allowed herself any emotions.

He loved her, and that emotion was not practical in any sense of the word. That one emotion terrified her. That one emotion can be his downfall. She worried that he would die because of his love for her, and she didn't want to think about that. If Voldemort ever found out about her and Sebastian...

She shivered.

A sound reached her ears, breaching her thoughts and she quickly scooped up the work papers, but decided to leave the letters for now. She would come back here with him later and talk to him then.

Straightening the schedules, she quickly made a retreat from his rooms and closed the door behind her. A knocking at their door brought her around, and with a quick look in at the baby, she went to answer the persistent knocking.

"Oy! Open up in there, will ya?" a familiar voice cried out impatiently, and she forced down a laugh, throwing open the door. She was immediately encumbered with a bone crushing hug and flung around.

She allowed his embrace as he swung her around, giggling in joy at seeing him.

"Hey, you're getting me dizzy. Put me down." She giggled as she found her footing and grinned up at a very tall Ronald Weasley. "When did you get in?"

"Just now." His grin widened as he pointed a thumb behind him. She only then noticed that Harry stood quietly in the corridor. "Harry owed me last night about you being back and I had to come. I couldn't wait to see you." His eyes narrowed with concern. "Are you all right? Where have you been? Do you know how worried we all were?"

"Ron, it's a very long story."

The tall redhead rose a hand to silence her and glanced around the room with a shudder. "Come on, let's get out of here and back up to the common room. I don't like being down here if I don't have to."

Hermione gave Harry a look and he simply shrugged his shoulder. "You didn't tell him?"

"No, I didn't think it was my tale to tell. I thought you should be the one to explain," Harry replied.

Hermione looked up into the eyes of her best friend and nodded. "Thanks, Harry." Turning back to Ron, she reached out a hand to him. "You had better come in, but you have to be quiet," she spoke, stepping back into the room allowing them both to enter. Ron took a tentative step inside with a shiver.

"I don't like being in the dungeon on the best of days, let alone now. It's creepy," Ron growled as he stood in the middle of the room gaping around.

"It's not that bad, Ron. It's really very homey. I like it here."

"It's better in the Gryffindor tower. Why are you here anyway and not up there?"

Hermione ran a nervous hand through her hair and looked at Harry for a boost of confidence. He nodded once to indicate that he was on her side. She then turned her eyes back to Ron and held out a hand to him. "Come with me. There's someone I want you to meet."

Ron took her proffered hand and gave them both a confused look. "Meet who? Not Snape, please, it's too early to go face too face with that man."

"No, not Severus..." She ignored Ron's look when she mentioned their professor by name. "It's someone else."

She led the two to the doorway that led to her sleeping son, before pausing at the door and turning back to Ron. "Promise me you will not blow your cool when you see him."

"Uh, Hermione? What is this all about? You're starting to worry me."

"Just promise me you will listen and not judge," she demanded, her hands resting on the doorknob.

"All right, I promise." Ron's worried glance went from her to Harry then back.

Harry nodded to him then stepped up to touch her shoulder. "He'll be fine, Hermione, just show him."

She nodded and turned the doorknob, pushing the door inward. The room was cast in dancing shadows as they stepped inside. A soft sound of breathing coming from across the room was the only sound from within.

"Hermione?" Ron's eyes fell to the crib and he froze.

"Come on, Ron, I want you to meet him."

"Who..." His eyes widened as she took his hands and led him over to the crib, and he stood, silently, in shock, staring down at the sleeping baby.

"This is Sebastian... my son."

"Who..." His hand reached out to touch the dark fuzz of the baby's head, pulling back uncertainly as the baby moved at the touch. His mouth gaped open in disbelief as he stared down at the baby.

"Ron?"

He jumped at the hand on his back and turned to look at the other two. "Who is the father? You, Harry?"

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "No, not me."

"He has very dark hair like yours."

"Yes, he definitely has his father's hair." Hermione smiled down at her son.

"Who is his father, Hermione? Is he the reason you ran away?" Ron's voice wavered with emotions as he gazed down at the baby, lying asleep, oblivious of his visitors.

"Yes, and no." She sighed and tucked the blanket up over the baby's shoulder. "Come back into the other room and I will explain everything."

Ron followed them both back into the living area silently, still dumbstruck with the fact that Hermione, his Hermione, was a mother. He fell heavily onto a chair and shook his head slightly in disbelief.

"I can't believe this..." he muttered softly as he watched Hermione cross to a bar and pour a shot of something and pass it to him.

"Here, you're going to need this." She smiled down at him and watched him as he downed the drink in one go. His face screwed up at the taste before handing it back.

"Okay... I think I'm ready now."

"Maybe you need to give him another, Hermione. I don't think he's ready to hear the whole truth just yet."

"I don't like the sound of that, guys. Is it that bad?"

Hermione and Harry exchanged glances.

"It's not to me, at least not now. It was at that time... but... but things have changed since Sebastian was conceived." Hermione fiddled with the empty glass in her hand. "I'm learning to adjust to my new life, and I think with everyone's help, things can somewhat return to normal."

Harry snorted. "Normal? Since when have we had a normal life?"

"True." Hermione smiled softly at him. "But it's as normal as we are going to get."

"You didn't answer me, Hermione. Who is Sebastian's father?" Ron interrupted.

She sighed and indicated the area with a wave of her hand. "Why do you think I am living here Ron? The only reason I was allowed to return was because of Severus. Without his support..."

"Snape?" Ron's one whispered word broke into her speech.

"Yes." She closed her eyes, expecting the tirade that she knew would come. When she didn't hear anything she slowly opened her eyes and frowned. Ron's face was red and his eyes flashed.

"I'll fucking kill him," he growled, standing slowly to his feet.

"Ron. You promised me you would hear me out," she protested, moving to stand before him.

His eyes rounded to Harry and threw a finger up at the other man accusingly. "You knew? You knew what he did to her and that mother fucker still lives?"

"RON!" both shouted.

The angry man turned on his heels and pelted across to the exit door, hell bent on finding Snape.

"*PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!*" two voices called out simultaneously, and Ron fell to the floor, immobile. An abrupt cry drifted from the nursery, and Hermione glared down at the prone man.

"Now see what you have done? You've woke your nephew." Hermione tossed the wand, which she had somehow acquired in her anger, to the floor and rushed to gather her bawling baby.

Harry knelt down next to his best friend and shook his head at the other's angry gaze. He knew Ron wouldn't take this easily. He was just as angry when he learned of the situation, but running out on her now was not an option. He had to get that drilled into his friend before she returned to the room.

"He loves her, Ron..." Harry spoke softly. "He told me so himself and I believe him."

The young man closed his eyes in response.

"I'm going to release you, but you are going to calm down. You are going to listen to the facts, and you are going to be supportive. Do you understand?"

Ron reopened his eyes, and Harry muttered the spell that released him.

"Nephew?" came his tired, emotional voice.

"That's what she wants."

"She and... Snape?" He shook his head still disbelieving what was before his eyes. "In... love?"

"Not quite. There's more to it than that."

"Such as?" Ron still hadn't bothered to sit up.

Hermione then emerged with a bundle of wiggling blanket clutched to her chest. "Is everything all right now?" she asked watching the looks crossing Ron's face.

"Tell me what happened," he finally spoke.

Ron sat quietly as he took in everything that she said. He felt waves of emotions. Disbelief, anger, pain, disbelief again, fear, then finally acceptance.

"So what are your plans now?" he asked as he watched her bounce the baby in her arms.

"Severus wants us here, so this is where we belong. I don't want to take Sebastian away from his father, and Severus has really been wonderful about all of this."

"Do you love him?" Ron asked, leaning forward and pulling the blanket away from the baby's face, gazing down at the bundle.

"I assume you mean Severus? I don't know. I think I could if given time. He has shown me a completely different side of him that I really like."

"Can I hold him?" Ron asked suddenly, and Hermione smiled, carefully transferring the baby to the arms of one of her best friends, showing him how to hold him and support the head. "He's beautiful. It's hard to believe he's Snape's offspring."

"Indeed," came a silky voice from the doorway. "It is."

What One Does for Friendship

Chapter 16 of 16

Hermione has left Hogwarts during her sixth year. Secrets and desperation brings her back.

Chapter Sixteen: What One Does for Friendship

All eyes fell to the figure in the doorway, and Hermione couldn't help but smile at the casual way Severus Snape leaned against the doorjamb. He had a smirk plastered to his face as he watched the exchange between friends.

"How long have you been standing there?" she questioned, rising to her feet to greet him.

Severus took his gaze from Ron and the baby as she approached. He blessed her with a half-smile, upper corner of a lip twisting up into a similar version of his smirk, only this time the smile reached his eyes. He snaked out an arm, and with a quick glance at the other two, leaned in and gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. It wasn't much of a hug, but that was all he was willing to do in front of the others right now. She grinned up at him and gave him a quick hug back, which made his pulse race. She liked his little show of emotion. However, it was one show that the other two didn't fail to notice as well. He gave a mental shrug before replying to her.

"Not long, love. I came to bring you down to lunch. I didn't realize Weasley had made it back as well. I will leave you three alone for a while longer." He turned to head back to the dungeon when she grabbed onto his arm and turned him back.

"Please stay. I can order our lunches to be brought up."

Her eyes locked with his, and he looked uncertainly back to her friends. As much as he would love to spend more time with his family, he didn't think that the other two would cherish the idea, judging by the eye rolls that were going on between the two. "Maybe later, Hermione. I do not think I am a popular person at the moment, and I don't wish to interfere."

She glanced back at her friends and noticed the distrustful look still in Ron's face. He still didn't understand everything, although she knew he was doing his best to try. It was going to take time to get over the past deeds that caused them to hate each other so much. She was glad that Harry seemed to be warming up to the truth. He had many more reasons to hate Severus than Ron did, yet he seemed to be taking it in his stride. It was only a matter of time to win Ron over. She slipped her hand in Severus's and pulled him more into the room, determined to get them all to be friends or at least be civil to each other. "If we are to be together, Severus, you are going to have to try to get along with my friends, as I will try to do the same with yours."

Severus raised his free hand to her cheek, casting side-glances at the boys, but keeping his eyes mostly on her. "As if I have friends that I ever want you to meet, love." His voice lowered for her ears only.

Her stomach dropped at the thought of meeting his friends, friends that would no doubt belong to that club known as the Death Eaters. Not that Severus would ever consider them as friends, but in his line of work, he had to socialize with them and thus... problems arising for the future. She did an inner shoulder roll to lose that thought and bring her mind back to the here and now.

"No matter, I want you all to try to get along. Please?" She tightened her fingers around his hand and was happy to see something in his eyes that passed as resignation.

He couldn't deny her this even if he wanted to. The look in her face bordered on desperation and determination. He had best give in now rather than wait until she was too pissed off to talk about it. "Oh, very well." He wrapped an arm around her waist and steered her back into the room. "If that is what you wish. I can not refuse you anything." His eyes locked to hers, and he was rewarded with a kiss to his cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I really appreciate this."

Letting go of him, she quickly strode to the fireplace and ordered lunch for the four of them before sitting herself on the sofa, allowing plenty of room for Severus to sit next

to her.

It was an awkward silence, yet she couldn't help the wide grin that formed on her face. This was a good start. Everyone in one room and no blood shed had to be a good sign. If Severus was willing to try for her sake, surely her friends would be as well.

The minutes ticked away, and the silence that followed Severus's arrival turned deafening. Both boys kept their attention on the sleeping baby, and none tried to speak first. No one knew where to start.

Hermione sighed deeply and looked at each man in turn.

"Look guys, we have to get over this. This is the way it's going to be from now on. Ron, Harry, I am here now. I am back. True, things have changed. I have a child and I am with Severus, kind of..." She felt his hand catch hers and give it a little squeeze. "Under the circumstances, I expect you to do your best to get along. If not for me, then for my... for our... son. You are as close to uncles as Sebastian is ever going to get. I doubt Severus's family will accept us..." She paused to glance at Severus and frowned. That was something that she hadn't even consider. What about his family? Did he even have a family? She was suddenly aware that she didn't know anything about him. That was something else they were going to have to talk about. They were going to have to talk about Sebastian Samuel Snape's family lineage.

Severus caught her look and gave her hand another comforting squeeze. "We will discuss that, and yes, Sebastian does have uncles other than these two." His head tilted to the young men, causing both to exchange curious glances. "We can talk about that tonight."

She nodded before turning her attention back to them. "Anyway, like I was saying, I am going to need your help. It's going to be difficult to continue with classes while with a newborn. I'm going to have to find a sitter for when I am in class and Severus is unable to care for him."

"We can put up notices..." Harry started.

"No, I think Severus and I need to deal with that. There is that one person that I don't want knowing about Sebastian's... parentage. If I start advertising for a baby sitter, he will no doubt realize what had happened and who the baby's father is."

"Malfoy," Harry's voice spat out the name in detest.

Hermione nodded. "I don't know how I will be able to hide Sebastian from Draco. And once Draco knows, it's only a matter of time before Malfoy senior will know. Then..."

"... Then the proverbial shit will hit the fan," Harry murmured.

"I don't know what Lucius had planned at that time, but I don't think it had anything to do with my having a child with Hermione," Severus spoke softly. "Lucius has his own agenda apart from Voldemort's, and sometimes he doesn't think his actions through completely. He made a serious mistake coming to us that night." He glanced at the look on Hermione's face before amending his last sentence. "Not that I would take it back, now that I have what I've always wanted." Her look softened and she smiled at him.

"Do you think Voldemort would be angry?" Ron piped up not wanting to be left out of the conversation.

"Furious... would be the word," Severus sighed.

"What options do we have?" Harry glanced between the two. He didn't like the idea of Hermione and her baby being in more danger than she already was. Snape could take care of himself, but she had a baby to worry about now and wouldn't be able to think on her feet in the speed that would more likely be necessary to their survival if it came down to the wire.

"We need to hide Sebastian's true identity." Severus frowned looking down at the baby still sleeping in Ron's arms. His pale face was still in peaceful slumber, with no awareness of his safety, trusting in his parents' protective dispositions.

"How do we do that?" Hermione questioned, turning her gaze to her baby as well. "It's not going to be easy to hide him from everyone."

"He needs... another father," Severus spoke barely above a whisper. He didn't like the way it sounded coming from his lips, although he had to utter the foul words. Hermione's sharp intake of breath caused him to look back at her. Her eyes widened with surprise and anger.

"I don't *think* so..."

Severus turned towards her and took both of her hands in his. He hated the words that came from his mouth, but it was for her and Sebastian's safety. "Hermione. I don't like it either, but it's the only way to keep you both safe."

"He has a father. You!" Her eyes started to well up and she sniffed loudly. She felt silly about getting upset about it. She knew he wasn't just trying to rid himself of both her and their son, but it still felt like a rejection.

"I am aware of that, Hermione, love." He tilted her gaze up to meet his eyes wiping a tear that slid down her face. "I'm not saying I'm giving up my rights to be his father, Hermione. I will never do that. I love you both. But in the eyes of the students, it's safer for them to believe that his father is someone else."

"Lucius will figure it out." she protested.

"Not if Draco thinks it's not of any importance to tell his father. If he thought that Sebastian's father was another student, there is a good chance that he wouldn't deem it newsworthy enough to tell his father."

"True, but I don't want Sebastian to have another father, even if it is fake. He would grow up confused."

Severus leaned forward, ignoring the looks on her friend's face, and kissed her gently, allowing his lips to press hers so tenderly. He was enjoying the way she allowed his small signs of affection. A kiss here, hand holding there... to him it meant that she was warming up to their situation. "This would be only until we can figure out another plan. School starts soon, and with Draco returning..."

Hermione leaned her forehead against his chest, closing her eyes. She could feel his heartbeat beneath his work robes, and without thinking twice, she moved to lean into him, letting him settle his arms around her to hold her close. She needed his comfort.

Severus held her close, relishing in the feel of her willing body pressed up against him. He hated passing on his responsibility of Sebastian to another man, even if only temporarily.

"It won't work, Severus. Who in their right mind would take on a task like that? To pretend to be Sebastian's father?" She raised her head to look into his eyes, fear and confusion swam in her brown eyes.

"I would," two voices popped up simultaneously, causing both to look at them. She seemed surprised, but Severus had a knowing look in his face. He knew one of them would volunteer. Such was their friendship.

"Ron... Harry..." Hermione started.

Harry raised a hand to halt her. "Look, to everyone else it would be a natural deduction. We have always been friends, best friends. It would only be natural to let them all

think that we just kicked it up another notch, from friends to lovers. No one would question if I'm fingered out to be Sebastian's dad."

"Or me." Ron smiled down at the sleeping bundle still held tightly against his chest. "It may be the only time I will be able to play dad for a long while. I wouldn't mind putting one over the Malfoys."

Severus watched the two men silently with awe. He was completely amazed by the depths of their friendships. If only he'd had friends like this when he was going through his life here as a child, perhaps his life would have ended up differently. He could have gone on and lived a normal, happy life with no fear of the darkness.

He sighed as the woman that he chose to spend the rest of his life with leaned against him again, and he wrapped his arms protectively around her. If given more time, she probably would have ended up with either Weasley or Potter, but fate was a fickle bitch, and he had somehow managed to finagle himself into her life.

"I think it would be best if Mr. Potter were chosen. With the black hair it would be easier to pass him off as a Potter." Severus tried not to grimace as he spoke his preference. He didn't even like thinking of his son being thought of as a Potter, let alone letting everyone else think so.

Hermione glanced between Severus and Harry. It felt like a betrayal to her, and she didn't like it one bit. She only wanted one father for Sebastian. "I don't know..."

"It's only for a little while, my love. I do not plan on giving up my son." He glared meaningfully to the dark haired boy.

Harry raised a hand to Snape's look and grinned. "Don't worry; I have no claim on either one," Harry spoke quickly, reassuring the jealous man before him. As it was, he was trying his best not to let loose with a bout of laughter that threatened to escape.

"But what about the living arrangements?" Hermione frowned, looking around the chambers she has grown accustomed to. "I don't want to move him again."

"Let me speak with Albus about this, and I'm sure we can come up with a solution," Severus volunteered, feeling a bit put out from the expression of glee on Potter's face.

The group nodded, and Ron's face clouded over with disappointment as he gazed down at the baby he still held.

"I wouldn't have minded playing his dad. It's too bad I have all this red hair."

Hermione grinned and cocked her head to the side as she watched the young man with her son. "You have potential, Ron. You will be a good father, I can tell. You have that 'Weasley' instinct. I think it's in the blood."

"I don't think it's the blood that it's in. It's a bit further... south... I think." A big grin followed Severus's words.

"SEVERUS!" Hermione pulled back from his chest and looked up at him with her mouth gaped open in delighted surprise. She never expected a joke from him in regards to the 'Weasley' sperm.

He raised a naughty eyebrow at her expression and the two boys fell over themselves with laughter, causing Sebastian to waken and start howling in protest.

"Oops... I think he's awake," Harry said with a grin.