

The Marriage Law

by teshara

After a new law reduces witches to chattel, Hermione Granger finds herself married to Severus Snape in order to keep her from the Death Eaters.
Hermione begins to shadow Severus in his work with the Order. They begin to form a mutual respect and love for each other after Hermione works as negotiator to a matriarchal secret society, the Amazons.
Severus stations them in Russia, where his family has a home, and his cousin is active in patriarchal secret society, the Mystic Brotherhood, who has been at odds with the Amazons for years.
After the Final Battle is fought, one would think the Order would be done with its work, but after Harry is scarred forever, Hermione is given a holy artifact, and a mysterious string of Muggle murders catches the attention of the Ministry, it seems as if their work is just beginning...

The Petition

Chapter 1 of 17

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Background:

This is a deviation of the WIKTT Challenge: The Marriage Law.

Loosely, it reads that Muggle-born witches have lost their rights and wizards can petition for their custody, thereby forcing them into marriage.

I apologize outright, because I didn't really fulfill any of the other requirements.

Also, please keep in mind this story was started before Order of the Phoenix came out and at one point was canon. I have tried to work in things if I can, such as Sirius' death, but other things, such as Dumbledore's sexuality and Hermione's birthday, were already integral to my storyline and unfortunately, could not be changed without a complete rewrite of several plot lines.

Chapter 1: The Petition

"Are you sure, Severus?" Albus Dumbledore looked over the tops of his gold rimmed glasses at the nervous man sitting in front of him. "You are under no obligation to do this."

Severus Snape squirmed in his seat. He always felt nervous under the gaze of the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Even more so today.

Dumbledore had a petition in his hands that would legally bind Severus to one of his students: Hermione Granger.

Dumbledore's hat, a dashing pointed design, fashioned of a deep purple velvet, rested on a corner of the high backed chair he was sitting on. His white hair and beard flowed over him and down the front of his robes. His deep blue eyes peered at Severus with curiosity.

"Yes," said Severus, a pained look crossing his features. He reached a hand up to pinch the skin between his eyes. "I'm sure."

"Very well then," Dumbledore sighed and handed the parchment to Severus, along with a green quill.

Severus took it, hands shaking, and signed.

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Hermione Granger was enjoying her breakfast in Hogwarts' Great Hall with her best friends, Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, when a large brown barn owl swooped down over their table and dropped a light blue scroll in front of her, upending a plate of bacon.

Her hand froze halfway to her pumpkin juice.

Ministry of Magic: Department of Matrimonial Destiny was stamped across the scroll in swirling silver letters. It was sealed with a silver blob of wax, a pair of bells stamped into it. They were enchanted to look as if they were ringing.

"But you're not 18 yet, Hermione," said Ron, looking at her stunned.

"I know that," said Hermione sounding panicky.

"Then what's that for?" Ron asked, sounding frantic.

"I don't know!" cried Hermione, leaving the scroll untouched near her plate.

Harry reached out and took it. He broke the seal, unrolled it, and read silently.

"It seems your experiences with the Time-Turner have been taken into consideration when determining the date of your availability." Harry raised his eyebrows.

Ron snorted.

Hermione felt ill.

The Marriage Law.

Another crackpot idea of the Ministry. To insure the future of the Wizarding community, they claimed. The latest idea was to reduce the status of witches to chattel and allow wizards to petition for their hand.

It was supposed to be the same for both Muggle-born and pure-blood witches, but witches from pure-blood families usually had the connections and the ability to bribe the right people to get disqualified from marital service.

"You had three offers in the first hour of your availability, so you're being allowed to pick your mate," Harry scanned the page.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Neville said softly, having overheard the outburst.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" Ron said outraged.

"You wouldn't be allowed," Hermione explained patiently before Ron had a violent outburst and lost them the House Cup.

"You're still underage and your brothers are spoken for," Harry said as he handed the scroll over to Hermione.

Hermione paled as she read it. Then she reached in her book bag and dug around for a quill. Ron watched as she scribbled a note on the parchment. The owl that had delivered it swooped down from the rafters to carry it back to the Ministry.

"So that's it?" Ron asked, quietly.

"I guess so," said Hermione in a small voice. Neville put his hand on her back to steady her.

"Who did you choose?" Harry asked gently.

"Who did you have to choose from?" Ron asked.

"Gregory Goyle, Aurelius Ollivander, and Severus Snape," Hermione said, blinking blankly.

"Are you serious?" asked Ron weakly.

Ron felt utterly helpless. He and Hermione had never made things official, but he had always planned to settle down with her when he had enough to offer. Now the Ministry had swept her away before they even had a chance. He had watched the same thing happen to Percy after Penelope had been mated to a tailor in Brighton. She was legal property of someone else now.

"Who did you choose?" Ron asked. His voice gave the impression he didn't really want to know.

"Snape, of course," hissed Hermione. "He's in the Order. He must have petitioned for me because of that."

"That would make sense!" Ron looked excited. His grin was wide and his eyebrows were working up and down. "He's going to save you. This must be a plan!"

"Well, I suppose I'll get to thank him later this evening," Hermione said, taking her planner out of her bag.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"We're getting married tonight," Hermione said, jotting down a note in her planner.

The Ceremony

Chapter 2 of 17

After the Ministry enacts the Marriage Law, Severus Snape finds himself petitioning for Hermione Granger in order to keep her out of the hands of undesirables. As things in the Wizarding World heat up and they find themselves in a close working relationship they find themselves growing closer.
Russia. Brotherhoods. Amazons. Mythic secrets. Final battle. Surprising Changes.

Chapter 2: The Ceremony

Hermione stood in front of a full length mirror frowning at what she saw.

Her light colored wedding robes swished around her ankles as she turned this way and that, trying to get a better view of herself. Her robes were tasteful: pleated to make the back look fuller, a thin cloak attached to her shoulders with gold clasps.

Lavender Brown stood behind her, rubbing her arms as if chilled. The room was quite warm.

"I don't know, Hermione," said Lavender finally. "It's creepy if you ask me."

"He has just as much right as anyone to choose a bride," said Hermione as she leaned towards the mirror and swabbed light blue eye shadow over her eyelids. "It could be worse. Would you rather have me chosen Goyle or Ollivander?"

"You know precisely what she means," said Cindy Dawkins, a blond sixth year and a friend of Lavender's said sharply. "I don't approve of this law and neither does she. Even if we have to put up with the law, a teacher shouldn't be able to petition for you. It's just *wrong*."

"Nevertheless, the law exists." Hermione insisted as she rustled through a white leather makeup bag and pulled out her mascara. "I don't intend to be a fugitive. Or have my memory modified to make me more compliant."

Cindy shook her head, unable to come up with another answer. A soft knock came from the door.

"Come in," Hermione called out. Professor McGonagall came through the door, followed by Ginny Weasley, who was wearing light blue dress robes.

"Professor!" Hermione exclaimed. "This must be a first, I don't recall you ever visiting us before."

"I'm glad to see you're feeling well," McGonagall said nervously, as if expecting Hermione to burst into hysterical sobbing at any second.

"I'm feeling fine," Hermione said. "A little nervous, but altogether I feel fine. He won't pull me out of my classes and I doubt he'll stop my continued studies."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. Hermione noticed she was holding a small cluster of pink and white wildflowers.

"I'm glad you're going to be in the ceremony, Ginny." Hermione gave her a relieved smile. "I know it was short notice."

What she was really concerned with was whether Ginny wanted to be her friend anymore.

"Don't worry about it," Ginny said with a wave of her flowers. "What you should worry about is your dad."

"My dad?" Hermione said questioningly. "*My parents* are here?"

"Of course," McGonagall said stiffly. "The Ministry owed them about the betrothal as well as notifying them when the ceremony would be."

"He's been yelling at Snape for about a half an hour now," said Ginny giggling. "Snape's been trying to convince your dad he really was the best choice, but your dad isn't going for it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He let him get on a roll." She sighed. "If you let him get started, he never lets up. You need to cut him off early before he gets into it."

"For some reason he thinks Snape's been perverting after you for the last seven years and he's furious," Ginny said, eyebrows raised.

"I've got to stop this." Hermione started out of the room.

"Nonsense," McGonagall said sternly, placing both her hands on Hermione's shoulders and steering her back to the mirror. "Dumbledore will break it up when he thinks it's gone on too long."

Hermione turned back to her makeup bag, although hesitantly. She pulled out tweezers and began shaping her eyebrows.

"Your things will be moved before the end of the ceremony," McGonagall said quickly.

"Moved?" Hermione said quizzically. "To where?"

"The quarters you will share with your husband," said McGonagall with a bitter look on her face. "You are married, of course." She pulled her robes around herself tighter.

"Of course," Hermione said hollowly.

She felt coldness creep into her stomach. She didn't know why the details had failed to elude her before.

True, Snape was keeping her away from the Death Eaters, and apparently Mr. Ollivander, who she would never look at in the same way ever again, but he didn't have to make this pleasant for her.

"It's almost time for the ceremony, Hermione," Ginny said quickly. "We should get going."

Lavender lifted a lace veil out of a bag and pinned it to Hermione's soft curls.

"You'll be fine," Ginny said. "Don't look so terrified. I'm sure he... has some redeemable qualities."

"Like what?" Lavender snapped.

"She can now bottle fame, brew glory--" Ginny began.

The Gryffindor girls giggled.

"Don't tell me he's still giving that inane speech," McGonagall said sharply. She looked appalled.

"He gets better at flapping for emphasis every year," said Hermione. "Maybe I can put a stop to that."

"Good point," said Lavender, handing her a bouquet of white roses. "But you can stop it later; first you have to get the deed done."

Hermione took a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror one last time.

The veil was white and woven with tiny gold threads to make it shimmer warmly. Her makeup and a clever charm made her face look blemish free and her cheeks flushed prettily from nervousness.

"I'm ready," Hermione said finally, letting her breath out.

Ginny opened the door and the group of women walked down the staircase, descending to the Great Hall where Hermione's betrothed waited for her.

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Hermione stood behind Ginny as soft music tinkled from the Great Hall.

Most ceremonies took place in more traditional places, but since both bride and groom resided at Hogwarts and Dumbledore was qualified to perform weddings, Dumbledore had argued to the Ministry that a small ceremony on the grounds would cause less of a disruption to the body of the school.

To everyone's surprise, the Ministry had agreed, but Hermione had pointed out that it was an excuse for the governors to make an inspection with little preparation on the school's behalf.

Ginny hugged Hermione quickly before starting a slow march through the large double doors that lead into the Great Hall.

Hermione's father stood beside Hermione in a Muggle tuxedo and took her arm. He stood slightly shorter than her, his silver hair shining in the candlelight.

"He'll take care of you," said her father gruffly. "From what I understand it was the best option. It was between him and that Mundungus."

Hermione stifled a laugh at the idea of being wed the dirty little man that so much resembled a pile of rags. "I suppose so."

"I'm sorry, kitten," Hermione's father said, trying not to get emotional. Hermione heard the strain in his voice.

"Dad, it'll be alright," Hermione insisted as she hugged him; not knowing whether or not it would be alright at all.

Her father wiped his eyes hastily with a handkerchief he pulled out of his pocket and looked at her.

"You look beautiful," he said, straightening her veil.

"Thanks, Dad."

She took his arm and they began the slow march through the doors, up to the podium that had been moved to the front of the Great Hall, where the teacher's table normally was.

The long tables the students normally ate on had been moved to encircle the room and food was piled on them. Hermione spied small white tables and chairs stacked in one corner. She supposed when the ceremony was over someone would rearrange everything in the Hall to accommodate dining.

The long wooden benches that went with the Hogwarts' tables were positioned to watch the ceremony.

"Amazing what people can do on such short notice," Hermione whispered to her father, staring at the sea of heads, not really recognizing anyone.

He chuckled at her.

She could see Snape as they approached the front of the hall. He turned from Dumbledore to look at her. She nearly expected him to flinch, but his face was unreadable.

He was wearing a high collared shirt and black long coat. A burgundy ascot lay at his throat and a white flower was pinned to his coat. His raven hair was caught behind his neck with a white silk ribbon.

Hermione couldn't help but notice he actually looked a little handsome when he decided to put forth a little effort.

Hermione felt her cheeks burn and she stared at the long red carpet her feet tread on, leading her to her betrothed.

As her father put her hand in Snape's, she felt her veins burn cold.

Dumbledore chanted the binding spell that entwined them magically.

Hermione heard herself recite the appropriate words at the right time. She heard Snape do the same. Then she heard Dumbledore close the book, ending the ceremony.

Nothing prepared her for the feel of his lips on hers.

They were warm. Not dry at all. The gentle pressure startled her and she jumped slightly.

Snape drew back and frowned for a split second.

Then he abruptly took her arm and stalked down the aisle, dragging her behind him. He dragged her out of the Great Hall and down to the dungeons.

"Aren't we even going to eat?" Hermione asked as she stumbled behind him.

"There is food in my quarters," said Snape. "I had the elves prepare it for us before anyone else had the chance to get to it. Didn't you see who was present?"

"No," said Hermione crossly. He certainly wasn't going to start this out by bossing her around. "I didn't get to see much of anything."

"There were several unsavory persons from the Ministry that I wouldn't put past the idea of slipping potions into the food," said Snape, frowning at her.

He stopped at a stone statue of a fish and muttered a password.

"Veritaserum?" Hermione asked as the statue moved aside and a portal opened in the wall.

"Possibly," said Snape bitterly, stepping into the quarters they now shared. "If they felt particularly kind."

A table was filled with platters and bowls of the food that was available upstairs.

From the entrance, Hermione could see a fireplace set into the same wall as the portal, a wooden door on the right side of the room, and a large window looking out over the lake.

She was surprised to see the view, but reasoned that since the castle was built on a small drop before the lake started there was no reason why one side of the dungeons couldn't have windows.

There was a low, black couch with a small table in front of it in front of the fireplace. A threadbare black carpet was the only thing that decorated the floor. Small book cases doubled as low tables throughout the room. A comfortable looking black chair sat near the window.

It wasn't homey, but it wasn't as stark as she'd expected. She looked at her new home and took a deep breath.

There were so many things going through her head, she wasn't exactly sure which one was making her feel so jittery.

"I wish I would have gotten to say good bye to my parents," said Hermione, looking at the portal close. It seemed like a melodramatic end to a chapter in her life.

"I know this may be difficult for you, Miss Granger," Snape said slowly. "Your parents were told I would be whisking you off right away. They were instructed to mingle for awhile, then someone will bring them here. They have been told not to sample the food upstairs."

"I hear my dad gave you a hard time." Hermione sounded apologetic.

Snape snorted.

"Nothing unexpected. I would do the same thing for my daughter," he thought for a moment. "There would have been more fire, of course."

Hermione stifled a giggle, though not very well. Snape looked at her sharply. It didn't help.

"That was a really funny visual," she said, trying to compose herself. She felt slightly hysterical.

A corner of his mouth quirked for a split second before he scowled.

"Your quarters are in here," said Snape, walking to a portrait of a black cat sleeping on a pink pillow. He meowed at it softly and the cat blinked sleepily and opened its eyes.

"*Emicoatus*," Snape whispered at the painting.

The cat yawned and its mouth grew wider.

So wide in fact, that it began to widen over the canvas.

"Is this supposed to happen?" Hermione asked Snape. He nodded sharply.

The wide grin began to stretch the stone frame and all the color turned grey. A tiny pinhole in the wall started to widen, revealing a room behind the wall.

When it finally stopped, it had widened into an arched door frame with two tiny points at the top.

"Who came up with this?" Hermione asked, amazed.

"Helga Hufflepuff," said Snape, stiffly. "These were her original quarters. I'm still not sure I've found everything hidden in here. Apparently she had a fondness for charms."

Hermione stepped in the doorway and blinked at her room. The deep burgundy and gold she was accustomed to was gone, replaced with a deep midnight blue and accented with silver trim.

"A particular house-elf took it upon himself to make sure it was up to his specifications," Snape said, quirked an eyebrow.

"Oh dear," said Hermione wincing. "I hope he wasn't too much trouble."

"It made for an easier transition with his preparations."

Hermione had been looking at the king sized canopy bed. The frame was wrought iron with silver vines painted over it, twining up into the fabric. The comforter was velvet and such a deep blue it was almost black. It was very soft to the touch and Hermione suspected it was enchanted. Crookshanks was purring merrily in the center of it.

"Well, you've certainly made yourself at home," Hermione remarked to him. Crookshanks yawned widely and pulled himself to his feet.

A pool of long, ginger hair remained where he was sleeping. Velvet. What was Dobby thinking?

Crookshanks padded over to her and butted her hand with his head. She stroked him for a few seconds and he flopped back on the comforter.

"Lazy," she accused.

There was a small table with four white wooden chairs around it in the center of the room. Hermione felt relieved. It seemed to imply Snape expected her to have people in her room.

A light blue desk was pushed against one wall near a small window. A much larger window was near the bed. Dobby had been thoughtful enough to position the bed so that Hermione could see out of it without leaving her bed. Hermione saw the top of a stone gargoyle's head as she glanced out the window.

Snape pushed a pewter panel with an engraving of Celtic knot work on it, and Hermione turned her head towards him as stone began to grind and a hidden door opened, revealing her private bathroom.

Snape motioned for her to follow him and Hermione walked into a bathroom that looked as if it were made from growing stone. The ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky, much like the Great Hall. The bathtub, seamlessly rising from the floor, was a piece of hollowed out granite. Water poured from a small waterfall coming out of the wall. Small ferns and flowers grew in small pockets of earth set in the stone.

Hermione's bathroom things were arranged on stone shelves flanking a mirror above a carved stone sink. Celtic knot work flowed around the mirror and sink.

"This is incredible," Hermione awed. "She took this much time to do a bathroom? Why aren't you using it?"

"I don't believe bathing should be an out of doors experience." He sniffed imperiously. "I understand she took her bathing time seriously."

"No kidding," said Hermione looking at the openmouthed frog fixture perched on the edge of her sink. A soft knock resounded from the main room.

"I think your parents are here," Snape said, shivering.

Hermione stifled a grin.

Snape walked to his receiving room and put his hand on a square pewter panel on the wall near the fireplace. Dumbledore walked through the portal that opened in the bare portion of wall.

"Would you like some food, Headmaster?" Hermione asked politely, wondering where her parents were.

"Yes, thank you," said Dumbledore walking over to a tea service on a small cart Hermione had not noticed before. He poured himself a cup of tea and went to fill his plate from the assortment of food on the table.

"Your parents will not be joining us, however." Dumbledore looked at Hermione over the top of his gold wire-rimmed glasses. "It seems your father was so nervous he forgot the warning to refrain from eating." Dumbledore quickly glanced at Snape.

Snape frowned.

"What happened?" Hermione's face went pale and she sunk to the low black couch Severus had placed in front of his fireplace.

"Nothing all that serious," Dumbledore said with a wave of his hand. He sat down on the black couch with a heavy swish of his dress robes. "Just got hold of a prototype. He'll be fine in a few days."

"A Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes prototype?" Snape asked, his face turning stony.

"Yes, that would be the company," Dumbledore said quickly. He held a muffin out to Hermione. "Muffin?"

"What happened?" asked Hermione in a relieved tone as she took it and sat beside him. "I'm assuming it was just a shape-changing spell. They're working on pigs now, aren't they?"

"Actually, they're working on shrinking candies," said Dumbledore.

"I don't know why you take them so seriously." Snape had a stern look on his face. "They're a liability."

"They're creative." Dumbledore arched an eyebrow at Snape.

"Well, if it's between shrinking or being poisoned, I'll take shrinking," Hermione said testily.

"How small is he?" Snape asked, interested. He examined the selection of food and finally reached for a turkey leg. He picked at it with his fingers instead of biting into it.

Hermione was amazed at how neatly he could eat something so messy.

"About the size of a mouse," Dumbledore said. "Give or take."

Snape nodded. "How long until it wears off?"

"It should be a few hours, but he shouldn't have shrunk that much. Apparently it was a lot stronger than expected. He should be back to himself in a week," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Your mother was just saying he needed to take some time off."

"Where is he now?" Hermione asked with a worried expression.

"St. Mungo's," Dumbledore and Snape said in unison.

Hermione blinked.

"It's the only place with the capabilities to care for someone that's been shrunk," Snape explained.

"You would know all about that," Dumbledore chuckled as he took a bite of food.

"You shrunk yourself?" Hermione asked Snape, trying not to chuckle.

"It wasn't intentional." Snape snorted, picking at his turkey leg.

"During his O.W.L.s," Dumbledore said, shaking his head with a smile.

"Anyway, St. Mungo's has excellent facilities," Snape said to Hermione. "He'll have a fully functioning home his size made out of balsa wood. When he expands he'll just break out, as it were."

"I take it mum went with him?" Hermione asked Dumbledore. He nodded as he sipped his tea.

Hermione finally felt her stomach lurch. She was married and she had barely got to see her parents. She looked at the table of food near her and her stomach growled.

"I heard that from here," Snape said. "Eat or you'll make yourself sick."

Hermione got up and put a little turkey and fruit on her plate. Snape looked displeased, but stayed silent as she went back to her place on the couch.

"Well," said Dumbledore, setting his plate down on the low table in front of him. He clapped his hands together before he rose to his feet. "This has been quite an exciting day. I suppose you'll want to get some sleep before classes tomorrow."

Snape walked Dumbledore over to the portal that led out into the school.

"Goodnight, Hermione," Dumbledore said. "I suggest you get to bed soon. Something tells me you'll have quite an exciting day tomorrow."

"Of course, sir," Hermione said. "Goodnight."

They shook hands before Dumbledore left and the portal closed up behind him.

Hermione was left alone with Snape.

Hermione had been alone with Snape before, but never as a part of his household. She supposed she was going to have to learn to adapt. She knew this was probably as

much of a shock for him as it had been for her, and she didn't know what to say or even if it was appropriate to say anything at all.

She nibbled at her food in silence and discovered how hungry she really was. She looked up and realized Snape was cutting into a slab of vanilla frosted chocolate cake. It was decorated with small blue rosettes.

"What?" Snape asked sharply as he returned her stare.

"It's just--" she began. "That's my wedding cake. It's all kind of strange."

"Do you want to help cut it?" Snape asked, frowning.

"No," she said testily. "I was just remarking that this was the last thing I was expecting when I went to bed last night."

"There was nothing else we could do," Snape said as he approached her and sat on the other side of the couch. "We tried to get you disqualified altogether."

"I understand this wasn't done lightly," said Hermione. "But I'm sure there must be some plan beyond the school year. There's only a month left until end of term, what will happen then?"

"We have several choices, but we'll know our assignment for certain soon," said Snape as he leaned over and shoved some of his cake onto her plate. "In the meantime, we kept you away from several unsavory elements."

"Mr. Ollivander is a Death Eater?" Hermione asked, shocked.

"Gads, no!" Snape exclaimed. "He's just a lecherous old man in need of an heir. Or two. Or a dozen."

Hermione shivered.

Crookshanks padded into the room and leapt on the couch between Snape and Hermione. Hermione stroked his fur and he purred happily. He walked over to the other side of the couch and butted his flat orange face into Snape's hand. Snape scratched him behind the ears.

"I have scrolls to grade, kitty," Snape said. "I cannot sit about and scratch you all evening."

Crookshanks purred louder and crawled onto Snape's lap.

"Is he always this distracting?" Snape asked, frowning at the content cat.

"It's easier if you don't let him onto your lap until after you're at your desk," said Hermione, shrugging. She reached over and picked up her cat. "I'll take him. I have a paper to write, anyway."

Snape rose to his feet as Hermione walked to her chambers.

"Good night," Hermione said as she walked into the stone archway.

It slowly began shrinking and the gilded frame began to reappear as the portrait started revealing itself. The black cat finally completed his yawn and stretched. It purred contentedly and settled on its pillow.

Snape turned to look at the table of food. The elves would have it cleared by the morning.

He *did* have papers to grade. Perhaps they didn't have to be done right away, but he needed a distraction and there was nothing wrong with getting ahead. He prepared a plate of food, enough to last an evening and started to head into his bedroom.

Snape glanced back at the cat portrait on the opposite wall. His wife was in there. He shook his body to ward off the chill he felt rising from the base of his spine.

One day at a time.

They had no other choice.

The Day After

Chapter 3 of 17

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Chapter 3: The Day After

Hermione woke in the morning and looked at the deep, blue fabric that made up the underside of her canopy. The curtains on her bed were pulled tightly closed, but a sliver of light seeped through on one side between curtain and canopy. The ripples of canopy pleating made her think of the ocean.

She wrinkled her nose. She smelled food. She wasn't sure *why* she smelled food.

She sniffed and there it was again: the distinct smell of bacon. She felt Crookshanks stir beside her and give a tiny morning mew.

She pulled back the heavy curtain of her bed to find a wooden tray set with a breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and pumpkin juice in a wooden goblet. A single pink rose lay on the tray beside her plate. Next to the rose was a pair of green knitted socks with the same pattern of knot work that was on her bathroom door panel. They actually looked wearable. Dobby was getting much better.

Hermione smiled as she reached for the tray. She would have to thank Dobby later for his thoughtfulness.

As she carefully pulled the tray to her lap, Crookshanks showed sudden interest and padded over.

"Shoo, Crookshanks," Hermione said, gently pushing his curious nose away from her bacon. She tossed a small piece on the floor and he followed it with a muffled thump onto the floor.

As Hermione ate, she wondered if breakfast in bed was going to be a normal occurrence now she was a teacher's wife.

No. That couldn't be right. The other teachers were always at breakfast and no one else had a spouse that resided at Hogwarts.

At least, not that she knew of.

She shook her head to clear it. She would have to speak to Dobby later, although having breakfast brought to her certainly did give her more time to prepare for the day.

She finished eating and rose out of bed with a mighty stretch. She slipped out of bed and padded over to a light blue wardrobe in her sock feet. She opened it and found her things had been arranged neatly within. The worn, brown leather trunk she packed for school was on the floor of the wardrobe, her shoes arranged on top of it.

After she dressed in her school robes, she brushed her hair and teeth before going back to her wardrobe. She reached in and pulled out a lightweight, black, school-approved cloak.

The dungeons were drafty, and although she found her new quarters quite cozy, she suspected the walk to the main body of the castle would be quite chilly. She was beginning to understand why Snape wore so many layers.

She grabbed her book bag and placed her hand on a plain pewter panel near the location of the portal leading out of her rooms. Unsurprisingly, the portal opened, and Hermione stepped out into the common room she now shared with Snape.

She was greeted by the sight of her husband's butt.

He was on all fours looking under the coffee table. It wasn't an altogether unpleasing sight, Hermione decided.

She stared for a moment before she remembered herself.

"Do you need help?" she asked inquisitively. She jumped as he banged his head on the underside of the table.

"I seem to have lost my favorite pen," Snape said, scowling as he rubbed his head.

"I have extra quills--" Hermione started as she began poking through her bag.

"I break quills," Snape interrupted, poking his hand under the couch. "This is a blown glass pen from Italy."

Crookshanks jumped on the couch with something that resembled a knitting needle in his mouth.

"Oh," said Snape, looking pleased. "Thank you." He took a green and black glass pen gently from Crookshanks.

Hermione snorted. "He probably stole it in the first place."

"Don't steal my pens." Snape shook a finger firmly at the cat in front of him.

Crookshanks sniffed the finger and began scratching himself on it.

"It's a lost cause, isn't it?" Snape asked with a deep sigh as he scratched the fluffy cat behind his ears.

"Probably," said Hermione, looking into her bag to make sure Crookshanks hadn't taken her quills as well. "Just keep it safe from now on."

"Naughty kitty," Snape said firmly, but continued scratching Crookshanks behind the ears. "By the way, the oddest thing happened this morning."

"What?" Hermione asked as she glanced at a clock on the wall. Plenty of time to check in with Ron and Harry before Herbology.

"My breakfast was ready and near my bed," Snape said with a quirk of an eyebrow. "And whoever put it there seems to think I need more creative footwear."

"Dobby," Hermione groaned. "I'll talk to him."

"Thank you," Snape said as he packed a small black satchel with papers. "I'll see you in class."

"Until then, Professor," Hermione said.

"Please call me Severus when we're not in class," Snape said quietly, looking in his bag. "If we want this to work, we have to be convincing. If the Ministry suspects we have a sham marriage, they can seize you and keep you in custody until your state appointed husband shows up for you. We need to act as if we are, at least, socially familiar."

"Well then," said Hermione slowly as she tried to fight back a chill over the idea of a state appointed husband. "Until then, Severus."

"Until then, Hermione."

-+ +-

Hermione approached Ron and Harry on the grassy hillside overlooking the Herbology greenhouses. Ron was practically hopping up and down with anxiety.

"He didn't do anything inappropriate," said Hermione in an annoyed tone. "Knock it off."

Ron let out a sigh of relief and she shot him a disgusted look. Harry grinned at her. They entered Greenhouse 5 and slipped on their work robes.

"Probably nice, having private quarters," Harry mused as he pulled a brown cap out of his things. He tried to flatten and pull his untamable hair back as much as he could before slipping it on.

"It's actually quite nice," said Hermione, rummaging through her bag for her dragon hide gloves. "Do you know Snape has the quarters Helga Hufflepuff built?"

"Wow," said Ron, suddenly interested. "She was supposed to *bereally* keen on enchantments."

Hermione nodded. "It's pretty impressive."

She described her room, complete with yawning cat and pewter panels for opening doors.

"I bet that's not even a tenth of it, Hermione," said Ron excitedly. "I'd poke everything you could in there."

"Well, that's a good idea," Harry laughed. "Go ahead, Hermione. Thousand-year-old enchantments. Don't know what they do. Go ahead, give it a poke!"

Hermione laughed as Ron turned pink.

"Thanks for the advice guys," Hermione said with a grin as Professor Sprout approached her station at the long table. "I'll be sure to keep it all in mind."

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"I'm so sorry, Hermione," said Lavender as Hermione approached the Gryffindor table at lunch. Lavender looked as if she were going to cry.

"For what?" Hermione asked, startled. She sat next to Lavender and put her hand on her back. "What's happened?"

"I mean... having to..." Lavender shuddered, looking at the teachers table.

Hermione glanced at the teacher's table and caught Snape's eye. He frowned sternly at the Gryffindor table. Hermione bit back a laugh.

"You know," Lavender whispered as she put an arm around Hermione and held her tight.

"He really isn't horrible," said Hermione with a sigh as she returned the hug. "Just... private. And has very few social skills."

Parvarti shrugged. "My grandparents' marriage was arranged. They learned to fancy each other after awhile."

"Really?" Lavender asked incredulously. "I couldn't imagine."

"Enough to have seven kids," Parvarti went on, reaching for a muffin. "You never know. They're still married."

Hermione bit into an apple. She didn't want to think of having grandchildren with Severus. Or children for that matter. That would mean they would have to...

"I hope he didn't force himself on you," said Lavender with a stern look.

"He was a perfect gentleman," said Hermione hotly.

"Of course he was," said Parvarti quickly. "He's civilized, after all."

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Severus sat at the Head Table watching the Gryffindors eating their lunch. The seventh-year girls seemed unusually animated. Hermione seemed to be handling the situation well, and it looked like Miss Patil was trying to diffuse things, thank God.

He looked at his plate and began pushing his food around.

Once again he was the subject of ridicule.

Nearly all the students, with the exception of a few pure-bloods, thought he was a pervert. Half the staff was being rather formal with him.

"It will pass, Severus," said a voice near his left ear as a hand fell on his shoulder. Snape turned his head to see Professor Dumbledore.

"I know," said Snape, pressing his lips together tightly. "It just seems to take longer every time."

"There is a Quidditch game this evening," Dumbledore said lightly as he clapped Snape on the back. "That will distract them a bit."

"Perhaps," said Severus thoughtfully. "But perhaps it's an opportunity to appear as normal as we possibly can."

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"Madam Snape, would you stay for a moment after class?" Severus said as seventh-year Potions ended.

So it was Madam Snape when they were in class, was it? Hermione was actually a little surprised that she was still allowed to be taught by her new husband. Perhaps it was because she already had a history of being the second best Potions student in the school, bested only by Draco Malfoy.

Neville looked at Hermione as if he were truly sorry before gathering his things and leaving the classroom with the rest of the students. Hermione found herself alone with her husband.

"There's a Quidditch match tonight," Severus said in a low voice. He rustled through the scrolls that were spread over his desk. "You should accompany me in the staff box. It will help reinforce this ruse."

"Of course," Hermione said, letting out a breath of relief. She didn't know what she had been expecting, but it wasn't an invitation to a Quidditch match. "That would be nice."

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Hermione changed into heavier black robes and examined herself in the long mirror on the inside of the door of her wardrobe. She knew she'd be under scrutiny tonight, at least from the rest of the school if not a reporter or two looking for a story.

She pinned her hair up and arranged a gold and burgundy scarf over her head and around her neck. She pinned it in place with a small gold lion pin before she grabbed her black school cloak and walked into her receiving room to meet her husband.

Severus was sitting on the couch, small, pewter, half-moon spectacles perched on his nose. He was liberally marking scrolls with comments in green ink. Crookshanks was curled up next to him, purring deeply.

Both looked up as she walked into the room, Severus looking over the tops of his glasses at her.

"Think it might be a bit cold?" Severus asked, peering at her.

"Better safe than sorry," said Hermione stiffly. "It was quite breezy today." She looked at the pile of scrolls in front of him. "Are you even going to be able to go?"

"Yes." Severus sighed as he set his glass pen down. Crookshanks eyed it. "Sometimes it's like trying to push water uphill."

"What year?" Hermione asked as she walked to the table and picked up a scroll.

"Sixth," said Severus in a tired voice. He put his pen down and rubbed his eyes. "Properties of cardiospermum."

"Well this one is awful," said Hermione wrinkling her nose in distaste. "Did this one even bother to open his book?"

Severus snorted. "I think I should make them do it again, but twice as long." He rose to grab his cloak.

"What do you think that's going to solve?" Hermione asked, tossing the offending scroll back on the table. She fought back the urge to wipe her hand on her cloak.

"What?" Severus asked sharply. He threw his heavy black cloak over his shoulders.

"It's not going to do any good to have terrible essays twice as long," Hermione said, looking in disgust at the pile of scrolls. "Give them a project so they can really see it."

"Those are expensive ingredients to waste on blunt-witted fools," Severus said, reaching for a black knitted hat.

"So have a competent pair do it and have the rest of the class discuss and take notes," Hermione said.

"Perhaps," said Severus, pulling gloves on.

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"Where's Hermione?" Lavender asked Parvati as her eyes scanned the stands.

"Probably with Snape." Parvati shrugged as she tried to get a glimpse of Harry as the Gryffindor team took the field.

"She is!" Lavender squealed as she spotted Hermione in the staff box. "I don't know how she can stand it!"

"It could have been a lot worse," said Parvati. She nodded toward the Slytherin stands where Goyle was openly glowering at the staff box.

"I guess you're right," Lavender said with a shiver. "Somehow I doubt her other suitors would be as gentlemanly as she claims Snape is." She shook her head resignedly. "Whoever would have thought it?"

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Hermione watched in comfort as Ravenclaw and Gryffindor took the field. The wind had picked up, and she and Severus were the only ones besides Dumbledore that weren't shivering in the chill air.

"Good call," Severus said under his breath as he did a tricky little charm that warmed their seats before he reached under his cloak for a packet of crisps. He opened it and offered it to Hermione before taking a few for himself.

Severus looked up as the whistle blew. Ravenclaw scored almost immediately.

"Blast!" Hermione and Severus said in unison.

Hermione looked at Severus.

"I have a Galleon riding on this game," he admitted.

"You bet on Gryffindor?" Hermione asked with a quirk of her lips.

"Professor Sprout insisted Ravenclaw was going to sweep the game," sniffed Severus.

"So you bet her a Galleon Gryffindor would win?" Hermione asked, watching Ravenclaw score again.

"Yes," said Severus, visibly annoyed. "Damn."

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"Wow, Harry," Hermione said to Harry in the Gryffindor common room.

Harry just shook his head. Catching the Snitch hadn't even mattered. At that point they just wanted the game to end so they could hide in their common room.

"Where did they find her?" Ron asked blankly. He was still wearing his uniform, and he kept turning his helmet over and over in his hands.

"She's a second year," said Dean Thomas dully. "She wouldn't have even been there if Owens hadn't gotten injured in the last game."

"She'll be a permanent team member for sure after this," said Seamus sadly. He was tearing apart a paper napkin into tiny pieces.

No one was eating the food they had prepared for the victory party that wasn't.

"Are you OK, Hermione?" asked Neville under his breath as the other boys discussed how to destroy Ravenclaw in the last game of the season. He had slipped into the empty spot next to her on the couch in front of the fireplace.

"I'm alright," said Hermione giving him a small smile and a pat on his leg. "He isn't unkind, you know."

"That's good," said Neville. "You know, you can petition for an annulment after 6 months if you want. As long as you don't get pregnant." His face turned red.

"But then I'm open for bids again," said Hermione as she shook her head. "That might end up worse."

"True," admitted Neville quickly. "But by then most of us will be over age and we can petition for you. At least a few of us are bound to get through."

"Thank you, Neville," Hermione said sincerely. "I'll keep it in mind."

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"How was the condolence party?" Severus asked, smirking as Hermione returned to their chambers.

Galleon or no, he was still cheerful when Harry was miserable.

"Pretty normal," shrugged Hermione, plunking herself on the couch next to Severus. She noted he had put the scrolls away and he was reading a textbook. "The Weasleys stole food from the kitchen and the team went over new theories until everyone else went to bed."

"Pathetic," Severus said cheerfully as he closed the book and placed it in the bag he packed for his classes.

Crookshanks jumped on the couch between Hermione and Severus and began purring.

"Is he usually this demanding?" Severus asked, scratching him behind his ears. Crookshanks purred deeper and leaned into Severus' hand.

"He usually has a common room full of people to sucker into petting him," Hermione said, shrugging.

"You have gotten spoiled," Severus said to the cat.

Crookshanks gave a tiny squeak of agreement and butted Severus with his head.

"Well, at least you know." Severus shook his head and tried to hide a small smile.

Hermione watched as her long-haired, orange cat walked over the deep black fabric of her husband's clothing, leaving a trail of hair as he went. Severus didn't seem to notice.

"I was thinking," Severus said slowly as Crookshanks settled down in his lap. "Summer will be starting soon and your schooling will be completed. Do you plan on starting a Ministry internship right away?"

"I had thought about taking the summer off," Hermione admitted as she watched Severus idly stroke Crookshanks. "I know it seems silly, but I thought travel would be good for me for a few months. Maybe I can come up with a clear career plan." She blushed slightly. "I don't know if I really want to be working for the Ministry right now."

Severus was inwardly pleased.

If he had to be attached to a student at least he got a sensible one. She was listening to him, even if she came to her own conclusions. She had not had one burst of hysteria, even though he thought it would naturally occur. She had not shied away from him at their wedding, or in their household for that matter. She would make a fine addition to the Order. She seemed to hold up well under duress, Severus concluded.

Yes, of all the students he could be saddled with, she was the best choice, especially with things heating up for the Order.

Voldemort was in seclusion again.

He had been severely weakened and had lost most of his followers, but still he lived, like an annoying germ. He was rumored to be hiding in Siberia, but few were brave enough to go searching for him.

Dumbledore was insisting they strike while the iron was hot, and that involved using some unconventional sources for assistance. Severus could use all the help he could get in that respect. Hermione was the best new recruit for the job, and being legally bound to her would help them avoid all sorts of uncomfortable questions while traveling abroad.

"I'm going east to do some work for the Order this summer," Severus said as he scratched Crookshanks, who was now settled in a large, upside down, orange puddle on his lap. "You certainly are of age, and by then you will be out of school. You are joining the Order?"

He already knew the answer, but if she knew how much of her future had already been plotted out, she might not be as compliant.

"Of course," Hermione said sitting up straighter. Severus tried not to shake his head at her obvious Gryffindor bravery and pride. The young were always ready to fling themselves in harm's way. He inwardly frowned. He'd have to keep that in mind. The last thing he needed was a liability.

"Will you be willing to assist me?" Severus asked, finally looking up from Crookshanks.

"Yes. Where will we be going?" Hermione asked, reaching out to pet Crookshanks.

"St. Petersburg, for starters," said Severus, surprised that she was so totally agreeable. "I don't know where our information will lead us from there. Perhaps nowhere."

"I will be up for the task," said Hermione said proudly.

A little too proudly, in Severus' opinion. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"And I will do my best," she continued, oblivious to Severus' reaction.

"I'm sure you will," said Severus.

He just hoped he wouldn't be returning her corpse back to her parents anytime soon.

The Order Meeting

Chapter 4 of 17

After a new law reduces witches to chattel, Hermione Granger finds herself married to Severus Snape in order to keep her from the Death Eaters.
Hermione begins to shadow Severus in his work with the Order. They begin to form a mutual respect and love for each other after Hermione works as negotiator to a matriarchal secret society, the Amazons.
Severus stations them in Russia, where his family has a home, and his cousin is active in patriarchal secret society, the Mystic Brotherhood, who has been at odds with the Amazons for years.
After the Final Battle is fought, one would think the Order would be done with its work, but after Harry is scarred forever, Hermione is given a holy artifact, and a mysterious string of Muggle murders catches the attention of the Ministry, it seems as if their work is just beginning...

"Severus," Molly Weasley asked him in a low, threatening voice. "Are you insane?"

Her expression was nearly as fiery as her hair color.

Severus lowered his eyebrows at her. He clenched a large mug of hot cocoa in his left hand. He looked at Dumbledore, who was sipping at his own mug of cocoa and pointedly trying to ignore Severus.

The heavy wooden table in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place was crowded, but all seemed to be avoiding his gaze.

Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Fred and George Weasley flanked one of the long wooden benches. Remus Lupin, Sturgis Podmore, Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Mrs. Longbottom sat on the other side. Severus was leaning in a doorway, somewhat separate from the others.

"Yes, Molly," Severus said, annoyed. "I've gone insane. I thought it would do for a nice change."

Charlie snorted cocoa out his nose and Bill had to pound him on the back.

"She's never done field work, and she's not even initiated yet," snapped Molly as she banged a round tin of biscuits on the table.

"She's the best person for the job," said Lupin as he reached for a biscuit. "Her researching skills go beyond normal standards." He threw a bitter look at Snape.

"I'm going to have to agree," Arthur said reluctantly to his wife, oblivious to the moment between Snape and Lupin.

Molly turned her eyes to Dumbledore, who set his mug down thoughtfully.

"Molly, it's just research," said Dumbledore in a tired voice. "They're not going to go prowling around looking for Voldemort. And I do have to agree. Miss Granger is the best person for any research project."

"Madam Snape, you mean," said Molly, rolling her eyes at Severus.

"I am not having this conversation," said Severus, looking levelly at her.

"Oh, stop it, Molly. It was done because it had to be," said Arthur in a tired voice. "Unless you think Percy should have broken off his engagement to do it. He very nearly did, you know."

"No, of course not," said Molly as she wrung her hands. "Then we'd just have to figure out how to get Cassie. There's no way her family could afford a bribe. We just scraped by for Ginny."

Percy had finally reconciled with his family.

There had been a tearful session between Molly and him, and in the end he had joined the Order, although he still worked for the Ministry in the Department of Matrimonial Destiny. He had notified Dumbledore the second Hermione's name appeared in the Book of Brides.

It had also allowed him to petition for the girl he had been seeing, and his own wedding to Cassie Jackson was arranged for the end of July.

Molly shook her head, her red curls brushing her shoulders. "I just don't think it's right to have to do this so soon. Hermione's still in school."

"At least he could keep her there," said Mrs. Longbottom, frowning deeply. The stuffed vulture on her hat bobbed in time with her nodding. "Someone else might have decided her education was over and pulled her enrollment."

Molly sighed resignedly. "It just seems like she's so young."

"Think of it this way," Arthur said, smiling. "When you were her age, you were a year away from starting this brood." He smiled at his sons.

"Heaven forbid," said Molly throwing a warning look at Severus.

Severus gave Arthur a look.

"I don't make it a habit to molest my students," Severus said coldly.

"She won't be your student for long, mate," said Fred, or George. "She's turned into a right piece."

"George!" said Molly, appalled.

Mrs. Longbottom stared at him in shock. Tonks began to giggle uncontrollably, as did the other Weasleys. Dumbledore just rolled his eyes and sipped at his cocoa.

"Oh my God, that was rude," said Bill laughing, his hand slapped to his forehead.

"It's true," said George or Fred in an annoyed tone. Kingsley shook his head in amazement that the boy had said what the others were thinking.

Hermione still had her bushy hair, but she had a pretty face, a lean body, a sharp mind, and it was true: Hermione wouldn't be Severus' student much longer.

"As much as I hate to say it," Severus sneered. "Your sibling is right. That was terribly rude."

"Sorry," said George or Fred, poking Fred or George, who was not looking very sorry at all. They both snickered.

Their mother glared at them.

-+ +-

"How did the meeting go?" Hermione asked conversationally as Severus walked through the green flames of the Floo into their quarters.

She looked up from the textbook she had been reading and watched him. She was wearing blue plaid flannel pajamas and white socks. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but its curls still wined their way over her shoulders.

"Molly was not overly enthusiastic about you going to St. Petersburg with me," said Severus as he unwound a long black scarf from around his neck. He tried desperately not to rake her over with his eyes, thinking of George's words.

Severus brought a plain brown paper package tied with twine from under his robes and set it on the table in front of the couch.

"I can imagine," said Hermione, wincing as she imagined Molly's protestations. "I hope she didn't get... emotional."

"The Order decided as a whole that you are the best person for research assignments," said Severus simply. "So what Molly thinks really isn't important."

Hermione nodded slowly. They had *all* felt that she was the best researcher the Order had to offer? *All* of them?

Her eyes fell on the package Severus had put on the table. "What's that?" Hermione asked curiously, then suddenly wished she had not when Severus looked at her sharply.

He seemed to be sizing her up before he gruffly said: "Potion ingredients. For the sixth years."

"Oh, I see."

Hermione tried not to smirk as she quickly turned her attention back to her reading.

A Hogsmede Surprise

Chapter 5 of 17

After a new law reduces witches to chattel, Hermione Granger finds herself married to Severus Snape in order to keep her from the Death Eaters. Hermione begins to shadow Severus in his work with the Order. They begin to form a mutual respect and love for each other after Hermione works as negotiator to a matriarchal secret society, the Amazons. Severus stations them in Russia, where his family has a home, and his cousin is active in patriarchal secret society, the Mystic Brotherhood, who has been at odds with the Amazons for years. After the Final Battle is fought, one would think the Order would be done with its work, but after Harry is scarred forever, Hermione is given a holy artifact, and a mysterious string of Muggle murders catches the attention of the Ministry, it seems as if their work is just beginning...

Chapter 5: A Hogsmede Surprise

Hermione woke late Saturday morning to the smell of bacon. She shook her head and pulled her bed curtain back.

The wispy white drapes that decorated her window were already pulled back, and cheerful sunlight spilled into the room. A breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, and pumpkin juice were sitting on a small lap table next to the bed. A scroll tied with a silver ribbon sat next to her breakfast.

Hermione levitated the tray with a wave of her wand. She now kept it in a small red pouch tied to one of the posts of her bed. Crookshanks sniffed at the tray momentarily before Hermione shooed him away.

She took a sip of pumpkin juice and reached for the scroll.

Hermione,

I was going to make an excursion to Hogsmede today to replenish supplies not available to me last night. You might find it in your interest to join me.

Severus

Hermione shrugged and looked at a clock sitting on a small table near her bed. It was almost eleven o'clock. She wondered when he planned on leaving. She quickly ate her late breakfast and went into her bathroom.

She submerged herself into her tub and began washing her hair. She spent some time soaking in luxurious privacy before she rose and dried off before covering her body in sweet scented lotion.

Her hair was twisted up in a towel and she was choosing her clothing for the day when there was a soft knock at her door.

"*Emicoatus*," she called out, hoping the word would work as well as the pressure panel.

Severus walked into her chambers and looked at her.

Hermione's hair was bound and hidden within a white fluffy towel. Her cheeks were flushed pink from her bath and her eyes were shining. Her white, terry cloth robe stopped mid-calf and her legs and feet were bare.

Severus was instantly reminded of young Weasley's comment earlier, but quickly pushed it from his mind. He swallowed hard.

"You got my scroll?" Severus said hesitantly.

"I'm almost ready to go," said Hermione. "I just need to get dressed."

"I wasn't planning to go until after lunch," said Severus, frowning. He was surprised she was ready to go so soon.

Crookshanks jumped off the bed and began winding his way around Severus' legs. He purred loudly.

"I don't think so," Severus said sternly to the cat. "You get to stay here."

Crookshanks seemed to understand Severus. He stalked off, seemingly annoyed.

"I'll be ready when you are," Hermione said.

Severus gave her a sharp nod and left her chambers.

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"It's not even a Hogsmede weekend!" complained Ron. He consoled himself with taking a second helping of apple crisp.

"I know," said Hermione, trying not to beam. She hadn't been hungry, but had climbed up to the Great Hall for lunch so she could talk to her friends before going to Hogsmode.

"Bring us back sweets," said Harry with a grin.

"I will," promised Hermione.

"And the new book on Bulgarian Defense Strategies," said Ron, fishing in his robes for money.

"Never thought you'd ask me to pick up a book for you," Hermione said, pocketing his coins.

"Pygmy Puff Treats for Arnold!" Ginny added excitedly as she passed Hermione a few coins of her own. Hermione nodded and grinned.

"We'll need that book to win the cup from Ravenclaw," said Ron to Harry, shrugging.

"Just have a good time," Harry said to Hermione, ignoring Ron.

"I'm sure I will," said Hermione, smiling.

-+ +-

Hermione walked through the door Severus was holding open for her and looked around at the contents of Flourish and Blotts' bookstore. She quickly selected the book Ron had asked her to get for him from a display of books on Quidditch.

"What on Earth is that for?" Severus asked, eyebrows furrowed. "You cheer on your friends, certainly, but I got the distinct impression flying and sports weren't strong points of yours."

"It's for Ron and Harry," Hermione said hotly.

Severus snorted. "It's going to take more than that to beat Ravenclaw."

"What makes you say that?" Hermione asked, picking up a book about Egyptian Hexes.

"Connie Watkins' grandfather used to be the coach for the Hornets," said Severus bitterly. "I looked into her family after the game."

"Well, let them think they have a chance," said Hermione, shrugging. "It's better than hearing them whine about it. Is Connie the replacement girl?"

"Yes," said Severus picking up a book of Russian history and tucking it under his arm.

"Hello, Severus," a smooth voice said behind them. Hermione and Severus turned to see Lucius Malfoy standing behind them. "And Madam Snape, what a delightful surprise."

"Lucius," said Snape, nodding curtly at him.

Hermione felt her lip curl, and she tried to force her face into a more neutral expression.

"Congratulations on your marriage," said Malfoy smoothly. "I would have congratulated you sooner, of course, had you decided to stay at your own reception long enough to receive your guests, but I suppose you had to run." Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "How *like* you Severus."

"I thought a couple was allowed a bit of privacy on their wedding night," Hermione snapped.

Lucius looked at Hermione with mild surprise.

To his horror, Severus felt his cheeks going pink.

"It seems I may have misjudged you," Malfoy said to Severus with a raised eyebrow and a sneer. "It only makes sense you would retire early. It was a school night, after all."

Hermione felt her cheeks flame with anger. She tasted copper as she bit her tongue to stay silent.

"*Arachne sprechen!*" Snape snapped his wand out of the sleeve of his robes and pointed it at Malfoy.

Lucius pulled his wand and opened his mouth to speak a spell of his own, Hermione suspected, but instead a cascade of spiders fell out of his mouth.

They scabbled over his waistcoat and down the front of his trousers. He leaped back in surprise, then glared at Severus.

"Watch your tongue when you're in the presence of a lady," said Severus in a low dangerous tone.

Lucius glared at the pair of them for a moment before he stalked off.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, trying not to look as giddy as she felt.

"It will wear off in a few hours," said Severus, apparently satisfied. "Until then, he won't be able to speak ill of anyone."

"That could be a handy little spell," Hermione mused to herself, trying to recall the movements he made with his wand when he uttered the incantation.

"Don't even *think* about it," Severus warned sharply. His voice dipped down low, and he stepped closer to her so no one could overhear him. "I won't hesitate to take house points from you, even if we are to appear to be familiar."

"Yes, sir," Hermione squeaked.

She'd just have to teach Ginny and let nature take its course.

-+ +-

"Wow," said Harry, impressed. "That would have been something to see!"

Harry was sitting in an overstuffed chair in the Gryffindor common room. Ron and Hermione were sitting in chairs nearby. There was an assortment of sweets spread in front of them on a low table.

"Do you remember how to do it?" Ron asked excitedly.

"No," Hermione lied. "It happened too quickly."

"Oh, hey!" She grabbed her new backpack: a sturdy, black bag with reinforced straps and large silver buckles. She reached into it, past beyond where her hand should have stopped. "I got your book."

"Where'd you get the bag?" Ron asked abruptly.

"Severus got it for me in Hogsmeade," said Hermione, handing Ron the Quidditch book he had asked for.

"Severus?" asked Ron sharply. "Getting a bit *chummy*, are we?"

"Ron," warned Harry.

"It's just a question," Ron snapped.

"Whether we like it or not, this marriage may last awhile," said Hermione quietly as she rustled through her bag of sweets. "This really is the sensible thing to do."

Ron was silent while he thought for a moment.

"Are you going to petition for an annulment in six months?" Ron asked.

"Probably not," Hermione said. Ron looked at her in shock.

"Oh, come on, Ron," Hermione said exasperatedly. "What if I got put in the hands of a Death Eater? By that time I'll be in the Order."

"One of us can petition for you," said Ron, meaning *any* of the Gryffindor boys.

"That doesn't mean anything," said Hermione quietly. "Percy pulled some strings so I'd get a choice this time, but there's no guarantee I'll get a choice next time. They could place me with anyone."

"She's right, Ron," said Harry as Ron opened his mouth to protest.

Ron closed his mouth and shook his head. He threw an unopened Chocolate Frog back on the table and retreated up the stairs to the boys' dorm.

"It's a bit difficult for him," said Harry apologetically.

"I know," said Hermione. "But it's not that easy on me either."

"I know," said Harry, getting up and putting an arm around her. "Probably isn't all that easy on old Snape, either," he added as an afterthought.

"He's been very generous," said Hermione, wiping tears away before they fell. "I have the coolest bathroom in the world."

Harry laughed. "Well, I'll have to see it sometime. Just make sure he's in class so I don't get punished for traipsing through a teachers quarters."

"OK," said Hermione squeezing him back. "I just wish Ron would stop punishing me for not suffering enough. It's like he wants me to be completely miserable because I didn't end up paired off with him."

Harry rose and went back to his chair. "I don't know what to tell you. He'll eventually have to get over it, but I'll try to talk to him."

Hermione nodded in agreement, but suddenly felt very tired. She said her goodbyes and made her way back down to the dungeons.

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When Hermione got back to her quarters, she found Severus asleep on the couch under a pile of scrolls and an orange pile of hair.

Hermione smiled and whistled softly. Crookshanks popped his head out of the pile and yawned widely.

"Bed, Crookshanks," Hermione whispered.

As the large ginger cat rose to his feet, a few scrolls fluttered to the floor.

Hermione cringed, but Severus didn't wake.

She waved her wand at him and the scrolls gathered themselves up and settled into a neat pile on the coffee table. She approached his chambers and stared down the door.

She had never seen the inside of his personal area, and decided she didn't want to challenge any wards he could have on the door.

She covered Severus with a grey blanket she spotted on the large chair that sat in front of the large window overlooking the lake.

He shifted slightly as the blanket settled on him, but stopped moving in a moment. His head tilted back and a lock of raven hair lay across his forehead. His face was relaxed in sleep and Hermione stopped for a moment to look at him.

Severus was her husband.

What was that even supposed to mean to her?

He wasn't unattractive, he was intelligent, and it could have been far worse as far as partners went.

She had enjoyed their day together. They had browsed bookstores and potion ingredient shops. She hadn't seen Severus pay for anything, but watched him sign off invoices wherever they made a purchase. Maybe it was a form of Wizarding credit she didn't know about.

She realized she was staring at him and finally tiptoed into her chambers to sleep with Crookshanks.

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Hermione woke to a loud tapping at her window. She opened her eyes and went to her window to see a large eagle owl perched on the head of the gargoyle outside of her window. He was tethered to a fairly large package that, for certain, was under a hovering charm. He had a tube strapped to his back with clips.

Hermione opened the window, looking at him with confused expression as he flew in and dropped his delivery on her unmade bed before soaring to the ceiling and settling on a perch she had not noticed before.

"Are you lost, pretty boy?" she asked as she reached out for the invoice attached to the package:

To: Madam Snape

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Kethol's Book of Experimental Fungi

Hillard's Justification of Dark Arts in Modern Day

A Biography of Merlin

Ulf the Amazing Explains Advanced Rune Work

Percival's Examination of Titanium

1 bookmark

Paid In Full: Snape Estate

Hermione paled as she looked at the stack of books in front of her.

The fungi book alone was 50 Galleons. The *Biography of Merlin* was 'price upon request.'

She looked at the eagle owl, who was purring contentedly. He seemed to be going nowhere.

"Did Severus buy these?" Hermione stared in confusion.

The owl hooted sharply and puffed his feathers out.

"Well then," she said, slightly taken aback. Where had they come from?

Hermione looked at Crookshanks who was staring at the owl intently.

"Crookshanks?" Hermione said in a wavering voice. Crookshanks didn't move.

Hermione decided it was best to get help.

She opened the door to her chambers and walked into the common area she shared with Severus.

It was empty.

She tentatively walked to Severus' door and knocked quietly. When she got no response, she knocked a little more firmly.

Hermione was about to knock a third time when she heard a soft scraping behind the door and it opened.

"Bit early, isn't it?" asked Severus sleepily, wiping his face with his hand. He was still wearing his clothing from last night, although he was rumpled and he needed a shave. He took in the sight of her in her white cotton nightgown and blinked hard.

"Tell that to the owl in my bedroom," said Hermione, shrugging. "Did you order any books?"

"What?" asked Severus, peering over her shoulder with eyes not yet adjusted to the light, as if he could see into her rooms from where he was. Hermione stepped out of his way as he walked past her and into her rooms.

His eyes first fell on the opened package on the bed.

"Is this what it brought?" asked Severus, frowning slightly. He picked up the invoice and groaned.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Obviously there's been a mistake."

"There's been no mistake," said Severus sullenly. His eyes wandered the room and fell on the owl near the ceiling. His eyes narrowed.

"Good morning, father," he sighed resignedly.

Sunday Morning

Chapter 6 of 17

After a new law reduces witches to chattel, Hermione Granger finds herself married to Severus Snape in order to keep her from the Death Eaters.

Hermione begins to shadow Severus in his work with the Order. They begin to form a mutual respect and love for each other after Hermione works as negotiator to a matriarchal secret society, the Amazons.

Severus stations them in Russia, where his family has a home, and his cousin is active in patriarchal secret society, the Mystic Brotherhood, who has been at odds with the Amazons for years.

After the Final Battle is fought, one would think the Order would be done with its work, but after Harry is scarred forever, Hermione is given a holy artifact, and a mysterious string of Muggle murders catches the attention of the Ministry, it seems as if their work is just beginning...

The eagle owl on the perch near the ceiling swooped down and transformed into a naked, tall, stocky wizard with coarse silver hair.

Everywhere.

Crookshanks meowed loudly and the man reached out to scratch his head. Crookshanks purred deeply.

Hermione tried not to stare at the Animagus. She knew a lot of older wizards preferred transforming in the buff.

"You would have thought you would have at least invited us to the wedding." The older man sniffed as he drew a wand from the small tube that had been clipped to him in owl form and Transfigured a throw pillow into a black robe. "See what lengths I have to go to, just to give my daughter-in-law her wedding present." He pulled the robe on and tied it casually.

Hermione studied the similarities between the men.

They had the same nose, but where Severus had a finely boned face, his father had a wide expanse of brow and cheek.

"How did you know?" Hermione asked in a disbelieving tone as she reached out to caress a volume. Crookshanks had plopped down near the books and was laying on his back purring.

"I followed you around the bookstore," said Severus' father simply. "You didn't want to put those down."

"Do you have any sense of decency?" Severus asked in an appalled tone. "Stalking a poor girl around a book store. What is wrong with you?"

"My daughter-in-law, I might add," said Severus' father, ignoring the jibe and pulling himself up to his full height, about an inch taller than Severus. "Whom I have never gotten to meet, although we share the same name."

"Aren't you being a little dramatic?" asked Severus with an annoyed look as he crossed his arms.

A small house-elf appeared in the doorway, balancing a tray of breakfast in one hand.

"Oh!" squeaked Dobby, surprised. "I will get breakfast for company. Pardons sirs and miss." He scrambled backwards out of the room before anyone else could say another word.

"No, I don't think so," said Severus' father, ignoring the elf, as he also crossed his arms and glared at Severus.

"Thank you so much," said Hermione softly, interrupting them. "This is an incredible gift." She was stroking the heavy leather cover of Merlin's Biography lovingly.

"Well, at least one of you has manners," snorted Severus' father stubbornly as he took one of the seats at Hermione's little table.

Breakfast plates began appearing on the table, and Hermione took a seat near her father-in-law, trying to sit primly in her white night gown.

"I am Jacob Snape, head of the Snape family, and father to this pain in the arse," said Jacob Snape as he reached out for a piece of toast and some marmalade to spread on it.

Hermione tried to stifle a giggle.

"And you are Hermione Snape, formerly Granger. A top student at this school with promise to go far. An incident with a Time Turner made you above the age of consent before graduation, which allowed my son to marry you legally, if not ethically." Jacob quirked an eyebrow at his son as he took a bite of his toast.

"Dear Lord," Severus snorted as he took a seat across from his father.

Jacob narrowed his eyes, but ignored his son's outburst. "My son petitioned for your custody as soon as you were available. Out of three candidates, you chose my son, although I'm bewildered as to why."

"He was the best choice," said Hermione simply, and before another sound could leave Severus, she shoved a small muffin in his open mouth.

He glared at her, but said nothing as he chewed. To her credit, they were *very* good muffins. Did that damn elf make special ones just for her?

"Obviously," Jacob chuckled, patting Hermione's hand with a slightly sticky hand.

Severus lowered his eyebrows at them, but there was nothing he could do with a mouthful of food.

"It isn't that you finally got married," sighed Jacob, turning his eyes to his son. "Obviously this young lady was the intelligent choice, and it's obvious to all you fancy each other. Especially after that gallant defense of her tender sensibilities with that rather rude fellow in the bookstore."

Severus choked on his muffin. Hermione pounded him on the back.

"But did you *have* to petition for her?" Jacob reached out for a piece of sausage and inspected it before popping it into his mouth. "Your mother is having fits! Couldn't you have eloped like a normal person?"

Severus only coughed harder, and Hermione reached out for a white ceramic teapot and poured him a cup. She fought back the mad urge to giggle.

"It seemed to be our best choice to do things through the proper channels," Hermione said to Jacob as she handed the tea to Severus and patted him firmly on the back.

"Well, you must come visit us in our French estate during the summer," said Jacob aside to Hermione. "Anastasia would love to see the both of you!"

"I was planning on the Russian estate," said Severus hoarsely as he finally cleared his throat. "Hermione's never been to Russia."

"Well," said Jacob stiffly, his smile frozen on his face. "We'll have to visit you, then."

"We'll be looking forward to it," said Hermione quickly before Severus could say anything. There was something going on here, and she didn't want to deal with it without being prepared.

"Now about your family, dear," Jacob said turning to Hermione. "I tried to look your family up, but they don't seem to be local. Where are they from?"

Hermione's cheeks flamed red and she looked at Severus.

"She's Muggle-born," said Severus flatly.

"Oh," said Jacob, sitting back in his chair. He seemed to be a bit taken aback. "I see. Well. You're still top in your class?"

Hermione nodded silently, thinking it best to keep quiet. She wanted to defend her intelligence and ability to learn, but she couldn't afford to make any mistakes that could

cost the Order.

"Well, can't blame a person for their parentage," said Jacob, glancing at Severus with an unreadable look. "Your Great-Great-Great Uncle Johan was Muggle-born, and his line turned out just fine."

He smiled at Hermione, but looked her up and down, as if he were sizing up a prize cow.

Hermione tried to look cordial as she nibbled at a muffin. Inside she was fighting down a biting retort.

Severus looked at her quickly and then glared at his father.

"Well, at the very least," Jacob said, rising to his feet, "owl your mother. She's driving me mad."

"I will," Severus said glumly.

"You're not staying for breakfast?" Hermione asked as she stood.

"If I stay much longer, your new mother-in-law will come looking for me. I will not do that to Severus this early in the morning." Jacob's eyes twinkled.

"Oh, thank God," Severus mumbled under his breath.

Jacob put his wand back in the tube and snapped it around his wrist. His form seemed to bunch up as he transformed back into a large eagle owl, and the robe slumped to the ground as he glided towards Hermione's window.

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Jacob Snape, in his eagle owl form, soared in the window of the den in his Oxford estate, and he transformed mid air, his bare feet stumbling slightly on the thick Oriental rug.

Flaming red silk robes lay on a polished mahogany chair near the window.

He took his own dark, blue brocade robes off the polished brass bird perch where they had been hanging and pulled them on. He slipped on black carpet slippers before padding over to a gold rope in one corner of his den and pulling it. A bell sounded in the distance.

He went over to his desk and saw his reflection in the polished ebony and smiled. The newest generation of house-elves were excellent this year.

He sat in his ancient chair behind the desk and heard the black leather crinkle as it adjusted to his weight. He pulled a scroll out of one of the drawers of the desk and began reading.

After he had read a few lines, a raven swooped in the open window. Jacob watched as the raven transformed into a beautiful, nude witch with long black hair and creamy pale skin. Jacob's gaze swept over her as she reached for the red robes.

"Well?" she barked impatiently in a thick Russian accent. She pulled the robes on and slid into red slippers that had been under the chair.

"You look as beautiful as the day I married you, Anastasia. Bravo!" Jacob smiled as he went back to his scroll. It was almost too easy to get a rise out of her.

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" She stormed over to the desk and snatched the scroll out of his hands. "And no work on the weekends."

Jacob sighed resignedly as she pouted at him, and he folded his hands on the desk.

"They seem to be happy," Jacob said as he watched her fumble with a few decorative hair baubles that had been lying on a small table tucked between bookshelves. "They have separate bedrooms for now. I think he is keeping it as professional as possible until she graduates."

"How chivalrous!" Anastasia beamed proudly, coiling and pinning her hair around the crown of her head. "He always was a little gentleman."

"I think you have a selective memory, my dear," said Jacob, pointing his chin down and looking at her with a cocked eyebrow.

"Yes, yes," she said dismissively, waving a hand at him. "What is the girl like?"

"Polite," said Jacob. He thought for a moment. "Pretty. Has hair like your cousin Lillith."

Anastasia snorted.

"She loved the books. Acted like I bestowed jewels on her."

"Jewels of knowledge are more precious than jewels from the earth," Anastasia said simply as she gave her hair a final pat and reached for a silver belt slung over the back of a chair.

"Indeed," Jacob said, smiling slightly at her. "She can head him off before his mouth goes into light speed. It's a miracle if I've ever seen one."

"Intelligent," said Anastasia, impressed. "And quick, I can imagine. When do I get to meet the girl? What of her family?"

Jacob rubbed his forehead and waved his wand at a silver tea service on a cart across the room. It clattered over, and the pot started steaming.

"Should I sit down for this?" Anastasia asked, reaching for two cups.

"I don't think it's *that* serious in today's age," said Jacob unsteadily. "She's a Mudblood."

"That's not polite talk nowadays, my dear," Anastasia chided as she poured tea in both cups. "What of her parents? Are they living? How do they feel about this? What is their social position in the Muggle world?"

"I forgot to ask," Jacob said, taking the cup of black tea from his wife. "I was a bit shocked."

"I can imagine," said Anastasia, putting sugar and milk in her tea. "Considering Severus' past."

"Well, pure blood or not, they seem to have raised a clever, intelligent daughter," said Jacob, sighing. "It's not like we can change it now. Perhaps they'll be tolerable people."

"My great-great-grandmother always said she enjoyed spending time with Johan's mother," said Anastasia, shrugging and making a face.

"Perhaps it won't be that bad," said Jacob, nodding firmly.

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"I apologize for my father," Severus said stiffly as he reached for a plate of sausage. "He forgets his manners frequently."

"It should have been expected," said Hermione as she tossed a small piece of bacon to Crookshanks.

"It was still rude," said Severus, shaking his head. "What if you slept in the altogether?"

"I've spent the last seven years sharing a room," Hermione scoffed at him. "What are the chances?"

Severus gave her a quizzical look and suddenly she knew more about Slytherin modesty than she ever wanted to.

"I can't believe your father did this," Hermione said, changing the subject and wiping her fingers on a cloth napkin. She reached out for one of the more common books sitting on her bed.

She opened *Percival's Examination of Titanium* and a bookmark fell out. It clinked lightly as it hit the stone floor and shimmered like a rainbow in the morning light. The tassel seemed to be woven from miniscule strands of silver. Sapphire chips set in the titanium shaped a decorative 'H.'

"Good lord," Hermione exclaimed and her fingers fluttered to her mouth.

"He tends to overdo things," Severus said, embarrassed.

"I'll owl your mother later and thank her," said Hermione. "The card did say it was from the... estate?"

"That would be appropriate," said Severus quickly. "If we are being watched, it looks as if we're leading a normal life. Also, my mother enjoys being coddled."

"I imagine most mothers-in-law do," mused Hermione as she picked up the bookmark and examined it.

Severus suddenly decided he should send flowers to Hermione's mother. Perhaps it would make her father less hostile.

Perhaps it would make him more hostile. Severus frowned.

Hermione tucked the light piece of metal back into the book and turned back to the table.

She looked mournful as she began eating. Her eyes kept straying towards the books.

"Do you really want to read them that badly?" Severus asked.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, blushing. "Normally I'd be opening them, but I'm afraid of getting anything on them."

Severus shook his head at her and gave her an admonishing look. He pulled his wand out and waved it at the pile of books.

The one on titanium rose in the air and came to a gentle stop in front of Hermione. With a flick of Severus' wrist, the book opened to page one.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Hermione murmured to herself as she began reading.

Severus sighed. At least he wouldn't have to worry about keeping her out of trouble for now.

Settling In

Chapter 7 of 17

After a new law reduces witches to chattel, Hermione Granger finds herself married to Severus Snape in order to keep her from the Death Eaters. Hermione begins to shadow Severus in his work with the Order. They begin to form a mutual respect and love for each other after Hermione works as negotiator to a matriarchal secret society, the Amazons. Severus stations them in Russia, where his family has a home, and his cousin is active in patriarchal secret society, the Mystic Brotherhood, who has been at odds with the Amazons for years. After the Final Battle is fought, one would think the Order would be done with its work, but after Harry is scarred forever, Hermione is given a holy artifact, and a mysterious string of Muggle murders catches the attention of the Ministry, it seems as if their work is just beginning...

Chapter Seven: Settling In

Severus stormed into his quarters Sunday afternoon to find Hermione sitting in the parlor, reading. Her legs were curled up underneath her in his overstuffed chair near the window. The curls in her hair cast off small glints of light as the sun caressed it.

He slammed a tray with a ham sandwich and a goblet of pumpkin juice on it on a table near her. The pumpkin juice sloshed over the sides of the goblet and pooled on the tray.

Hermione squeaked in surprise, but recovered enough to ask: "What's this?"

"You didn't eat lunch," Severus said stonily. He was trying to control an outburst bubbling under his skin. "Your absence was noticed. Mr. Potter and Weasley kept whispering to each other, and several young women in Gryffindor gave me some rather rude looks."

"I wasn't hungry," Hermione said sheepishly. She was torn between being afraid of him and laughing in his face.

She put her bookmark in her book and closed it.

"How would you know if you were hungry or not?" Severus asked with a sneer. "You haven't put that book down since breakfast. You need to eat."

"It's not like I'm putting out a lot of energy," Hermione argued as she placed the thick tome on the small table holding the tray with her lunch. "I ate a large breakfast and I

didn't notice the time."

"That's not healthy," insisted Severus with a frown. "You can easily exhaust yourself, and I see you doing that with ease. The Order needs its members in top condition."

Hermione's brows furrowed. "You're making that up! If that was true, Mundungus Fletcher would never have been recruited!"

Severus tightened his mouth. He didn't expect her to see through him so quickly.

"Be that as it may," Severus said loftily, "Fletcher will not be asked to do critical research and you will."

Hermione sighed. It was an excuse, of course, but if it was after lunch, she had been reading for hours without a break. He was standing stiffly before her: back rigidly straight and his arms folded tightly across his chest. His black eyes bored into her.

"Thank you," said Hermione as a small chill went up her spine. "You're right, of course. I'll go set things right after I eat."

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"There she is!" shouted Ron to Harry as they soared high above the Quidditch pitch.

Harry waved to Hermione and she waved back from her seat in the stands.

Harry and Ron soared to her and clattered to a stop as their heavy boots landed on the old wooden stands.

"Where have you been?" Ron demanded as he pulled his helmet off.

"Where have I been?" Hermione asked, laughing. "In my quarters with a book. Where else would I be?"

"Of course you were," Harry said, nudging Ron in the side. "It's Sunday. Where else would she be?"

"So, when do we get to see this place?" said Ron, slightly embarrassed, but still annoyed.

"Whenever you want," said Hermione with a wide smile. "You seem to know more about my quarters than I do."

Ron beamed for the first time since Hermione's marriage to Severus.

"We'll change and we can go now," Harry suggested reluctantly.

Hermione knew Harry wasn't looking forward to spending any time with Snape, but this would give Ron peace of mind and Harry was willing to suffer.

"Perfect." Hermione said with a sigh.

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Hermione opened the portal to the quarters she shared with Severus and stepped through with Harry and Ron.

Severus was sitting on the black couch in front of the fireplace reading scrolls, reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. He gave them an obligatory sneer.

Harry and Ron took in the large window with a view behind Severus, the comfortable chair and table beside the window, the picture with a purring, dozing cat on it.

The wall to the right had a heavy wooden door. A silver tea service and delicate porcelain cups and saucers sat on a cart near the door.

"Err... hello, Professor," said Harry, wondering if this was a good idea.

Ron stayed silent for a change.

Severus took his glasses off and put them in a small black case on the coffee table. "Come to check on Hermione?"

"Something like that," said Harry sheepishly before Ron could open his mouth.

"I expect you'll find everything in order," Severus sniffed as he began liberally marking a scroll in red ink.

Hermione shook her head at all of them. She walked over to the purring cat and whispered the password that opened the portal to her room.

"Incredible," Ron breathed as the portal opened.

Severus looked over at the backs of the trio and allowed himself a small smirk. They'd be occupied all afternoon and wouldn't be able to get up to too much trouble. They were old enough they weren't *too* irritating and they were in another room.

Babysitting them would no longer be such a tedious chore. At least he wouldn't have to chase them around and loom out of dark corners at the appropriate moments anymore.

"Nice colors," said Ron sarcastically as he took in all the blue. "Feel like a Ravenclaw these days?"

Crookshanks, who was sleeping on the bed, raised his head long enough to blink at the boys, then lowered it and sighed as he settled back into his nap.

"Blimey, Hermione! I'm coming over just to use the loo!" Harry's voice came out of the bathroom.

Hermione had taken to just leaving the door open since no one came into her quarters besides her.

Hermione shook her head as Ron walked wordlessly over to investigate. He wasn't going to make this easy.

"Wow," said Ron, impressed in spite of himself.

He tickled the frog faucet under the chin and a white liquid trickled from it.

"What's that?" said Harry with a surprised look on his face.

"What's what?" Hermione asked as she walked into the bathroom.

"Ron tickled the frog and the water changed to... whatever this is," Harry said pointing at the sink.

Hermione frowned and looked at the trickle of white fluid. She reached out to stick her hand in it, but Ron stopped her.

"You don't know what it is!" Ron exclaimed.

Hermione sighed, annoyed, and went back into her bedroom. She was back momentarily with a clear glass. She collected some of the substance and uttered the word carved on top of the faucet to stop it.

"We do have access to a Potions master," she said simply before turning to walk into the parlor.

"Severus?"

Severus turned and saw Hermione holding a cup of white fluid. Ron and Harry seemed shocked and appalled she had called him by his first name. He had to fight down a satisfied smirk in spite of himself.

"We were in the bathroom, and when Ron tickled the frog, this came out instead of water," Hermione explained. "Could you tell us what it is?"

"What?!" Severus exclaimed, looking alarmed. He laid the scroll he was reading on the coffee table in front of him and quickly got to his feet.

"What made you tickle the frog?" Severus asked curiously as he took the glass from Hermione and swirled the liquid around in it.

Before they could answer him, he sniffed it, and then gave them a look of disappointment. He took a drink from the glass.

Ron, Hermione and Harry gasped as Severus swished the liquid around his mouth before swallowing.

"Are you insane?" Ron bellowed before he thought better of it.

"Did your mother tell you to say that?" Severus asked sharply.

"What?" Ron asked, confused.

"Nothing," said Severus, waving a hand at him. "It's milk." He sat the glass on the table with the scrolls.

"Milk?" asked Harry in a confused tone. "For if you fancy a drink in the middle of the night?"

Hermione snorted and all the men looked at her. To her surprise, Severus was included.

"Milk is good for your skin," Hermione explained. "I bet it's pumped down from the kitchens. I doubt Helga Hufflepuff could pop over to a Wizarding beauty shop for face cream before we were organized enough to even have a culture."

"Girl stuff," Ron said, shaking his head.

Harry and Severus nodded in agreement.

"Oh, honestly!" Hermione spluttered before she stalked back to her bathroom to figure out how to turn the milk off and the water back on.

Severus looked at Ron.

Ron looked at Severus.

Harry looked at Ron pleadingly. He had a creeping suspicion this wasn't going to end well.

Severus had dreaded this moment. He honestly expected the boy to hex him. Dumbledore expected him to be at least sensitive to the boy's emotions, but how could he be when he expected to be hit by a Killing Curse any moment?

Perhaps he could at least make the boy a bit less homicidal. If this wasn't handled correctly, it could compromise their entire assignment, if not the whole of the Order.

"I know how difficult this must be for you," said Severus slowly before the boy could say or do anything stupid.

"What?" Ron asked, his face an expression of bewilderment. Whatever Ron had been expecting, it hadn't been this.

Harry put a hand on Ron's shoulder before Ron said something he'd regret.

"It would have been less difficult for us if you were of age or any of your brothers were available to petition for her," Severus continued.

"What?" asked Ron again.

The boy really was clueless.

"Your brother, Percival, could have petitioned for her," Snape explained patiently to the dumbfounded Ron. "However, it would have meant sacrificing his own intended and it would have looked strange."

"This didn't look strange?" Harry asked, interrupting what would have no doubt been a rude comment from Ron.

"A bit unconventional, yes, but not so strange," Severus said slowly. Harry was the last person Severus thought would help him diffuse Ron.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, relaxing a little. His worst fears had not been founded. Snape was not a bodice ripper in disguise. It didn't mean he was comfortable with the arrangement, it just meant he didn't feel immediately threatened.

"Powerful wizards can lead much longer lives than the general Wizarding population," explained Severus patiently. "Sometimes their spouses don't last a quarter of their life spans."

"What does that have to do with professors pairing off with students?" Ron interrupted.

"Imagine you're 130 years old, Weasley," Severus snapped. "You meet a charming witch 40 years your junior with a familiar last name. In fact, the women have familiar last names because you taught each one that passed through Hogwarts. All of them. For the last 100 years."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Are some of the Hogwarts professors *married*?"

Ron tried to imagine a Madame Flitwick. The image he conjured made him shake his head to rid himself of it.

"A few in the past," Severus said stiffly. "It's very hard to see people as adults when you met them all as children."

"So, none are married now, except you?" Harry asked, hoping Snape didn't get angry at him for asking so many questions.

"Binns has a widow," Severus said shortly.

He didn't like discussing his thoughts on the subject. Some people saw it as romantic. Severus thought it was tragic.

"Binns?" Ron asked incredulously. "Are you still a widow if your husband's a ghost?"

"You live in hell if your husbands a ghost," Severus snapped at him.

Ron stood up straighter, startled. He bumped into Harry, taking a step back as Severus loomed over him.

"Lucinda loved that daft dry dishrag, for some crazy reason, and she wilted when he passed," Severus hissed.

Severus didn't notice Hermione standing in the doorway of her room.

"He wasn't really gone," Severus said in a low tone. "He was still here. Bound to the school. Correspondence was dictated to house-elves and delivered to her by owl. She got a notice of her husbands' condition in the same envelope as his death certificate."

Ron paled.

"That's horrible," said Harry, a stricken look on his face.

Severus pushed away the ancient memory of a red-haired girl with the same expression.

"That's not so horrible, Potter," said Severus silkily. "She spends her summers here, watching his transparent form, never able to touch him. He gets to watch her slowly age before him, knowing she will probably not meet him when she passes."

"How do you know she won't become a ghost?" said Hermione from the doorway.

"What?" Severus asked, annoyed he'd been interrupted.

"A ghost is someone who has strong emotional ties to something that keeps them here," said Hermione, sounding like a textbook. "Everyone knows that Binns was held back because it was his last session before the O.W.L.s and he was particularly obsessive about the details of the Centurion Tribunal that year."

"What's your point?" said Severus loudly, making the boys jump. His spooky demeanor vanished.

Hermione folded her arms. He may be her husband, but he was *not* going to torment her friends for amusement.

Harry and Ron both turned and sat on the couch as if this was something they'd witnessed a thousand times.

Severus felt off guard.

"My point is he's a ghost and she obviously has strong ties to him," said Hermione testily. "If given the option, she would spend eternity here with him. And he's not bound to the school. The O.W.L.s being in Hogwarts is a technicality of location. Moaning Myrtle used to go all over before the Ministry got her to stop causing mischief."

"Fine then," Severus said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "He can go for a country holiday if he wishes. His wife still has to have to be given the option and you can't predict that." He stood straighter and folded his arms.

"Yes you can, and she would be a logical choice for a ghost," Hermione said insistently.

As Hermione and Severus bickered, Harry's and Ron's heads looked back and forth, as if they were watching tennis.

"No you *can't*, and there are no probable theories to being transformed into a ghost. Also, being a ghost *isn't* a pleasurable thing," said Severus, frowning his eyebrows at her. "It would be illogical for her to choose it even if given the opportunity."

"Lucinda would choose to stay," Hermione insisted. "And there *is* logic to it. We're still learning about the process."

"We? What do you know?" barked Severus.

"Binns began the project my sixth year," Hermione said smugly, crossing her arms. "We interview all the new ghosts that were converted in the last year over Easter weekend. The idea came from Sir Nicholas originally."

"You really should have expected something like that, you know," Ron interjected to Severus from the couch.

Severus sharply turned his head to look at Ron.

"She doesn't ever start something if she doesn't have a hidden play." Ron shrugged. "Except in Wizard's Chess. She stinks at that."

Harry shook his head in agreement.

Severus looked at her dumbfounded.

"Are you serious?" Severus asked, loosening his stance slightly. "Where is your data?"

"Binns has it in his office," Hermione said smugly. "You can see it if you like."

Severus looked at Hermione and saw fiery defiance blazing in her eyes.

She *knew* she was right, and she wanted him to admit, as her professor, that she was more knowledgeable than him about *something*.

Infuriating know-it-all.

Her chin was even tilted upward, set stubbornly.

His body responded immediately and he swept his robes around himself dramatically.

'Where in blazes did that come from?' thought Severus embarrassedly. *'I've been spending too much spare time in the company of teenagers.'*

"I would," Severus said, reluctantly impressed in her project.

How the girl found the time to do everything, he would never know. The Department of Mysteries would be banging on her door the day after graduation.

Hermione watched as Severus swirled his robes around himself dramatically.

'Annoying bat,' thought Hermione as he retreated to his private rooms. She gave a small smile to his bedroom door as it closed.

"That was incredible, Hermione," Harry whispered so Snape didn't hear him.

Ron just cocked an eyebrow.

Hermione shrugged.

"Forget it," she said as she shook her head. "Come on; let's see what else we can find in there."

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Severus closed the door to his room and looked at the bulge in his trousers.

"Who asked your opinion?" he snarled at his erection.

The image of Hermione looking so annoyed at him swam in his vision.

Severus put his hand on the front of his trousers to try and push his problem away. A wave of pleasure surged through him. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the door for a moment before he realized what he was doing.

"Oh, bloody hell!" he exclaimed as he unbuckled his trousers quickly and made for the bed.

At least he could get this over quickly.

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"If you smack it on the head you might get pumpkin juice," Harry suggested, snickering as Hermione and Ron examined the stone frog crouched by the sink in Hermione's bathroom.

"Don't be stupid, Harry," Ron muttered as he poked the stone frog with his wand.

It burped bubbles at him.

"Well that was interesting," Hermione remarked as she popped a bubble floating by with her wand. "So there's a way to integrate soap in the water? I wonder how to trigger it?"

"No idea," said Ron, shrugging. His face suddenly brightened. "I have a great idea!"

"What?" asked Harry, who was examining the ivy growing around Hermione's stone bathing pool.

"Let's get Colin!" Ron said as if everyone else in the room was stupid.

"Creevey?" Hermione asked, confused.

"We need his camera!" Ron said, doing a little dance in his excitement.

Hermione wished she knew what he was so excited about.

"His pictures *move*," Ron began patiently.

"So small things will reveal themselves," Hermione finished softly. "Brilliant, Ron."

"Thank you," he said, taking a deep bow.

Severus left his rooms in a far more relaxed state to find Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Colin Creevey entering his rooms.

Colin was carrying the camera bag the Gryffindors finally talked him into, rather than carrying his camera everywhere. Severus said nothing but gave Hermione an odd look.

As the boys entered Hermione's quarters she stayed back to explain to Severus what they were doing.

He hoped he didn't look or smell odd. He prayed to God his cheeks didn't turn pink.

"Well, if the Ministry asks anyone, we seem to have a valid marriage," Severus said flatly.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"What other Slytherin Head of House would let a pack of Gryffindors trot through his private quarters as they pleased?" Severus gave her a stony look.

Hermione raised her hand to her mouth in embarrassment.

"I am so sorry," she said, turning pale. "I just thought it would make a nice afternoon project and kind of got carried away."

"Who would have ever guessed you would become involved in a project and get carried away?" said Severus sarcastically.

"I'm sorry," she said again, quieter.

"Hermione, that was my idea of a joke." Severus said with a sigh. "I knew I wouldn't be lucky enough to avoid your friends forever."

Hermione smiled at him slightly. He wasn't pleased, but he wasn't surprised, either.

"I can't believe you never explored in there," said Hermione, changing the subject.

"I did," Snape admitted reluctantly. "I believe it was quickly apparent how abysmal I am when dealing with charms. I never thought of a camera. It was a clever idea."

"It was Ron's idea," admitted Hermione.

"I would like to see your results," Severus muttered, honestly sounding interested instead of just patronizing.

"Of course. We'll let you know," said Hermione.

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Colin ran down the rows of wooden tables in the Great Hall to where Hermione, Ron, and Harry were eating their lunch a few days after the pictures were taken. A large

brown envelope waved in his hands.

"Did you get the film developed?" asked Hermione, making room for him beside her.

"Just finished," said Colin, smiling and opening the envelope.

"Are those the pictures you've been waiting for?" Seamus asked, nodding at the envelope. "Of Hermione's new room?"

"Yea," said Ron, reaching for a picture.

"Wow," said Harry looking over Ron's shoulder.

The picture was a close up of the frog faucet. Bubbles rose out of its mouth. Occasionally one of its feet rose to scratch the side of its head.

"What do you think that means?" Harry asked.

"Don't know," said Ron, shrugging. "But at least it gives us an idea."

Hermione was looking at a picture of her bed when she started slightly.

"What?" Ginny Weasley asked.

The boys were still staring at the frog, speculating how it could work. Hermione quietly slipped the picture to Ginny, who began giggling quietly.

"I wouldn't let Ron see that," Ginny said.

The ivy on Hermione's bed seemed to unwind and trail over the bed from four corners. She could only surmise they were some type of restraints.

"Not sure I'd let Snape see it either," Ginny snickered as she handed it back to Hermione.

Hermione laughed and reached for the other pictures in case there was anything else sensitive showing.

"Hey!" Ron protested as Hermione took a picture from him.

"We have Charms next," Hermione said simply. "Lunch is almost over. We can go over these later."

"Alright," Ron said reluctantly as he handed over the pictures.

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Severus walked down the stone corridor to his quarters.

Hermione had classes the rest of the afternoon and he had scrolls from the fourth years to grade. His life was a monotonous, never-ending cycle of homework, grading, and experiments.

He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding when he got in his quarters. He breathed in the fresh air coming in from his open windows. The house-elves must have decided his quarters were in need of an airing.

Fresh orange flowers sprouted out of a black ceramic pot on the coffee table.

That house-elf really was fond of the girl.

There were new flowerboxes with red flowers outside the large window in the parlor. Long tendrils of silver and green ivy snaked out of mounted small pots on either side of the window.

The place did look much more pleasant. Besides, both types of flowers could be harvested for potions ingredients. He would have to remember to thank the elf later for his consideration. Hermione would appreciate the gesture.

Severus walked over to the open window in his receiving room and took in a deep breath of fresh air. He could smell the vapor rising from the lake in the warm weather.

The scrolls could wait. Today was a perfect day to take in a little recreation.

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Hermione decided to go to her quarters to do a little reading before dinner.

The library was her normal choice, but her new books were waiting for her in the small bookshelf Dobby had built near her bed.

"*Should we bring you something to eat later?*" Ron had teased, knowing she would never get to the Great Hall if she stuck her nose in a book.

"*I'm near the kitchens now,*" Hermione reminded him. "*I'll grab a bite later.*"

The boys had reluctantly said their good-byes to her, and she began her descent to the quarters she shared with Severus.

Hermione opened the door to their quarters to find light spilling in through all the windows, including through the doorway to her room, which should have not been open, and the door to Severus' room, which she had never seen open before.

Hermione drew her wand and went to Severus' door first.

She peered into his room to see a large bed with a black bedspread and a mahogany headboard. There was a small table near the bed with an oil lamp on it. A small wooden chest with a lock lay at the foot of the bed.

The walls were lined with books and a window was set into the wall to her right. It was wide open, thick black curtains pulled back and thin, white under curtains moving with the breeze.

The wall to the right had two doors. Hermione guessed they were for the closet and bathroom since she saw no wardrobe. She decided not to peer into those yet, but uttered an incantation that locked them from the outside.

She didn't want any unpleasant surprises if this was an ambush.

Hermione approached her rooms warily. As she began to walk into them, she met Crookshanks, who meowed loudly.

"Hello?" she heard Severus call out.

"Oh, hello," called out Hermione, feeling a bit silly. "Be right in."

She hastily ran back to his rooms and unlocked the doors before he thought she was crazy. She would have to try harder to make a good impression if she wanted to be in the Order.

Hermione entered her rooms to find Severus perched on the oversized ledge outside her window. She tossed her book bag on the table before walking over to him.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, slightly worried. Her best thought was that some type of moss growing on the castle was a useful potions ingredient. Her worst was that he'd been Imperiused and was about to jump to his death.

As she walked over to him, realization dawned on her and she rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

"Fishing," said Severus, snapping his line out over the water.

Hermione peered out the window and saw that behind the decorative gargoyle, there were was a generous ledge.

"There's room for another if you'd care to join me." He smirked as if he already knew her answer.

"I think I'll pass," said Hermione, turning slightly green as she looked down several hundred feet to the water. The line and reel were obviously enchanted. "Thanks anyway."

"Suit yourself," Severus sniffed. He felt a tug on his line and focused his attention on it.

Hermione turned to see Dobby entering her rooms with various containers.

"Will Madame want her dinner with the professor?" Dobby asked politely.

"I suppose I will," Hermione sighed. She had planned to spend her evening reading, but if dinner had already been arranged, there was no sense in not taking advantage of the situation. She took her book bag off the table and set it near her bed. "The table is fine, Dobby. Thank you."

Hermione watched as Dobby unpacked rice, seaweed, sesame seeds and several small trays. He lifted the lid off a small bowl of crab and began chopping.

"You know, Dobby," Hermione said as she watched him prepare ingredients, "you don't need to wait on us. We're capable of going to the Hall for meals like everyone else."

"It is Dobby's pleasure, Madame!" Dobby beamed. "And it is no problem at all since Madame and Professor sleep so close to the kitchens!"

Hermione wanted to point out that the kitchens were at least two floors away, but instead she asked: "What are you preparing for us?"

"Sushi, if I can catch a decent sized tuna," Severus said from the window, struggling with his line.

"There's no tuna in this lake," Hermione said, thinking about the time a distant cousin had treated her to sushi in London.

"There is if Dumbledore decides there will be," said Severus with a smirk as she watched him flick his wand in the direction of the lake.

She supposed she'd been naive to think he'd reel it in by hand when he could use magic.

Dobby began chanting under his breath as the fish glided through the air to the table.

As Hermione watched, the fish was cleaned, cut, prepared, and chilled before it even reached its destination. The scraps were whisked into a small iron pot as the thin slices of fresh fish fell onto the cold rice doobby had packed into small squares.

"This is wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed. "Thank you."

"Thank you for letting me break into your quarters to provide us dinner," Severus said as he climbed in through the window.

"Like I really had a choice," Hermione said sarcastically, although she really hadn't minded. She had spent the last seven years sharing a room with two other girls. One person passing through occasionally was still far more privacy than she was accustomed to.

Hermione watched as Dobby chopped vegetables, seafood and different wraps to prepare dinner for herself and Severus. The result was a rainbow of food, set neatly on colorful trays across the table. Small black enamel trays of pickled ginger, wasabi, and soy sauce divided the table, and chopsticks lay near the black six-sided plates Dobby had set out.

Dobby cleared away his containers and bowed slightly before he left the room.

"I got the pictures from Colin," Hermione said as she walked over to her book bag. She fished out the large brown envelope.

"Excellent," said Snape as he sat down and put his napkin in his lap.

Hermione sat across from him and handed over the envelope. He opened it and started looking at the pictures as he reached out his chopsticks and started filling his plate.

Hermione watched as he flipped through the pictures. He stopped abruptly and his eyes widened.

"What?" Hermione asked, praying he wasn't staring at the picture of the bed.

"Has your bathroom mirror ever spoken to you?" Severus asked sharply.

"What? No! Why?" Hermione frowned at him.

Severus got to his feet and drew his wand.

Hermione reached up slowly and took the picture from him. It was a close up of her towel rack. In the background, an elderly, white-haired witch peered out from the mirror.

She winked.

Greetings and Meetings

Chapter 8 of 17

Hermione and Severus get to know their unexpected guest. Graduation day changes everything.

Chapter Eight: Greetings and Meetings

Hermione stared at the picture in front of her. The elderly, winking witch looked pleasant, at least.

Hermione watched as Severus inched to the bathroom slowly, as if he were trying to stay silent. Hermione followed him, stepping lightly, her wand drawn.

She suddenly felt very silly. If the mirror had wanted to hurt either of them, it had had the chance several times before now.

Severus entered the bathroom and stared at the mirror above Hermione's sink. He pointed his wand at it.

"Reveal yourself," he demanded to his own reflection.

"Well that's not very polite," said Hermione furrowing her eyebrows at him.

She had thought of the Fat Lady and Sir Cadogan. If it was some sort of enchanted object, it may react negatively to orders.

Severus turned to look at her. "It's a mirror," he said, as if explaining something very simple to a small child.

"I *know* it's a *mirror*," said Hermione visibly annoyed. "But it's been here far longer than either of us. If someone tromped into my house and started demanding things, I'd tell it where to go."

"It is nice to see one of you has the manners the good Lord gave a goat," said a gentle faced, elderly witch as the surface of the mirror rippled like water and her image came into focus.

She was dressed in light blue, ancient-looking robes fashioned from a rough fabric. Runes were sewn into the white fur that wound its way around the brim of her tall, pointed hat in neat gold stitching.

Her white hair was pinned up under her hat and her large, light blue eyes twinkled as she grinned mischievously at Severus.

Severus jumped back so suddenly he tripped over Hermione's new enchanted towel warmer (a gift from the wedding) and fell backwards, a tangle of terrycloth and brass rods.

He sat down hard and cracked the back of his skull on the wall behind him. He looked dazed for a moment.

"For crying out loud," Hermione muttered under her breath.

The witch in the mirror gaped in horror and her pale hand fluttered to her lips.

Hermione rushed to see whether Severus had really harmed himself. She ran her hand gently over the back of his head to see if he had broken the skin. To her surprise, his hair felt as if it had too much product in it. Soft, but it left a bit of residue in her hand.

"A bit tickle-brained, is he?" the witch in the mirror asked.

"I beg your pardon!?" Snape looked up sharply.

Hermione quickly assessed the only thing he had hurt was his pride and bit her lips trying not to laugh.

"I'm terribly sorry, Madam," Hermione said as she gave Severus' head a gentle pat. "We just uncovered your existence and he's a bit..." Hermione searched for a word.

"Paranoid?" supplied the witch.

"That works," said Hermione, helping Severus to his feet. He was a bit shaky, but still scowled at both women and kept his wand at the ready.

"I do suppose it would be a shock," said the witch kindly. "The last time I spoke to a soul was the year of our lord 1742. Then Lyons expired and the chamber was empty. He was a charming fellow. Sang in the morning. Lovely voice. Firm backside."

Severus looked taken aback.

"I believe you have a bit to catch up on," said Hermione hesitantly, ignoring the comment about former Headmaster Lyons' backside. Hermione winced, not knowing what the mirror's reaction would be. "The present year is 1997."

"I see," said the witch slowly, obviously shocked. "I cannot understand why I have been left alone for so long. I put so much thought into the area; I thought it would be useful for generations." She seemed genuinely disappointed.

"You're Helga Hufflepuff?" said Hermione, breathing in sharply.

Severus stiffened beside her. She looked at him, but his expression was unreadable.

"Why, yes, dear," said Helga gently, the spider web of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes spreading as she smiled. "I am sorry I did not introduce myself forthwith, but I didn't want to startle you."

"How did you get in a common mirror?" asked Severus sharply.

Hermione looked at his frowning face and gave him a testy look.

"Why would Lyons remain silent about your whereabouts?" Severus went on, oblivious to Hermione.

"I commissioned a portrait of myself before my death," said Helga in a patient tone of voice. "Then I hid the portrait within the mirror. I don't know why Lyons never told anyone. Perhaps he thought I would be moved if anyone knew."

"How would you put a portrait into a mirror?" asked Hermione with a confused look on her face. "Why would you put a portrait in a mirror?"

"Mirrors used to be made of mercury and glass," said Severus in a much more normal tone of voice.

"I put it in a mirror so it would never deteriorate and it would be simple to clean. The mirror is charmed to be unbreakable, of course." Helga smiled.

Severus finally lowered his wand. "What a clever trick."

"Thank you, sir" said Helga sincerely, bowing her head; not offended at all that someone hundreds of years her junior called her brilliant enchantment a 'clever trick.'

"Mercury and glass?" Hermione said questioningly.

"When creating an object that turns into a teleportation portal, a combination of mercury and glass is used to produce a main component in the anointing potion," Severus said as if quoting a textbook. "Since the portrait would be hidden, not actually teleported anywhere, all the mirror would have to do is act as a point of stasis."

"What?" said Hermione, for once a bit blustered.

Severus smirked slightly. He would file that look away for reference later.

He mentally admonished himself for having such a thought.

"I made a pocket of space, tossed the portrait in, and closed it up," said Helga. "He is just trying to impress you."

"I am not," said Severus a little too quickly.

"Yes, you are," said Helga knowingly. "I have five sons. Do not tell me what you are thinking; I see it in your face before you think it."

Severus was suddenly glad he had taken refuge in the other rooms rather than waking up to this every morning.

Hermione giggled.

"You reside here now, dear?" Helga asked Hermione.

"Yes," said Hermione.

Hermione quickly explained the law passed by the Ministry and why a student was residing in the quarters of a professor before Helga began to ask.

Hermione had a feeling Helga Hufflepuff was a woman to be afraid of when roused.

Severus was suddenly reminded of Molly Weasley.

"I beg your pardon?" she squawked loudly. "Impertinent fool-born lout!" she thundered. "Leave it to a man to come up with such a beef-witted idea!"

Hermione blinked a few times. So did Severus. It had obviously been awhile since Helga had spoken to anyone.

Hermione made a mental note to convince Helga to teach her medieval slang later.

"Don't tell me," Helga blustered on. "He has to be a descendent of that flap-mouthed Salazar! Never did have anything to rattle between his ears and nests of bastards everywhere! I do suspect his offspring would be no better!"

Hermione and Severus were both silent. Their faces went slack of expression.

"Something is horribly wrong," said Helga. Her eyes darted from Severus to Hermione. "What has happened?"

Severus reached up and pulled the mirror off the wall. A small silver hook remained, along with a faint discoloration on the wall where the mirror used to be.

Helga looked startled and grabbed the inside of the frame to keep her balance as she was jostled around.

"I'm not going to eat my dinner in a bathroom," he said as he walked out of the bathroom, pushing past Hermione. "And if I have to discuss unpleasant things I'm not going to be hungry."

Hermione made a face at him, but followed.

Helga's eyes widened as Hermione pulled a blue, overstuffed chair over to the table and Severus propped the mirror up in it so they could talk to Helga comfortably.

"Has Hogwarts degraded to a state where they cannot even afford to cook its food?" Helga asked as she looked at the sushi, appalled.

Hermione quickly explained sushi to Helga, and assured her it was very good. Helga then spotted the photographs and was fascinated. Hermione had to fight to remember what she knew about the history of photography. She was thankful Colin tended to be a bit long winded about things.

"Well," said Helga, trying to take in some of the changes. "I see things have changed greatly."

Severus decided the best place to start was after Lyons had left. Voldemort had been such a big part of their recent history, Severus decided it would be simpler to give her a history lesson covering the last two centuries.

Hermione often went to her bookshelf to consult a question when their memories failed them or Helga had a question they couldn't answer.

When dinner was finished, Dobby returned to clear their plates. Severus stopped him as he was leaving.

"Dobby, I would like it if you could install a small hook in a prominent place in the parlor for Mistress Hufflepuff's mirror," said Severus.

"Yes, sir," said Dobby cheerfully. "Is there anything else you would be wanting, sir?"

"Some dessert, perhaps," said Severus.

"Only if it isn't too much trouble," said Hermione hastily, shooting Severus a warning look. He was getting far too used to the little elf's help.

"Some dessert and one hook," repeated Dobby. "I will return shortly sir and madams."

"Thank you, Dobby," said Severus. "Where were we?"

"Grindelwald," said Hermione.

Severus continued talking through their dessert of trifle, and by the time Dobby wheeled in Severus' tea service, he had begun talking about Tom Riddle and Voldemort. When he finished, Helga was shaking her head in sorrow.

"I never thought anyone would pay that lack-witted fool an ounce of thought past his death," Helga said.

Severus stayed uncomfortably silent. Helga didn't seem to notice.

"So that is where we are, is it?" Helga asked.

"Yes," said Hermione. "You're up to date, more or less."

"I would thank you for taking the time to speak with me," said Helga smiling, although strained. "I would much like to see my new area. It's been so long since I've had new things to look at, and I would expect you are ready to retire."

Hermione thanked Helga for revealing herself to them and bid her and Severus a good night before Severus carried the mirror into the parlor. The stone arch of Hermione's doorway shrunk into the form of the purring cat once again.

A gaudy gold frame was attached to the wall near the cat with a hook nailed in the center. Red velvet curtains hung from either side so the mirror could be hidden if desired.

The elf did seem to take things to the extreme.

Severus hung the mirror and Helga smiled at him.

"What are you smiling about?" Severus asked, uncomfortable with the way she was smirking at him.

"You both claim this is a marriage of convenience, but she has caught your eye," Helga said knowingly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Severus, visibly caught off guard.

"You respect her mind," Helga said simply. "What else could one want in a wife?"

"Who says I want a wife?" asked Severus scowling.

"I didn't say you wanted one," said Helga. "You need one."

"I do not *need* anything," he sniffed imperiously. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"That's what they all say," said Helga, frowning her eyebrows at him.

Severus threw his hands in the air and stormed into his rooms. He slammed the door behind him.

"Impertinent whelp," Helga puffed. "He can't deny it forever."

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Hermione lay on her back, staring at the underside of her canopy. The moonlight streamed in her window and cast a ghostly blue sheen over everything in the room.

Hermione couldn't help but think how romantic the setting was.

This was quickly followed with the realization that the trifle had gone straight to her head. She giggled to herself in the dark.

As she fell asleep she wondered what it would be like if he kissed her again, what his face would look like in the moonlight.

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"Best of luck to you, my dear," said Professor Flitwick to Hermione as he shook her hand heartily in the Great Hall. Banners displaying all the House colors were suspended in the air over all the people milling about.

The last day of term had crept up on them. Hermione smiled at her tiny professor before giving him a hug. When they broke apart Flitwick burst into tears.

"There, there," said Professor Hooch, rushing over to pat him on the back.

"They grow up so fast," Flitwick said to no one in particular as he wiped his face with a large blue handkerchief.

A brown-haired Ravenclaw girl gave him a hug and he bawled even harder.

"Wouldn't be the same if Flitwick didn't get the vapors at least once during the send off ceremony," Snape remarked to Hermione as she took her place beside him at the end of the row of teachers.

"He does this every year?" said Hermione, giggling.

"Like clockwork," said Severus as he opened his program. "There's just the closing speech and the rest of the students will come in for the end-of-year feast. Then we'll be off."

"What's the rush?" Hermione asked.

"Order initiations tonight," Severus said quietly. "You, Ron, Harry and Neville are going to be inducted into the Order of the Phoenix."

"What!" Hermione squeaked. "So soon? It's that easy?"

"We decided we'd better act soon or you might be up to real mischief," Severus said, the corners of his lips quirked.

"Thank you for your faith," said Hermione dryly.

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A thunderclap sounded over number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Hermione, Harry, Ron and Neville watched as scraps of parchment with their names written in their own blood drifted into a goblet full of flickering gold flames.

"Well," said Dumbledore, smiling as he blew out the magical fire. "Who's up for biscuits?"

"I'm in," said George or Fred Weasley.

"Good idea," said Fred or George Weasley.

"I'll go put a kettle on," said Arthur Weasley, patting his wife on the shoulder.

"Congratulations," said Remus Lupin, looking at them through heavy-lidded eyes.

"Thanks," said Hermione.

Ron and Harry were already going over some diagram with the twins.

"I hear you've already been given an assignment," said Remus, smiling slightly.

"St. Petersburg," said Hermione.

Ron and Harry looked up.

"You're going to Russia?" Ron asked. His eyes shot to Severus.

Severus quirked an eyebrow.

"To see the Mystic Brotherhood," Hermione said, a little awed.

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Remus said, taking a teacup with a few biscuits perched on the saucer from Arthur. "You'll find the trip very informative."

"Rasputin was a member," Ron said, relaxing a little. "They're supposed to have one of the largest libraries in existence."

"I know," said Hermione. "I wonder if I'll get a look at it."

"Wish you well, Hermione," said Harry, looking happy and sad all at once.

"Thanks," said Hermione, feeling a ball tighten in her chest.

They were graduated, assigned tasks, and would be splitting up soon.

She felt like she was losing a part of herself when she looked at Ron and Harry. She would not cry. That would set them all off and that wouldn't make a very good impression.

Hermione looked around the kitchen.

With the exception of her parents, everyone she cared about was in this room, and they were all in very grave danger. She looked at Ron, Harry, Neville, and the twins laughing amongst themselves and wondered which of them would be injured or die. She watched Mr. and Mrs. Weasley bustle about as they got tea and sweets for everyone and thought of how much they were risking. Dumbledore, Lupin, and Severus, who worked so hard to keep Voldemort away from the next generation of magical citizens. Mrs. Longbottom, who Hermione suspected, may be the only witch in the Wizarding community that Voldemort might have a cool respect for.

Not all the Order members were present, of course, but there were enough that Hermione finally felt the weight of what they were doing rest on her shoulders.

"I'm very proud of you, Neville," said Mrs. Longbottom, beaming.

Neville smiled shyly at the room, surprised he had even been asked to join the Order.

"So, what *is* the Mystic Brotherhood?" Harry asked.

"Private academy of sorts," said one of the twins. "Really elite. They only take a few outside students at a time, and then only if they're done with regular schooling. You have to be born into the right family to be considered for the Brotherhood. I hear most are brought in as small children and never leave."

"Dedicated to the retention and acquisition of information," said Neville, as if he were reciting something. Then he snorted. "Bunch of leftover monks."

"But very, very powerful," said Dumbledore, sitting down across from them and dipping a chocolate biscuit in his tea. He turned towards Severus who was sitting silently to his right. "Will you be staying at your family estate, Severus?"

"I was planning to, yes," said Severus slowly as he stirred his tea.

It seemed to Hermione that he wasn't comfortable talking about his family having an estate.

Ron started shooting daggers with his eyes at Severus.

"There are twenty-three rooms in the estate, Mr. Weasley. I assure you, the young lady will have more privacy than entirely needed," Severus said in a tired tone.

Ron turned red.

"Really, Ron," Molly said to her son, annoyed. "This ridiculous sham of a marriage is the perfect excuse to take a trip to see the Brotherhood."

Hermione wondered who she was more annoyed with.

"It really is the chance of a lifetime," Hermione said, trying to diffuse the situation.

"So that's the way it's going to be then?" Ron said stiffly.

"It's the way it has to be," said Hermione softly.

"If you'll excuse me, I've lost my appetite," said Ron, pushing himself away from the table and standing up.

"Come on, Ron," said Harry, pleadingly.

"I know it's the way things have to be," said Ron sadly. "I didn't say I had to like it."

Ron walked into the next room and they heard him activate the Floo network to go to the Burrow.

"Where'd Ron go?" asked Arthur as he returned to the table and sat down next to Neville.

"Didn't take Hermione's assignment well," said Remus.

"Ah," said Arthur, pressing his lips together. "Well, he'll be busy enough soon. It'll distract him a bit."

"We'll keep him busy," said George, rubbing his hands together over the large parchment spread out in front of him.

"Just keep an eye on him," said Molly. "It's not easy for him."

"Will do," said Fred, reaching out for a quill and tugging on Harry's shoulder to get his attention back to the diagram.

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"How did it go?" Helga asked excitedly as Hermione and Severus walked back into their chambers through the fireplace.

"She's now a member of the Order," said Severus sullenly.

Hermione thought he'd be at least a little bit excited for her.

"Well you don't need to sound so excited," Helga said, making a face at him. "You might burst with enthusiasm."

"It's a dangerous assignment," Severus said, walking over to the tea service and pouring a cup.

Hermione thanked the inventor of Ever Perking Pots as he poured her one as well. It was better than her parent's electric tea brewer.

"It's a research assignment," said Hermione with a sigh.

"It's still too close to the Dark Lord for my taste," said Severus bitterly.

He walked into his rooms and came back out with a flask. He poured a healthy dollop of whisky into his tea, then repeated the procedure with another cup and handed it to Hermione.

Thank you," Hermione said as she accepted the cup.

As she drank she felt the burn of the alcohol down her throat. She really wished she had eaten more than a few biscuits during the day. She had even picked at her food during the feast, she had been so nervous about the induction ceremony for the Order.

"I believe I may be able to get you a few tomes from the library to examine, even if I can't get you full access," said Severus taking a sip from his cup.

"That would be incredible," said Hermione downing her cup. With the day over, she suddenly felt her hunger creep up on her. She felt too lazy to go to the kitchens for food. She reached for the teapot again and refilled her cup. "Thank you."

"I think you'll like the Russian Estate," said Severus thoughtfully. "It has a small library of its own. Although the books are fairly common for the area, you may find them interesting."

Hermione sipped at her tea and tasted whisky. Apparently the cups were enchanted to remember how you liked your tea and dressed it accordingly.

She sipped slower. She *had* finished her schooling and had been inducted into the Order. It was cause for some celebration.

"I'm sure I'll find something to catch my interest," she assured him.

"I'm sure you shall," said Severus.

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Hermione slid one leg out of her bed and placed it flat on the floor. The spinning room slowed by a fraction.

After four cups of tea, Severus had helped her to bed and got her sleeping things for her. He had assured her he would have a potion ready to help her with her inevitable headache in the morning.

Then he had the nerve to smirk at her.

She glared at the underside of her canopy, annoyed. It was his idea to drink the damn whisky in the first place. He had probably done it to make her look foolish in the first place.

Hermione didn't doubt he would have helped her change into her night things if asked, but she blushed at the mere thought of disrobing in front of him.

He had *smirked* at her! The nerve!

The worst part was that he looked so attractive when he did it Hermione couldn't get it out of her mind.

"It's just the whisky," Hermione muttered to herself.

Crookshanks meowed questioningly and butted his head against Hermione's left hand. She scratched him absentmindedly. He purred and curled up against her to sleep.

Hermione found herself slipping in and out of sleep. Severus' face swam in front of her in and out of dream. She slid a hand down under the waistband of her under things and moaned quietly.

'I would never be doing this without the alcohol,' thought Hermione to herself. *'Best get it over with as quickly as possible.'*

She breathed in near a lock of her hair that picked up the scent of him and felt her body react to the sweet smell of sandalwood.

Hermione imagined Severus placing the gentle kiss he had given her on their wedding day on more private parts of her person. She wondered what his nose would cause her body to do.

Hermione twisted her form under the sheets. She allowed herself to get near to climax, but didn't allow herself to fall over the edge. She teased herself higher and higher as her thoughts about Severus grew more carnal.

She plunged two fingers into herself and cried out a climax.

She instantly clamped a hand to her mouth before she remembered she didn't share a bedroom with two other girls anymore. She giggled in the dark and enjoyed her afterglow.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," Hermione giggled to herself as she turned over and cuddled under her covers. "He is my husband, after all."

She laughed aloud at the absurdity of it all.

The Snape Estate

Chapter 9 of 17

Hermione and Severus leave Hogwarts and get situated in Russia.

Chapter Nine: The Snape Estate

When Hermione woke up, her hand was still dipped under the elastic waist band of her panties.

'I must've been tired,' she thought to herself as she removed her hand. When she tried to move, pain lanced through her skull.

"Ow," she complained as she brought her hand up to her head.

Even that hurt.

Crookshanks rose beside her and hopped to the floor between her bed and the curtain. When he poked his head through to enter her room, a sliver of light poked through and lay across Hermione's eyes.

"Oh, Gods!" Hermione groaned miserably.

"Good morning, Sunshine," a deeply sarcastic voice came from her room.

She moaned an incoherent response and prayed to God he hadn't looked in on her and found her in such a private moment. Had she even closed the door to her room last night?

Severus pulled back her curtain and shook his head as she pulled her pillow over her face.

"You can hardly drink this buried under there," he said, motioning to the wooden goblet he held in one hand.

"I could conjure a very long straw," her muffled voice floated to him.

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"I doubt you're in any condition to conjure anything," said Severus in a stern tone.

Hermione ventured her bushy head out of her bedding.

Severus stifled a laugh. She looked just like his mother's cousin, Lillith.

He was suddenly thankful he was blessed with straight black hair. It looked like someone had hit Hermione with a truck and zapped her with a lightning spell.

"You certainly don't look fit to do anything," said Severus, handing her the goblet.

"I feel terrible," said Hermione, sipping at the goblet. Her headache began to subside. "Thank you."

"I would advise you to stay away from alcohol if that's your reaction to it," said Severus seriously.

"I think I'm inclined to agree with you," admitted Hermione, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"What are you going to do once we get to Russia?" Severus asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

"Refill my glass with water and fake it," Hermione groaned, setting the goblet down on her bedside table.

Severus allowed himself a small chuckle as he took the empty goblet from her.

"Well, you'll be faking it soon enough," Severus said. "We leave this afternoon."

"So soon?" Hermione asked as she turned pale.

"Well, we are going under the façade of a honeymoon," Severus said with a distasteful look on his face. "I believe I'm supposed to appear eager."

"Shouldn't I appear eager as well?" Hermione asked as she tried to subtly rearrange her bedclothes under the covers. She prayed she wouldn't be exposed in any way as she left her bed.

Severus watched her. Her night gown must have been high above her waist by the motions she was making. He prayed his face wasn't flushed. He felt like his breath was coming too fast. He certainly felt eager now.

"I'm not sure you should appear *too* eager," Severus swallowed. "Some might find it suspicious."

"Not after they talk to Lucius Malfoy," Hermione snorted as she swung her feet over the side of her bed.

"That's true," said Severus thoughtfully. "Still, best not over do it."

He watched her walk across her bedroom in a sleeveless white cotton shift. The light filtered through it softly as she passed by the window briefly. He tried not to shake his head like a Muggle cartoon to recover himself.

'Gods, when did I get so old?' Severus thought to himself.

"How long will we be gone?" Hermione asked, looking at herself in the mirror inside the door of her wardrobe and making a face.

"Most of the summer," said Severus, trying not to wince.

"I see," said Hermione, walking over to a bookshelf. She reached a hand up and ran it over a small grouping of blue books.

Severus knew she was attempting to look as if she were examining the tomes in front of her. He also knew that she was disappointed to be leaving before she was able to spend any amount of time with her parents.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," said Severus awkwardly. "This is a lot of responsibility for someone your age."

"I imagine you had been through much more at my age," said Hermione hoarsely.

She didn't say it maliciously. It was just a statement to her. Severus tried not to physically flinch.

"Some people would travel through several lifetimes to go through as much as I have," said Severus dryly. "I would never hold it as an example of good decision making."

Hermione chuckled, more out of nervousness than anything.

"I guess not," she said, turning to him, wiping a few tears away, but smiling.

Severus grabbed hold of some deep, hidden away part of him.

Maybe it was the spring air. Maybe it was the sight of her bushy hair in the morning. Maybe it was that horrible, old-fashioned nightgown.

It might have even been the tears rolling rebelliously down her cheeks, finally cracking the strong front she had been holding up so well.

Severus placed both of his hands on her shoulders.

"You are going to *be* something, Hermione," Severus said seriously. "You are quite competent and you possess a practical creativity. Never be afraid of how far you can go on your own."

Then he hugged her awkwardly.

Hermione needed a hug and was surprised he was offering her one, but she was appreciative nonetheless.

He smelled pleasant. The lingering scent of a pleasant smelling soap. His black, high-buttoned vest was soft under her cheek.

Severus indulged himself by breathing in the scent of her hair. Some sort of Muggle shampoo. It was soft and light, but was no scent Severus could identify as anything other than her.

He felt the soft skin of her shoulders under his hands. Felt the cotton move under his hands. He watched as a wild curl winded its way up to finally settle on the end of his nose.

There was nothing wrong with a chaste hug, Severus reasoned with himself.

He was the cause of her distress and was comforting her. She was no longer his student and technically his wife, a hug was within reason.

At least until his lower regions latched on to the idea that his wife was in his arms and it had been a long time since he made love in the morning.

Severus leaped back as he felt his body respond eagerly. He dramatically swept his cloak around himself.

"I apologize for the suddenness of the arrangement," said Severus stiffly. "But it would be ideal if you were ready by three o'clock."

Hermione let out the breath she had been holding. For a moment it had almost felt like he had enjoyed hugging her. Apparently a few seconds was all the human contact he could stand.

"I can be done sooner if needed," Hermione said.

"How soon?" Severus asked in a surprised voice.

He expected her to be more sentimental than this. Would she never stop surprising him.

Hermione looked at the small wooden clock Dobby had hung on her wall.

"Noon and we can catch lunch before we go."

"Well," said Severus a little startled. "Noon will be fine."

"Good," said Hermione.

Severus turned quickly and left her quarters. The door shrunk behind him as he left.

'That probably made him feel really uncomfortable,' Hermione thought to herself. *'But he was the one that initiated it.'*

Hermione still could smell hints of the lingering scent of him. She raised the front of her nightgown to her face and breathed in deeply. She felt her body react. She breathed in deeper.

She felt the sudden urge to lie back down. Perhaps the effects of the alcohol hadn't worn completely off.

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'That was wrong,' Severus chided himself as he stormed to his rooms. *'Shouldn't have let it go that far.'*

He laid on his bed, not even bothering to take his shoes off. He opened his trousers, slid his hand over his erection, and took some pressure off the situation.

"Oh, Hermione," he whispered as he wrapped his hand around himself.

Another hand snaked into his bedside table and brought out a small towel. He placed it over his chest and lay back to enjoy himself.

In his fantasy, Hermione had lifted her nightgown over her head and discarded it. She had then pointed a wand at him and rendered him in a similar state before leading him to the bed and letting him pound her senseless.

Severus felt himself spill out and he gasped out loud. His body twisted in pleasure as he squeezed his eyes shut.

When he had finally finished, he lay quietly, shaking slightly and trying to catch his breath.

He was glad the Russian estate was so big. They would both be busy, perhaps he'd be able to shake her out of his head then.

Severus cleaned and righted himself before opening the door from his personal chambers. Hermione was already waiting for him in the receiving room. Her trunk sat at her feet and Crookshanks lay sleeping in a cage stacked on top of it.

He dragged the trunk he had packed earlier this morning out of his room and went over to the fireplace.

"We need to take the Floo to the nearest Portkey Station," Severus said.

"Err... sure," said Hermione, getting to her feet.

She had never heard of a Portkey Station before, but she had never traveled internationally using magical means before.

"Don't forget to keep a travel journal!" Helga reminded from her place on the wall. "I want to hear all about it! And don't forget to take scores of those photograph things!"

"We won't," Hermione promised. "And Professor Dumbledore said he's going to have you transferred to his office while we're gone. You can catch up with the other Headmasters and not be so lonely. Dobby will be in later for you."

"That would be satisfactory," said Helga, smiling serenely.

It was a look Hermione had seen on her own mother, and it had always been cause to worry.

Helga continued: "It will be wonderful to talk to the other Headmasters. I am looking forward to having a word with Lyons."

"Portkey Station," Severus said, throwing Floo powder into the dancing flames as he rolled his eyes. Green flames leapt up, and Severus and Hermione were whisked away from Hogwarts.

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"Welcome home, my dearest darling!" A light, melodic female voice called out in a Russian accent as Severus and Hermione finally arrived at his family estate in St. Petersburg.

Hermione looked up and stiffened at the sight of a pretty, dark-haired, young witch striding towards her and Severus.

The pretty witch wore black silk robes and gold bangles at her wrists. Her mouth was curved in a sly smile that accentuated her high cheekbones and her twinkling, black eyes.

"Hello, Mother," said Severus wearily. He bent down to kiss her cheek as she embraced him.

Hermione blinked. Her mother-in-law didn't appear to be any older than Severus was.

"You don't need to sound so excited, Severus," said Severus' mother with a pout.

"Our trip was quite an adventure," said Hermione, finally noticing she was almost completely covered in dust and grime from their traveling. "They gave us the wrong portkey in Stockholm and we ended up somewhere in the Congo."

"You poor, poor dears," Severus' mother said as she embraced Hermione, her bangles clattering noisily.

Hermione began to wonder if this was a joke. Clearly Severus had not come from this woman and the man she had met earlier. They seemed to be so pleasant.

Severus' mother pulled away and waved her wand at them.

Hermione felt the dust and grime pulling away from her person. It formed into a small ball in front of Anastasia, combining with a similar one from Severus, and it floated into a small, decorative wastebasket in nearby.

"We were wondering why you were taking so long." Severus' mother put an arm around Hermione's waist and fingered one of Hermione's frizzy curls as she smiled. "Your father was starting to worry."

"I'm sure." Severus snorted.

Hermione finally got a moment to look at her surroundings.

The room was enormous. The white marble fireplace was large enough to transport the entire Weasley family and a few friends.

Gold ivy sectioned the walls into neat rectangles and paintings of landscapes were prominently displayed within them.

The high, vaulted ceiling had large pink roses blooming across it that seemed to twinkle in a vaguely familiar pattern.

Hermione noticed the black, polished floor rippled as people moved on it, almost like they were on water.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Madame Snape." Hermione bobbed slightly as she smiled shyly at Severus' mother.

"Do call me either Mother or Anastasia," Severus' mother said, smiling warmly.

"I tried to control her," a deep voice floated in from a set of large double doors. Jacob Snape reclined in the doorframe. "But she insisted on coming right away. She even dodged my Leg-Locker Curse."

"I'm sure you did your best, Father," Severus sighed. He waved his wand at their trunks and they vanished. So did Crookshanks' cage, although the fuzzy cat remained.

He meowed and stretched.

"What a handsome little fellow!" Anastasia exclaimed as the orange tomcat padded over to sniff her.

To Hermione's surprise, Crookshanks flopped at Anastasia's feet and began rolling on the hem of her robes, purring happily and pawing the air.

"He's usually not so rude," Hermione said, furrowing her eyebrows at him.

"It is entirely my fault," said Anastasia as she waved Hermione off as she reached for Crookshanks. "I was flittering around the garden this afternoon and got into the catnip."

"Hope you like him," Severus chuckled. "He's your friend now. His name is Crookshanks."

"Hello, Crookshanks," said Anastasia, scratching him behind his ears. Crookshanks meowed his adoration and twisted over on his back. "Oh, he is adorable!"

"He's found a slave," Severus smirked. He turned to his father who had come over to give Hermione a hug. "Father, we're starving. I'd like to visit the kitchens."

"The dining room has been readied for a nice meal," Anastasia said, still beaming.

"Mother, there was no reason to go to all that trouble," Severus said embarrassedly.

Hermione wondered how fancy the dining room really was if this was the Floo room. It didn't take her long to find out.

In the adjoining chamber, an impossibly long, 17th century dining table stretched the length of the room. Thankfully, four chairs were set up at the same end of the table.

Once again, the room where she ate, she could also view the colors blooming the early evening sky. In addition, the walls seemed to be made of live trees growing very close together. Their branches seemed to stretch out above them, shading the table from the strength of the full light of the sky, streaming it through the leaves. Small globes of white light hovered over the table.

"Thank you for your hospitality." Hermione remembered herself. "I'm sure we'll have a wonderful stay."

"At least one of you remembered your manners," said Anastasia, looking annoyed at her son. "Thank you, dear. We are just happy to see our Severus finally settling down."

Severus pulled a chair out for Hermione and sat next to her.

A turkey lay on a silver platter, steaming perfectly, and warmed by a preservation spell. Stuffed mushrooms decorated the plate around it and each plate had a bowl of spinach and beet salad. Fresh bread lay cooling on wooden trenchers nearby.

"Bless the food, Severus," Anastasia smiled at him as he pulled his chair up to the table.

Hermione folded her hands politely as Severus bowed his head and chanted a prayer in a language she didn't know. She suddenly had a vision of him doing the same thing as a young child.

She smiled slightly at him through the brown curls draped over her face as she bowed her head out of respect.

Severus helped Hermione fill her plate while Jacob carved a piece of turkey for her. Hermione noticed as she waited for her plate that the green carpet really was thick grass, growing up from the floor. She slipped her shoes off and curled her toes in it. It felt refreshing after the long day of travel.

Hermione picked up a fork and examined it. The glasses were crystal and she assumed the plates were as well, but she was amazed at her clear glass forks and knives. The person that had made these was a master at their craft.

"This is delicious," said Hermione, sampling some of the food. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of a warm, home-cooked meal in her mouth.

"We're glad you like it," said Jacob, smiling widely for the first time since they had arrived. "Will you be staying all season?"

"I was planning on it," said Severus as he took a few mushrooms for himself.

"I still think you should come visit us in France for awhile," said Anastasia.

Severus wished his mother would just drop it about France. He wasn't even expecting them here, but he should have guessed his mother would show up eventually. She was probably dying of curiosity over what kind of girl would marry him.

He watched as his father uncorked a bottle of champagne. Jacob filled all four glasses.

Hermione stared at her glass, turning slightly green. Severus had to fight back the urge to laugh at Hermione's expression.

"Might make you feel better," he whispered to her. He watched as she experimentally took a sip and then nodded slightly at him.

Small bowls of strawberries appeared near their dishes.

"Don't over do it," Severus warned.

"Have you ever been to France?" Anastasia asked Hermione.

"Yes," said Hermione truthfully. "I think it's why Severus chose Russia. I had never been here before."

"There are so many things to see here," Anastasia conceded. "No doubt you'll be busy all summer."

"No doubt," Hermione said, smiling politely at her mother-in-law.

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Hermione looked at Severus across the great expanse of bed, her arms crossed. A blue bathrobe was tightly belted around her waist and some of her white nightgown poked out from behind it.

"I didn't know they were going to stay the night," Severus said quietly. He was wearing a white t-shirt and black flannel pants. "I'm sorry."

"Well, you couldn't have thought they'd be making off for the Portkey Station to be off to France after what we just went through today," Hermione said crossly. "I just don't understand why you have to sleep on the floor. There's plenty of room up here."

That's what I'm afraid of, Severus thought to himself, rolling his eyes to the ceiling and taking a deep breath.

"What if I snore?" Severus asked her as he crossed his own arms.

"I can still hear you if you're on the floor," Hermione said, annoyed.

"Not if you put a silencing charm around the bed," Severus reasoned. He was getting annoyed. It was almost as if the girl actually wanted him in bed with her.

"I can see the reasoning in that, except I've seen you sleep a number of times, and I've never heard you snore," Hermione said as she pulled back the covers.

"Fine," Severus snapped, glaring at her. "But if I snore, you are to kick me directly to the floor."

"I'll have *no* problem doing that," Hermione said as she undid the belt to her robe.

"I think I'll go take a proper bath," Severus said, thinking about relieving his needs before they ever arise. "I need it after today, and it will give you a chance to fall asleep before I join you and have the chance to disturb you."

"Fine," Hermione said as she slipped between the covers. "I'll probably be asleep by the time you get out."

Severus felt his body respond to her words.

'She wasn't talking to you, this time, either!' Severus snarled silently to himself.

"Well then, goodnight. I'll see you in the morning." He tried to smile, but it looked pained.

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Severus walked back into his bedroom, his hair still damp from his bath. He had relieved himself twice before he had finally pulled the plug in the antique tub. He was no longer a young man and felt sore and extremely tired from the experience.

There was a single candle burning by the bed, and he saw Crookshanks' ginger, curled up form standing out on the dark coverlet.

On the side he intended to sleep on. At this point he had gotten used to the idea of sleeping on a comfortable mattress and was disappointed.

"Shoo, kitty," Severus whispered as he tried to pull the covers back.

Crookshanks got up and placed himself firmly in the center of the bed. Then he fixed Severus with a stare that made Severus' cheeks turn pink.

"I'm not *that* bad, you know," Severus whispered, glancing at the curly, brown mass of curls poking out of the covers on the side opposite to him.

Crookshanks purred and closed his eyes. Severus shook his head and got in the bed.

Perhaps the feline knew what was for the best, after all.

Getting to Know the Family

Chapter 10 of 17

An inappropriate moment and a day with the in-laws.

Getting to Know the Family

Hermione woke up to the smell of soap and delicious cologne. She opened her eyes to see Crookshanks bathing himself in the bedroom window. A grey sky was reflecting pinks and yellows. A strong arm was thrown over her, pinning her to the bed.

She examined the hand near her eyes. Small black hairs grew across the back of it, getting thicker as they went up Severus' arm.

Hermione tried to extract herself by sliding away and out of the bed.

When she started to stir, Severus groaned in his sleep and pulled her closer, spooning her firmly. Her night gown had pushed itself up to her waist again, and his morning erection was pressing firmly through his flannel pants, into the thin panties covering her bottom.

'Oh, this is not fair,' Hermione thought crossly, looking at the ceiling. *'He wouldn't want this if he was awake, and it's taking advantage of him.'*

He shifted himself, and one of his hands ended up firmly cupping one of her breasts.

Hermione found herself shifting with him and the end result was his morning erection pressing against her in a very pleasurable way. Her breathing became ragged.

Severus' eyes flew open.

He was holding Hermione in a most inappropriate way, not to mention his nether regions seemed to take control in his sleep and had plans of their own. He looked at her and eyes were closed.

Thank the Gods for small favors.

Probably dreaming of Weasley or another boy her age. She would be a prize for whatever man she chose.

He leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her shoulder. Then he slowly loosened his grip and slid over to his side of the bed to regain his senses.

Hermione crossed her eyes in frustration.

She tried to control her breathing and not jump on her husband. She looked over her shoulder at him. His eyes were closed and his breathing was deep as he lay on his back.

She sighed and rose for the day. Maybe a long relaxing bath with a pulsing showerhead would relax her. She grabbed her blue bathrobe and walked to the bathroom.

Severus cracked an eyelid as he heard the door click shut. He raised the covers and looked at the tip of his erection. He saw dampness on the fabric. He swirled a fingertip in it, and then smelled it tentatively.

It was most certainly not his scent. He felt himself throb.

He untied the waistband of his pajamas and dipped his hand underneath. He heard the water of the bath running in the walls and knew she wouldn't be back immediately.

He scraped as much of her scent as he could onto his fingers and breathed in deeply. Not more than a few drops at the most, but a most intoxicating aphrodisiac.

Severus tasted his fingers and ran his hand over his shaft, his hand gripping it firmly. He closed his eyes and entertained a fantasy that he had slowly pulled her nightgown up, smacked her bottom firmly, and placed soft kisses over her shoulders as he ripped her panties off and had her.

In his fantasy, she bucked against him with wild abandon, insisting one of his hands slide over her sex to a rhythm she liked and the other pulling gently and twisting one of

her nipples.

As he exploded, the Hermione in his fantasy climaxed, screaming his name.

He felt the soft droplets of his own climax fall on his shirt. He took a moment to regain his breath and looked down at himself. He felt a thin crust cracking on his upper lip as fluids began to dry and pull at his skin.

He blushed furiously. This was depraved.

He ripped his night clothing off and went to the cupboard to get his day clothing so he could dress for the day.

As Hermione walked back in the bedroom, she saw Severus washing his face in a white basin on a small wooden table near one of the walls. He was in trousers and shirtsleeves, his tight vest with so many buttons down the front was undone at the throat, but still outlined his torso.

She had satisfied herself in the bath, but her body wanted him to touch her. She wanted to feel his lips again. On her lips... her shoulder... had he even been awake enough to know he had kissed her the last time?

In the morning light she could see the room clearly. Dark grey brocaded wallpaper ran over the walls, only interrupted by pewter fixtures and accents.

Severus looked up at Hermione. She gave him a dirty look briefly before walking to the heavy black wardrobe with her things were in and pulling out dark brown cloak.

Severus couldn't imagine what he had done wrong. Perhaps the time change was affecting her adversely.

"I think my mother and father will be departing after breakfast," Severus said, drying his face with a small towel.

"What will we do for the rest of the day?" Hermione asked, pinning the cloak closed with a pewter broach.

"I was thinking of seeking conversation with the Brotherhood," Severus said. "We will see if their representative will meet us here."

"Why aren't we going to them?" Hermione asked, disappointed she wouldn't be able to see the library.

Severus hesitated. "Hermione, I think you should sit down."

Hermione sat down in a large, overstuffed chair. "Is there something wrong? Are they dark wizards?"

"They're as neutral as one can possibly get," said Severus dryly. "Their noninvolvement in world affairs has raised eyebrows on more than one occasion."

"All right..." Hermione said slowly.

"They are called a brotherhood for a reason, Hermione," said Severus gently.

"No women allowed," said Hermione furiously. She began to wonder why she even came along.

"There is a reason for it, Hermione," sighed Severus.

"Really? I'd love to hear it!" Hermione remarked hotly.

"Do you know about the Amazons?" Severus asked.

"The single-breasted archers that wiped out some Greeks by making them think they were prostitutes sent to reward them and killed them in their sleep?" Hermione asked, her nostrils flaring in anger and her brows furrowed.

"What a flair you have for retelling history," Severus said disdainfully.

"Anyway," Hermione said sharply. She really was flustered. Severus tried not to laugh at her stubborn expression.

"Anyway, you have studied the Balance of Energies theory, haven't you?" Severus countered.

"Of course," Hermione snapped at him. "There are feminine and masculine energies in magic using. They can be volatile if applied wrongly."

"Exactly," said Severus dryly. "At one point the Amazons and the Brotherhood were at war. Siberia was the result of a major battle. Millions of Muggles were killed."

"Good Lord," said Hermione, sagging slightly.

"After the Amazons were nearly wiped out, the library was warded to prevent them from enacting a pact of revenge." Severus said quietly, knowing how disappointed she was. "And Polyjuice Potion won't work; it was tried once. The result was -- a mess."

Hermione flinched.

She didn't know whether it was because she had been thinking of using Polyjuice Potion, or because she had stolen the ingredients to make it from his supplies when she was younger. She felt a pang of guilt.

"I promise, I will see what I can do," said Severus.

"Thank you," Hermione said dully, trying but failing to hide the disappointment in her voice.

Twice and it hadn't even been breakfast yet.

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Anastasia Snape downed the contents of the small blue ceramic bottle halfway through her breakfast and made a bitter face.

Hermione looked at the bottle curiously.

A droplet on the lip of the bottle shimmered metallic green in the sunlight that fell softly through the tree branches in the dining room.

"It is a youth serum Severus came up with while he was still in school." Anastasia beamed. "He was such a clever little boy."

"Really, Mother." Severus pinkened under Hermione's gaze. "I had already been accepted into an advanced training program by then."

He noticed her look: delighted and surprised at his embarrassment. He felt his pink flush deepen into a burning red.

"He came up with this when he was still at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, sniffing the bottle Anastasia had just handed to her. Lemony. "That's amazing."

"It was his seventh-year project," said Jacob. "His mother begged him to try."

"I just wanted to see him make something useful," Anastasia insisted.

Hermione caught Jacob rolling his eyes before his face disappeared behind the Russian language paper he was reading. Hermione couldn't read the headline, but it looked like Viktor Krum's wife, Tristan, had given birth to twin girls.

Tears were openly streaming down Viktor's laughing face as he held one of the tiny girls. The pretty, blonde Tristan looked weary, but smiled at the camera, holding the other twin.

Anastasia noticed Hermione's gaze.

"You are a fan of Bulgaria?" Anastasia asked.

"She's a friend of Krum's," Snape said, taking a sip of his tea. He found his mind wandering to the fact that he had no idea how good of a friend Krum was to her.

"Viktor Krum is your friend?" Jacob's interest was suddenly piqued. "Are you serious?"

"We met during the tri-wizard tournament," said Hermione, knowing the look of a Quidditch fanatic when she saw one. "We went to the ball together."

"You're *that* girl?" Anastasia asked, amazed. She glanced at Severus.

"Mother," Severus said, not bothering to hide his disappointment. "You've been reading those rags again."

"Only to see if she's done anything scandalous enough to get in them," Jacob snorted.

"Well," said Anastasia, huffing. "One can't help but hear international news."

"That pathetic fib made international news?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"So, what really happened?" Jacob said curiously.

"I'm friends with Harry," Hermione said. "I'm friends with Viktor. We went to a dance almost four years ago. Our mothers still talk to each other. He had a bit of a crush on me for awhile. Obviously he's gotten over it."

Jacob looked at the front of the paper. "Obviously. Well I, for one, am glad that's been cleared up."

Hermione heard a tone of finality and knew Anastasia would talk of it no longer. Her mother had a tone that was similar.

"So," Hermione said, going back to Anastasia. "What does this potion do, exactly?"

"If you drink them religiously you can slow down the aging process," Anastasia said. "If you are elderly it can reverse the aging process altogether."

"How does it do that?" Hermione asked, gaping at the bottle. People would kill for this.

"It makes the body think aging is a disease. It builds and replenishes new cells at an advanced rate," Severus said. "Then it causes the old cells to slough off so you don't get all lumpy with build up."

"That was a bug that took awhile to work out," said Jacob, his shoulders shaking with laughter behind his paper.

"It wasn't funny," said Anastasia hotly. "If you were a gentleman you would never speak of it again."

"Then I'm jolly well glad I'm no gentleman," said Jacob from behind his paper. Then he burped.

"I cannot eat with a pig," said Anastasia, throwing down her napkin. "I am going to gather our things." She rose and stormed off.

"Nosy thing, isn't she?" said Jacob, lowering his paper when he was sure Anastasia was gone.

"Too late to do anything about it now," Severus said, shrugging. He turned to Hermione. "I'm sorry you have to be inflicted with this. She'll get into your parentage at some point. Just remember: she really doesn't intend to be mean or malicious, she just doesn't know any better."

"Alright," said Hermione. "I'm sure she would never mean any harm."

"Indeed," said Jacob behind his paper, making Hermione wonder.

Severus and Hermione saw his parents off after lunch. Hermione watched curiously as Jacob loaded up the flying carpet.

"You ever seen one?" he asked, watching her expression.

"No," Hermione said.

"You should get Severus to take you on an aerial tour with the estate carpet," Jacob said. "He was never very much good on a broom, but he can manage a carpet alright."

"I'll remind him, later," said Hermione, glancing back at the house and making out the shadows of Severus and Anastasia arguing in the kitchen window.

"Don't let the Snape temperament put you off," said Jacob tying down a large, red trunk with a thick white rope. "We're a fairly vocal group."

"I knew that," said Hermione, chuckling.

"Suppose you did," said Jacob, smiling at her. "You seem to be a strong girl, you'll do fine. Don't let him walk over you."

"I don't plan on it," said Hermione, straightening herself a bit.

"No one ever plans on it," said Jacob with an amused look on his face.

Suddenly there was a loud noise from the house.

"Jacob!" Anastasia shrieked out the now open kitchen window. It was more of a command than a request.

"See what I mean," said Jacob, finishing his knot and standing up straight.

"Yes, my dear?" Jacob yelled back.

Hermione noticed he made no move to get closer to the house.

"Tell Severus he must at least come visit us for a week in France during his break," Anastasia demanded.

"I'm sure we can manage a week," said Hermione under her breath before something reflecting the annoyed look on Jacob's face came out of his mouth.

"They're on their honeymoon," said Jacob exasperatedly. "They want some time alone, darling."

"They can untangle themselves for a week," said Anastasia firmly. "We have bedchambers in France as well."

"Mother!" Hermione heard Severus behind her in the kitchen, appalled.

She waved a hand dismissively at him.

"I'm sure we can stop on our way back to Britain," yelled Hermione.

Anastasia looked smug as she retreated back to the kitchen, closing the shutters as she pulled her head back in.

"Last stop on the way home," said Jacob. "Good choice."

Hermione shrugged.

Anastasia came out of the house carrying a small brown traveling bag, Severus following her with a scowl on his face.

After Jacob and Anastasia had kissed them both goodbye and settled onto the carpet, Hermione and Severus waved them off as they soared away.

"They're taking all that to Portkey Station?" Hermione asked, bewildered as they climbed up the few steps back into the house.

"No doubt they'll rent someone to be their porter once they get there." Severus shook his head as he held the door open for her. "Mother hates having to keep track of all their things with all those people bustling about."

"Why didn't we do that?" Hermione furrowed her brows as they entered the small kitchen. She watched Severus take a kettle off a hook on the wall and fill it with water from a small metal pump in a deep sink.

"Because I didn't think you'd like the idea of paying a wizard for use of his house-elves in such a manner," Severus said stiffly.

"Oh," Hermione said.

He was right, of course.

Hermione looked around the kitchen. The counters were old and made from sort of yellow stone. The floor was yellowish tile. The cabinets and table were of worn wood. Nothing at all like the dining room.

If Hermione hadn't known better, she'd have thought she was in a Muggle kitchen in an old house.

"Pieter should be here soon," said Severus grimly.

He stoked a fire in the hearth and hooked the kettle above the flames before he started setting the table for tea.

"Who is Pieter?" Hermione asked.

"Someone I never thought the Brotherhood would trust with anything," muttered Severus.

"How can I help?" asked Hermione.

It was obvious Severus had a past with this person and she'd find out the gory details soon enough.

"The elves made small cakes last night," said Severus as he opened a cupboard and took out a tin of loose tea leaves. "They should be in the preservation cube on the counter."

Hermione tried not to cringe at the mention of the house-elves. She knew they must be present. She was hoping to discover their whereabouts and recruit them into S.P.E.W. later.

Hermione turned and examined the cube on the counter. It was frosted and she could see *something* in it, but she couldn't figure out how to open the seamless object.

Severus looked over her shoulder when he couldn't figure out what was taking her so long.

"One of the brightest students at Hogwarts can't figure out how to open a preservation cube?" Severus asked in a sneering, patronizing tone.

Hermione was no longer a student at Hogwarts. He could no longer treat her like a fool. They shared the same name, although not the same life. They were partners in the Order.

Plus, she was still annoyed at him after what had happened this morning in the bedroom. She decided to take Jacob's advice.

She brought her bent arm back sharply and felt it sink into Severus' stomach.

His chin smacked the top of her head firmly as he doubled over.

They both fell to the floor as they tried to balance themselves.

"Well it's nice to see Albus has chosen competent agents," boomed a thick, Russian-accented voice behind them.

"Hello, Pieter," said Severus, pulling himself up from the floor and offering Hermione a hand, although he was still rubbing his sore stomach. "I didn't hear you Apparate."

Hermione looked up, rubbing the top of her head. A lock of black hair dangled in Severus' eyes, and she noticed little lines at the corners of them as they crinkled when he looked down at her in mild amusement.

She felt light-headed. It must be from the bump on her head.

The man who must be Pieter reached out to her other hand, and the men pulled her to her feet.

"I didn't. I rode over on my broom and walked in the back door. You should learn to lock that."

Pieter was a dark haired, tall wizard with a long, thick black beard. His deep burgundy robes seemed to be made out of thick wool and were belted with a belt fashioned of gold braid. A tall, black, brimless hat with a red stone set in the brow and gold embellishments around the edge made him look even taller. Hermione could see the tips of black curly-toed boots poking out from under his hem.

His white teeth glinted ferally at her from the depths of his facial hair. One of his bright blue eyes winked.

"Thank you," said Hermione as she tried not to snatch back her hand.

She watched as Pieter slid the top of the seamless box to the side and grabbed a small pink cake.

"Where are Uncle Jacob and Auntie Stacy?" Pieter asked as he bit into it.

Hermione began to wonder if she should just assume every sarcastic wizard they ran across was related to Severus.

"Just missed them," said Severus as he scowled at his cousin. "If you wanted to see them you should have been here last night. It would look suspicious if you just showed up in the afternoon as they were leaving. I don't want them involved in this."

"I would say I was taking an afternoon off to take you fishing," Pieter said in thickly accented English, as he checked the kettle over the fire. "They would believe that."

"True," said Severus thoughtfully. "What are you doing Saturday?"

"Fishing with you," said Pieter, not looking at him, but smiling at Hermione. "Do you fish, young lady?"

"Depends on where it's from," said Hermione, thinking of the precarious perch outside her window.

"You do not like the ledge at Hogwarts?" Pieter laughed heartily, a great booming noise. He held out a chair for Hermione at the table and she sat. Pieter pulled up a chair next to her. "It does have the tendency to put one off the first time, but there are many fine fish in the lake."

"The location here is much more conventional," said Severus, putting a small orange cake in front of Hermione. "There's a lake on the grounds. Father keeps it stocked."

"Then I would very much enjoy it," said Hermione politely.

"What a partner," Pieter said, smiling at Hermione. "She is smart and she likes to fish. Could such a vision be more perfect?"

Pieter reached out and put a gentle kiss on the back of her hand, his sparkling blue eyes never leaving hers.

Hermione's cheeks felt warm. No one had ever talked to her like that. No one had ever looked at her like that.

Severus suddenly found his mind full of homicidal thoughts involving his cousin. His hand clenched the handle of the kettle.

"So how is Anna?" said Severus. To his annoyance his voice seemed a bit high and he thought it cracked slightly.

"Wonderful," said Pieter, smiling widely. "We are expecting a child again!"

"Good God man, get a hobby!" Severus exclaimed in surprise as he poured out tea for them. "What is it now, three?"

"This is the fourth," said Pieter proudly. "I hope this one is a boy. Then we will have two of each."

"Congratulations," said Hermione. "When will the baby be here?"

"Actually, any day now," Pieter admitted as he pulled a wand out of the sleeve of his robes and waved it at a cupboard. A small carton of sugar flew out. "Anna says it has moved in the right way and we will see them soon."

"Should you be away from home?" asked Hermione as Severus put a small pitcher of cream on the table.

"No," said Pieter as he levitated a generous measure of sugar into his cup and stirred it with his wand. "But I have a coin enchanted to vibrate when it is time. I can Apparate to her in the blink of an eye."

"Should be used to it by now," said Severus smirking into his cup of black tea.

"When are you going to find a woman good enough for you, Severus?" asked Pieter, who apparently knew the marriage was one of convenience. "Your house should be full of little shrieking voices. You would be amazed how relaxing it is."

"I have an entire school full of children," said Severus, glancing at Hermione. "That's relaxing enough."

"You never know," Pieter said his eyes twinkling. "After your mission is over you may decide not to bother with a divorce."

Hermione and Severus felt their cheeks burn.

Severus reached out to refill his teacup. Hermione took a bite of her cake. They avoided each other's gaze like their lives depended on it.

Pieter inwardly shook his head. That Shackbolt fellow was right. These two were pathetic. Something had to be done.

"You will dine with us tonight!" said Pieter as he smiled at them. "I will bring the documents Albus wants you to look over. Anna would love to see you."

"That would be wonderful," said Hermione before Severus could say no. "We'll look forward to it."

Severus frowned into his teacup as he took a sip.

Pieter was planning something.

It made him nervous.

The Titov Family

Chapter 11 of 17

Dinner at Pieter's. A gift of documents. An invitation from the Amazons.

Chapter Eleven: The Titov Family and the Assignment Begins

"Oh, *honestly*, Severus," Hermione said in an annoyed voice. "I don't think this is necessary."

Severus was holding out a set of thick, green winter robes and a brown fur cloak.

"You will catch a chill wearing... *that*," Severus said, nodding at the short brown and white striped Muggle dress she was wearing.

He ran his eyes over her again. It had no sleeves. It showed her *knees*. The neckline was so low, it dared to reveal an endearing little freckle just over her--

"They're used to seeing clothing like this, Hermione," said Severus, grasping at straws as he shook the robes at her. "With Anna so close to her time she might feel a little protective about her husband. Especially when you are wearing conventional Muggle clothing that shows more than they are used to."

"Oh," said Hermione, sounding disappointed as she took the robes from him. "I didn't even think of that. You're probably right."

Severus let out a sigh of relief.

Hermione stepped behind a wooden changing screen. It was painted a pale cream with pink roses dappled across the segments and reminded Hermione of something out of a Victorian novel.

Anastasia had insisted on the six paneled obstruction on the grounds that the room was too masculine and needed a bit of lightening up. Hermione and Severus had been thankful for the bit of privacy.

Hermione slipped out of the dress her mother had given her and stepped into the robes Severus had presented her with.

They were surprisingly light, although thick and they seemed to be made out of a material similar to cashmere. She rubbed the material between her fingers curiously and made a mental note to ask Severus about it later.

"Better?" asked Hermione, stepping out from behind the screen. The robes had some form to them, but had a high collar and the hem went down to her feet.

"Much," said Severus, holding out the fur cloak. She took it from him and fastened it with a brooch in the shape of a silver teardrop. "You look very nice."

"Thank you," said Hermione. "Are we Apparating?"

"No," said Severus. "Floo."

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Anna Titov jumped slightly as the flames jumped up in the hearth behind her.

She smiled as her husband's cousin stepped through the flames and gave her a small smile. She always liked it when Severus smiled; he did it so infrequently.

Severus saw Anna put a hand to her pregnant stomach and wince slightly. He ran to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Is it time, Anna?" he cried, his voice slightly high.

Anna scowled, her large brown eyes glaring at him. Her straight black hair was pulled back into a large bun. Kohl darkened her eyes and her lips were rouged. Her light brown skin seemed to shine from the various fires in ovens and stovetops in the small kitchen.

"You are as bad as Pieter," Anna said in heavily accented English. "I have done this before, you remember."

Then she whacked him with the wooden spoon she was holding.

Someone giggled, and Anna peered into in the dim light.

She hadn't even noticed the girl's arrival behind Severus.

Severus' new wife was a pretty girl with wild, curly brown hair she had done up. She smiled shyly and Anna smiled back wearily as a bowl of something whisked by Severus' head.

The kitchen was very small. Small yellowish-tan tiles covered the walls and floor. Large wooden cabinets and bins lay above and below the long counter that lined the walls. A large, cast iron, wood-burning stove creaked, and bubbling noises came from it. An assortment of copper pots rested on the top of it, wooden spoons resting on their rims.

Anna reached out to take the girl's hand and pulled her closer. "You brought someone useful, for a change." She said to Severus. She looked at his new wife. "Can you stir a cauldron?"

"Yes," she said, receiving Anna's friendly hug without an introduction.

"Good, then you can stir a pot," said Anna, handing her a wooden spoon, steering her to the stove and taking her cloak from her. "Stir the first two like a simple growth potion, the second like a polishing potion, and the last can be stirred anyway you like. It is just soup. Severus, Pieter is already into the vodka. Stop him. If I have to put up with another evening of off-key opera I may kill him."

The girl laughed as Severus hurried out of the room. "Is it really that bad?"

"It is horrible, and the children think it is amusing and encourage him," Anna said, lowering herself down slowly in a black wooden chair near a small red wooden table. "Sometimes they join in. They sound like werewolves in pain."

"I'm sorry," she said, chuckling as she stirred a pot.

"I would not normally mind," said Anna admittedly, "but I have been having a short temper as of late."

"I can imagine," said the girl, nodding at Anna's midsection.

"I think this will be the last," said Anna thoughtfully. "Anymore and he'll have his own army." She paused as she watched her stir. "Thank you for helping."

"Not a problem," Hermione said, handing Anna a biscuit from a basket hanging from a hook. Anna bit into it and smiled.

"Sometimes I get so busy I forget to eat," Anna admitted.

"Really?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow, not surprised at all.

Anna smiled widely. She already liked this girl. Severus really had found the one for him. It was about time.

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Severus shook his head as he walked into Pieter's den. He seemed to be doing the can-can by himself, as he browsed a bookshelf, holding a small tumbler in one hand.

"SEV-EH-UH-EH-UH-EH-UH-EH-UH!" shrieked a Tarzan yell from a corner.

"Well, goodness, young man," said Severus, amused as he scooped up his dark-haired, young cousin. "How terrifying you have become!"

"I am five," the small child said in almost perfect English. "And my name is Misha Titov."

"Your English is very good, Misha Titov," said Severus as the little boy flung his arms around Severus' neck. "What did you get for your birthday this year?"

"A training broom," he began. Severus winced. "A book about the stars, a book about Quidditch, and an Atlas."

"Very exciting," said Severus, his eyebrows raised.

"Smatrets, Misha!" said a small voice from a corner.

"Bulgaria!" Misha squirmed to be put down.

"Severus!" boomed Pieter. "How kind of you to join us for dinner!"

Severus embraced his cousin. Anna was right; he didn't need any more vodka.

"Your little ones are growing so fast," said Severus.

"They are five, three and two," said Pieter proudly, looking at the dark haired children piled in a corner pouring over an Atlas. "Misha, Nadia, and Tatiana. So far, only Misha speaks English, but the little ones are picking it up."

"I'm sorry we're such a burden," said Severus embarrassedly.

"The children would learn eventually," said Pieter dismissively. "Learning to speak to family is a good enough reason to start early."

"I never picked it up," said Severus in an annoyed tone. "They may not be able to."

"We spoke only English when you were young," said Pieter. "There was no reason for you to learn Russian. They learn things so quickly they don't understand it is supposed to be difficult."

"You're not *that* much older than me," said Severus in an annoyed tone, taking Pieter's glass away from him and taking a drink.

"Almost *half* a decade," said Pieter, walking over to a counter with bottles lined up on it. "Anna is almost *two* decades younger than me. Seventeen years."

"I keep forgetting Anna is only twenty five," said Severus as he walked over to monitor Pieter.

"It is better to wed them young," said Pieter with a twinkle in his eye. "They are willing to put up with more misbehavior and think it is attractive. Then again, you know all about that, wouldn't you Severus?"

"That was not why I was married to Miss Granger, and you know it!" Severus hissed.

"So she is 'Miss Granger' now," Pieter said loudly as his booming laugh filled the room. "You are in denial, Severus. She is fond of you. Take her, and she will be *yours*."

"Good God, man," said Severus looking over at the children in the corner. "Keep your voice down."

"How do you think they got here?" asked Pieter, raising his glass.

Severus reluctantly clinked his glass to Pieter's. "One can only imagine."

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Hermione sat at the dinner table between Nadia and Severus in a modest room lit by red candles. Pieter led a prayer in Russian and they had lifted their spoons to begin their borscht.

Nadia seemed intent on telling Hermione the events of the day and didn't seem one bit put off that Hermione didn't speak a word of Russian.

Tatiana stared at Hermione with large green eyes and played with her spoon throughout most of the meal. She seemed fascinated with Hermione's hair.

Mushrooms in sour cream and chicken followed. For dessert, little fruitcakes were served carefully by Misha before they retired to the parlor.

Pieter tired quickly after dinner, and he sank into a burgundy velvet couch with a pleasant smile on his face as Misha played the piano for them.

Anna put the girls to bed, then came down to tell them she was going to bed herself, but would look forward to seeing them again soon.

Severus rose from his place near Hermione on a love seat to embrace Anna and place a hand on her stomach. Anna murmured something to him that made his cheeks darken and he glanced at Hermione quickly.

Hermione glanced at Pieter, who seemed to be smiling at the pair.

After Anna retreated from the room, Severus made himself a drink and sat in a leather chair near Pieter, disappointing Hermione a little.

Their talk of Quidditch turned to fishing, and Misha was told to go to bed before long.

He rose from his seat at the piano and kissed both his father and Severus on the cheek before coming over to give a somewhat surprised Hermione a hug. Hermione watched him slip a book into his pocket before he left the parlor.

"Did he take the book on the desk or the table?" Pieter asked, yawning.

"The trunk," Hermione frowned.

Pieter thought for a minute, then nodded and shrugged. "Ghost stories. At least his sisters are asleep already."

"Did you bring the documents?" asked Severus.

"Yes, yes," said Pieter, waving a hand at him. "They are complicated and greatly decayed, though. It will take you some time to go through them."

Pieter walked over to his desk and opened a drawer. He pushed lightly at the bottom of one of the drawers and the bottom swung up. He reached into a hidden compartment and brought out a large package wrapped in brown paper.

"Be careful with them," said Pieter. "If they are lost--"

"Nothing will happen to them," said Severus. "I will make sure of it."

He somehow managed to tuck the package into his robes without it showing at all.

"I also have something for you," said Pieter to Hermione.

He handed her a blue envelope that seemed to shimmer.

"What's this?" asked Hermione.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Severus incredulously.

Hermione turned over the envelope and broke the seal, green wax with the imprint of an ivy leaf. When she opened the envelope, shimmering silver smoke rose out of it.

Madam Hermione Snape,

At the request of the English Ministry of Magic we extend an invitation to you to partake in an information exchange between our countries. Your presence would be welcomed at the Bibliotheca oo Amazon.

Sincerely yours,

Inessa Helenasdottir

"Well this certainly opens doors for us," said Severus, excitedly. It was the first time Hermione had ever seen him this way. "The Amazons are even worse than the Brotherhood at guarding their information."

"They seem to take the Dark Lord's invasion into what they seem to see as their territory as a personal insult," said Pieter, his eyes darkening.

"Approximate Amazon army size?" Severus asked, opening the top on the packet of papers and peeking in.

"Three hundred strong," said Pieter. "Could you imagine three hundred insulted women looking for you?"

Severus let out a snort. Hermione giggled to herself.

"I still do not feel sorry for him, mind you," said Pieter, waving a finger at Severus as he poured vodka in a tumbler for Hermione. "I am just saying it is not a place I would want to be in."

"Indeed," said Severus, closing the end of the packet that he had been peering in.

The Dark Lord may have bitten off more than he could chew, finally.

He was weakened and hiding, yet managed to catch the attention of the original militant feminist organization. Not to mention, one of the most respected magical elite forces unit in the world.

A wild part of Severus imagined it would be entertaining to watch.

Severus and Hermione Flooed back to the Snape estate and made their way to the kitchens so they could put away the basket of leftovers Pieter had insisted on sending home with them.

A small house-elf hopped up on a chair and Hermione jumped back into Severus, startled.

"Cherv will take that for you, Madam," he said.

"Thank you," said Hermione.

The elf hopped down and trotted happily into the door to the pantry with the basket.

Hermione lowered a look at Severus.

"We'll talk in the morning," he groaned sleepily.

He'd already had enough for one day.

The Translator

Chapter 12 of 17

A familiar face makes an appearance in Russia. The Titov family grows by one.

The Translator

Hermione woke to hear Crookshanks purring and she noticed a second lump weighing down the covers on her bed.

She opened her eyes and saw the small male house-elf she had seen the night before scratching Crookshanks behind the ears. The house-elf was wearing a clean red tea towel.

Severus had told her to stay in the rooms his mother had prepared for them, that he would stay in his usual rooms just down the hall.

She wasn't sure she really wanted him to leave at all, but couldn't come up with a reason for him to stay that didn't sound suspiciously like she was afraid of the dark and sleeping alone.

"Zdrast-vo-che," said Hermione to the house-elf, tentatively trying to say hello.

She didn't know what to do if the little fellow responded in Russian beyond a greeting. 'Hello' was about as far as she went. She inwardly kicked herself for coming to a country without bothering to learn the basics of its language.

"My mother was born in Scotland, Madam," said the elf in a very odd accent as he bowed to Hermione. It looked like he was trying to be polite and not laugh at what she just said. "I can speak English fluently. My name is Cherv."

"Oh good," said Hermione, relieved. She looked over at her breakfast tray and saw her post stacked on one corner.

Cherv handed her a separate small scroll with a Hogwarts seal on it.

"What's this?" Hermione asked as she took the scroll from him.

"It is from Cherv's cousin, Madam," said Cherv shyly. "I was hoping you could read it to Cherv."

"You can't read?" asked Hermione, surprised, as she took the parchment from him.

"Cherv cannot read English, Madam," the elf confessed as Crookshanks encircled him, butting him with his head and covering him with orange fur. "Cherv can read and write Russian and Greek."

"Of course," Hermione said, smiling and opening the letter. As she skimmed it, her face widened into a smile.

Cherv,

All is well at Hogwarts. The children have gone home for the season, but there is still much to do. The rooms still have to be cleaned and readied for the new students next year.

A new painting of one of the founders has been put in Headmaster's office. She is very nice and Dobby is liking her very much. She often has words with Phineas Nigellus and Dobby is now in charge of repairs in the Headmaster's office if their disagreements escalate. It is interesting work and Dobby is learning all sorts of new words that are inappropriate to say in front of a lady. Headmaster Nigellus has told me this, and I'm guessing Madam Snape is reading this to you so I cannot write what I have overheard.

Hermione laughed. Phineas was so imperious and Helga was so hard-headed that Hermione was amazed Dumbledore put them in the same room. She felt sorry for the other paintings.

Dobby thinks you need to tell Madam Snape the Legend of Felix the Kind. She would think it amusing. Also, tell her that her friends miss her very much and hopes she takes care in a place she is not familiar with.

I hope you are doing well and mother asks Dobby to tell you to give our regards to your mother.

Sincerely,

Dobby

Hogwarts Free-Elf

"Who is Felix the Kind?" Hermione asked as she stopped reading and refolded the letter.

"Master's great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather." Cherv hopped around on the bed. "He freed all the elves on the estate."

"He did?" asked Hermione. Obviously this was a man ahead of his time. Hermione smiled at the little elf with keen interest.

"He thought we would look more dignified in uniforms," said Cherv, ceasing his hopping. He looked woeful. "He was not thinking clearly after a local drinking contest."

"Because uniforms are clothes," Hermione faded off. Ahead of his time, perhaps. Ahead of his vodka, definitely not. "If you're all freed and have uniforms, why aren't you wearing them?"

"We would not want to... well..." Cherv said hesitantly.

"You're embarrassed," said Hermione, reaching for the breakfast tray on the table near her bed. She looked at her open-faced ham and cheese sandwich and blinked. She would have to get used to the food differences here. She didn't want to seem ungrateful to the small elf.

"It's not something to be proud of, Madam," said Cherv.

Hermione sighed and reached for her fork. "You know, Cherv, Dobby quite likes being able to decide who his employer is."

"But then you take the risk of," Cherv looked around to see if anyone else could hear him. He lowered his voice to a whisper, "unemployment."

Hermione blinked hard and shook her head slightly as she began to eat her breakfast.

After she ate, Hermione dressed quickly in light blue robes and followed Cherv to Severus' chamber. She waited while Cherv knocked on the door for her.

"Enter," Severus' voice called out from inside.

The door opened into a room much smaller than hers.

Dark mahogany paneling lined the windowless walls and deep green carpet covered the floor. A bed with white sheets and a black spread lay against one wall, its covers still messy from Severus sleeping in it last night. Several small bookshelves crouched in corners, while a large green velvet couch and low glass table sat in the center of the room.

Severus sat on the couch wearing a pale yellow bathrobe. Hermione blinked a few times and shook her head slightly. He seemed to be reading a document under a pane of glass laid over the top of the low table in front of him.

"How's your Gaelic?" Severus asked sharply as he frowned at the document on the table.

Hermione winced. "Tolerable."

"Unfortunately, merely 'tolerable' is not sufficient," said Severus as he curled his lip at the offending parchment. "I will have to procure a translator."

"Is there anyone trustworthy enough to be a translator?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

Severus raised his beetle-black eyes and they bored into her.

"Well," he said sarcastically. "I did have a thought I'd pop down to Economy Translators with a few copies I'll have made and see what they think of it. Thought I'd give the Dark Lord a bit of a break for a change."

Hermione gave him a dirty look. He was beginning to really enjoy those.

He smirked at her. She was really beginning to enjoy that.

"Well, as long as the Amazons are the front line," she said brusquely as she peered at the document.

"I sent an owl to Charlie," said Severus. "I expect he'll reply by this evening."

"Weasley?" Hermione asked.

The only word she had recognized on the page was 'rise.' Her Gaelic was colorful, even if it wasn't practical. She had Seamus Finnegan to thank for that.

She pointed it out to Severus helpfully.

"Too bad Finnegan never had enough brain to think on his own," said Severus, giving her a withering look. "He'd have come in handy."

Hermione frowned, but inwardly agreed with him. It was a shame Seamus and his mother were still in denial. Seamus had gotten much better at charms through the years and would have made a good addition to the Order.

--++--

Professor Snape and Hermione,

I have some time I can take to come see you. Is three days time alright?

~ Charlie

P.S. Is the estate hooked up to the Floo network?

--++--

Charlie,

Friday is fine. The estate is fine for Flooing. It's been temporarily hooked up to the extended network for the week. Please bring pictures of everyone.

Love,

Hermione

--++--

Hermione,

We received owls from Charlie, but decided it best to put Colin in charge of sending you pictures. Have you ever seen Charlie try to organize anything?

Hope you're all right.

~ Ron

--++--

Ron,

Yes, I have seen Charlie try to organize. I was there last Christmas, remember? Don't know what I was thinking. Colin was a great idea.

I miss all of you terribly. Maybe you can visit.

Love,

Hermione

--+-

Hermione,

I'd love to come, but Harry would want to come too and it's just not safe for him there. Mum would kill me. Ginny would also like to come, but mum won't hear of that either.

Sorry,

Ron

--+-

Hermione crumpled the last parchment in her fist and scowled.

Mrs. Weasley was right. It was very inconvenient sometimes. There was no sense of putting them all in one place when they were all being potentially hunted.

Hermione saw the firelight flicker green out of the corner of her eye and she looked over to see Charlie Weasley walk through the fireplace in the ballroom.

"Oh my God," said Charlie, looking around at the opulent room.

The muscular, stocky wizard looked out of place in the huge room. His red hair was in desperate need of a haircut and his clothing was worn. He pulled a battered leather trunk in behind him. A bandage was wrapped around his left hand.

"Charlie!" said Hermione, flinging herself at him.

"Hi, Hermione," said Charlie as he smiled and caught her. "It's good to see you well."

"Severus is out," said Hermione apologetically. "He should get back soon. I was hoping he'd get back before you got here."

"I'm sure he'll be along," said Charlie, grinning as he looked at the cozy chairs and tea service Hermione had moved into the large empty room. "He can't stay away forever."

"You must be starving," said Hermione, suddenly realizing how much Charlie looked like Ron when he was hungry and her chest ached a little for the familiarity that came with being surrounded by friends. "I figured we'd have some nibbles while we waited for Severus but you look like you need something more than this."

"A little," admitted Charlie. "But I'll wait for dinner."

"But dinner is a few hours away." Hermione lifted a small silver domed cover from the top of a plate and a small pink cake lay on a plate of delicate porcelain. Hermione cut him a small piece of cake and poured him some tea.

"I'll be fine," Charlie waved her concerns off as he poured cream into his tea and hungrily eyed the piece of cake she had cut for him.

They had just gotten settled when the flames in the fireplace went green again.

"Hello, Charlie," said Severus in a cold, cordial voice as he stepped into the room. "How is your mother?"

"Fine," said Charlie, trying to swallow the bite of cake he had just bitten into before he rose and shook Severus' hand.

"What happened to your hand?" Severus asked sharply. "Did you have trouble on the way?"

"Hatchling got a little frisky," Charlie muttered sheepishly.

"You weren't wearing gloves?" Severus frowned.

"Sometimes it's just not personal with the little ones," Charlie said, trying to look innocent.

"You're as bad as Hagrid," said Severus, shaking his head. "And I'm guessing you're starving."

"Err--," said Charlie, really looking like Ron now.

"Get into the kitchens and get a real meal," Severus commanded fiercely. "Your mother would be furious with me."

"I'm nearly thirty," said Charlie, weakly defiant.

"All the more you should know better," said Severus sternly. He swung around to face Hermione. "And I'm guessing that cake and tea is your idea of lunch?"

"Err--" Hermione stammered.

"Get a sandwich, both of you," Severus snapped. "Then we'll begin going over the paperwork."

"Then get in a bit of fishing before bed?" Charlie asked hopefully.

"Perhaps," said Severus, trying and failing to sound disinterested. "I suppose we could carpet to the lake and get in a couple of hours."

"In the dark?" Hermione asked in a confused voice.

"Not this time of year," Charlie said. "Haven't you noticed? Aren't there any windows here?" He looked around.

"The rooms that have windows are enchanted," explained Severus. "All the light changes bother my mother."

Hermione blinked in realization. The days must be almost completely light. She had forgotten completely.

"Can we lift the enchantments?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"As long as we put them back before we leave," Severus said, frowning. "I thought it would bother you so I didn't alter them."

"Round the clock daylight would be ideal," said Hermione. "I have shutters on my windows."

"I'll have it seen to," said Severus. "Now go eat. We'll be dining with Pieter and Anna tonight. If you're starving, he'll accuse me of neglecting you."

"Fine," said Hermione, sighing.

"I think he's secretly taking lessons from my mum," Charlie said conspiratorially as he fell into step beside Hermione on the way to the kitchen. "At least he's making an effort to be tolerable to you."

'You have no idea,' thought Hermione.

-++-

"So, Charles, you are a friend of Hermione's family?" Anna asked during dinner.

They were sitting in the Snape dining room. Once again, Hermione had kicked her shoes off under the table so she could curl her toes in the cool grass. The enchanted ceiling was shades of dusky orange and blue.

"My father studies Muggle technology as a hobby," said Charlie, trying to distract himself from the pretty woman with his herring salad. "Our families met when Hermione started going to Hogwarts. My mother wanted to make sure she was settling in well in her new household."

"I understand," said Anna seriously. "Your Marriage Law was quite a shock to us all. Poor Hermione is lucky to have gotten a man like our kind Severus. It could have been very unpleasant for her."

Charlie choked on his salad and Hermione pounded him on the back.

Severus tried to stare down Charlie. He may have succeeded if Charlie's eyes had not been full of tears.

"Do be careful," said Anna, laying a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "I think the house-elves may have missed a bone or two."

"It's wonderful," said Charlie, regaining his composure. "I swallowed the wrong way."

He sipped his water and glanced at Severus. He imagined Severus thought himself fierce looking, but he was still slightly pink from Anna's compliment. Charlie snickered into his water.

"How long will you be staying?" Pieter asked as he reached for a plate of chicken kiev.

"Probably just the weekend," admitted Charlie. "The little ones will have a fit if I'm gone for too long."

"Do you have many children?" asked Anna.

"In a way," said Charlie, grinning.

"Charles works at the Romanian Dragon Preserve," said Severus.

"I would like a dragon, please," said Misha politely.

"If you study hard and learn about them, maybe one day you can take care of them as well," said Charlie seriously.

"Father, can I have a book on dragons?" asked Misha in careful English.

"I believe there might already be a few in the library," said Pieter. "You may look after dinner." Pieter turned to Charlie with interest. "Very interesting career path for someone who originated in a country where dragon breeding is illegal."

"England is just too small," said Charlie. "One out of control dragon and it's pandemonium. Romania is more practical."

"I have to agree with you," said Pieter as he burped and reached for another buttered roll. "But it must have been difficult for you to study something you have never seen."

"I did my book work at Hogwarts," said Charlie defensively. "Professor Kettleburn oversaw my training personally. I spent the summer between my sixth and seventh years in Romania on a student intern program."

"I have heard of the internship program," said Pieter, raising his eyebrows and reaching for his goblet of wine. "It is very difficult to get into."

"Is it?" Charlie frowned. "The professor entered for me. I didn't know until two days before end-of-term I was going."

"You must have been an exceptional student," said Anna, beaming at him.

My mother says you are always good at what you love," said Charlie, shrugging. "I think I just got lucky."

"I want to be lucky, like you," said Misha, who had been whispering in Russian to his sisters. They were staring at Charlie's bandaged hand in wide-eyed awe.

"Mne khotelos' bi drakona na moi den' rojdenia," Nadia piped up.

"What?" Hermione whispered to Anna as Pieter seemed to be gently telling the little one no.

"She would like a dragon for her birthday," said Anna. "They saw the fire dancers last Christmas, and she thinks she has found her profession."

"Hermione's never seen fire dancers," said Severus, reaching for the chicken. "Is there a performance scheduled anytime soon?"

"Sadly, no," said Anna shaking her head. "Usually in the winter."

Nadia began speaking in rapid Russian to Charlie who looked at Hermione for help.

"I'm lost," said Hermione softly.

"She's trying to negotiate for 'just a little one,'" said Pieter. "I see politics in the future for this one." He raised a single eyebrow at her and she fell silent, but continued to beam at Charlie.

"I might be in trouble," Charlie said under his breath.

-++-

Pieter, Charlie, and the three children sang off-key opera loudly as Severus poured Hermione a cup of tea in his father's study. It was a comfortable room done in brown leather and dark wood.

"I wouldn't be so bad if they all sang the same song," Hermione said to Anna, who was beginning to look annoyed.

Severus crossed his eyes in pain at a particularly high note, and Hermione and Anna giggled.

"What is all this jesting?" asked Pieter, staggering over to them, a glass of vodka sloshing around in his hand. "Does our entertaining amuse you?"

"Entertaining," mused Anna. "Was that what it was? I suspected you had eaten too much for dinner and had made yourselves sick."

"Such wonderful cooking, I could never tire of," said Pieter.

"You--," began Anna. Then she winced and placed a hand on her stomach.

Severus put his tea cup down and looked at her. Pieter placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Niet," said Anna trying to brush away Pieter's hand.

"Brat rojdaetsia," Nadia said, grabbing Tatiana's hands and trying to make her dance.

"Niet," said Tatiana, going back to the wooden dragon in front of her.

"Da," Anna said to Tatiana, who looked up from her dragon.

"Da?" asked Tatiana, who toddled over to Anna. She placed her small hand on Anna's stomach and said, "Ooh!" in a surprised little voice.

Then she went back to Nadia and joined the victory dance. "Brat!" Tatiana sang.

"Well, the girls seem to think it's a boy," said Pieter, smiling. "I believe it is time for us to go."

Pieter barked something in Russian to the children, and they all began to quickly gather their things.

Anna got to her feet and placed her hand on her husband's arm.

"I think we will have to continue this later," said Charlie, raising his glass in Anna's direction.

"I believe so," Anna said, smiling weakly at him. "Dinner tomorrow?"

"We'll bring it to your house," said Hermione quickly.

"Make some of those Cornish Pasties," said Pieter, looking over his shoulder as he escorted Anna to the fireplace, the children following behind. "I haven't had them since I was a child."

"Will do," said Charlie.

--+-

Hermione and Charlie worked in the kitchen all the next day making a simple dinner that could be put into the oven and cooked at the Titov's.

"Cherv will do that for you!" The little elf wailed helplessly, standing on a chair as Hermione and Charlie swept through the kitchen mixing food and tending things on the stove.

"Its fine, Cherv," said Hermione as she stirred a bowl of pastie filling. "We like cooking."

"You can go tidy up the garden outside," suggested Charlie as he dumped a bowl of dough onto the floured table and started kneading it. "The roses could be tidied up a bit."

"My job is kitchen," insisted Cherv grumpily. "Zemlyaa prunes the garden. She would be angry if Cherv just did it on his own."

"How many elves live here?" Hermione asked, wondering where they all were.

"I think about twenty. I do not know for certain." Cherv paused and then brightened. "Should I go suggest Zemlyaa prune the roses and Cherv help her?"

"That might be a good idea," said Charlie as he picked the dough up and slapped it back down.

Cherv hopped happily to the floor and padded out of the room.

"You might end up with more elves, that keeps up," said Charlie nodding at the retreating elf.

"They're technically all free elves," said Hermione. "They can do as they please."

"Maybe one of their offspring might want to live with Mum," said Charlie thoughtfully. "She'd really like it."

"She'd have to give them fair pay," said Hermione defensively.

"Room, board, and food *is* fair trade," said Charlie.

"That is *not* fair!" she exclaimed. "That's indentured servitude!"

"Trade is not the same as indentured servitude," said Severus, walking in through the fireplace, his arms laden with packages from the market. "Although I would hardly call that offer fair."

Hermione and Charlie both looked at Severus, annoyed.

"What?" he asked, setting the packages down on the large wooden table. "It's true."

"Did you remember the potatoes?" Hermione asked impatiently as she reached for the parcels.

"Yes, I remembered the potatoes." Severus snorted as he unpacked his load.

"Privet." A sleepy sounding voice called out in Russian from the small fireplace.

Hermione turned and saw a weary looking Pieter entering the kitchen. She was thankful they hadn't decided to use the small fireplace for spare cauldron room.

"Hello, Pieter," said Hermione. "How is Anna?"

"She fine and is sleeping with young Boris," Pieter said, smiling wearily. "I just awoke myself."

"Congratulations," said Charlie, his hands deep in a bowl of dough.

"Thank you," said Pieter. "Although, I admit I did not do much. She is incredible."

Severus smiled softly at his cousin. For the obnoxious git he was most of the time, Hermione had to admit, he certainly did love his family.

"I'll give you a potion for her," said Severus. "I thought she might need it."

"I thought you might," said Pieter. "I expect she will wake within the hour."

Severus left the room and Pieter turned to Hermione.

"He is a good man," said Pieter. "A little emotional, but a good man."

Charlie snorted.

Pieter ignored him.

Hermione was a little surprised, but acted normally as Severus returned to the room with a red ceramic bottle with a black stopper.

"Give her a drink of this every four hours," said Severus handing it to Pieter.

"How much?" Pieter asked, tucking it into his robes.

"Depends on how much she thinks she needs," said Severus with an arched eyebrow. "Too much and she might get a little silly, but it won't harm her."

"Maybe I should save some for when she's feeling better," said Pieter lecherously.

"I don't think either of you need any help," said Severus dismissively. "Go home."

"Poka," said Pieter tossing a handful of Floo powder into the small fireplace. He stepped into the flames as he waved goodbye to them.

"You just happened to have a post-pregnancy draught?" asked Charlie conversationally. "That takes a bit of involvement to make."

"Especially a third level one," said Severus, waving his wand at the potatoes. They zipped out of their jackets and began falling into small chunks into a large bowl. Carrots went in after them.

"Wow," said Charlie, impressed.

Hermione was impressed as well. That was a difficult potion to brew, and most of the ingredients for the higher level potions tended to be very pricey.

He was a good man, she finally admitted to herself.

"Are you done with the translation?" Severus asked Charlie.

"Very nearly," said Charlie awkwardly. "The part at the bottom gets kind of vague."

"Typical of the Brotherhood," muttered Severus. "Just do the best you can."

"I don't know if I can do it by the end of the weekend," Charlie admitted.

"Can you stay longer?" asked Hermione.

"The new interns arrive on Monday," said Charlie thoughtfully. "So the babies will get plenty of attention. I think I can get Master Gavin to do their training for me. He owes me a favor."

"Does this mean you can stay longer?" asked Severus, peering into a small bowl of marinating meat.

"I believe so," said Charlie. "At least until I figure out that last bit."

"Excellent," said Hermione. "I'm sure we wouldn't be able to do it without you."

The Forgotten Prophecy

Chapter 13 of 17

After a new law reduces witches to chattel, Hermione Granger finds herself married to Severus Snape in order to keep her from the Death Eaters. Hermione begins to shadow Severus in his work with the Order. They begin to form a mutual respect and love for each other after Hermione works as negotiator to a matriarchal secret society, the Amazons. Severus stations them in Russia, where his family has a home, and his cousin is active in patriarchal secret society, the Mystic Brotherhood, who has been at odds with the Amazons for years. After the Final Battle is fought, one would think the Order would be done with its work, but after Harry is scarred forever, Hermione is given a holy artifact, and a mysterious string of Muggle murders catches the attention of the Ministry, it seems as if their work is just beginning...

The Marriage Law

by teshara

The Forgotten Prophecy

When the mark of thunder shines upon one

And Darkness retreats into the night to rest

The midnight sun shines bright in the sky

One with fathers taken twice shall rise into the light

Plunging darkness into he will fall

Within him power will grow

Two paths here are laid

Light and Dark will be inside

Cleaving one into two

The answer lies with the givers of life

To show the path

Under the sea

"I think you need to go talk to the Amazons."

-+ +-

A tall, young, muscular witch with long red hair stepped through the fireplace in the Snape ballroom. She wore thick gray over-robos that were belted at the waist and a thin gold circlet across her brow.

Her eyes fixed on Hermione and she smiled cordially. "You must be Madam Hermione Snape."

Hermione was relieved the Amazonian witch was fluent in English.

As per instruction, Hermione had been waiting for the Amazonian representative alone, although Severus had insisted in waiting in the next room over in case of trouble.

"Yes," said Hermione, inclining her head slightly.

Hermione had been told not to touch anyone and had to fight back the urge to attempt to shake hands. Pieter had insisted Amazons possessed strange magical protection items and that Hermione should exercise extreme caution.

"I hope these arrangements didn't prove to be too much trouble," she said apologetically.

"It was an amusing project to work on," said the witch in an odd accent. She bowed slightly and had a distinctly amused look on her face. Her thick grey over-robos parted slightly, and Hermione saw she was wearing light blue robes cut like a toga underneath. "I am Alexandra. It is my honor to act as ambassador for the Amazons."

"It's a pleasure," Hermione said.

Alexandra reached into her robes and pulled out a rubber duck. She held it out to Hermione.

Hermione smiled as she placed her hand on the portkey.

With a 'pop' they were gone.

They reappeared on a small, stable sheet of ice floating in the ocean. The position of the sun told Hermione they were several time zones away.

Icebergs and smaller chunks of ice slowly passed by as the sheet of ice seemed to drift in a specific direction. As they rounded a huge iceberg, Hermione breathed in sharply.

A tower of ice rose thousands of meters out of the water and into the clear sky. Small slitted windows fitted with tinted clear ice were set into the smooth material.

A gigantic decorative drawbridge of thick ice began to descend as Hermione and Alexandra grew closer. Frosted ice links formed into chains that slowly lowered the nearly football field sized bridge.

When it finally stopped lowering itself, the tip of the drawbridge barely made a splash in the water. Hermione and Alexandra began walking up the incline of the drawbridge into the Bibliotheca oo Amazon.

At the top of the drawbridge, a giant set of wooden doors greeted them. Hermione was relieved to see a smaller door in one of the larger ones for people to easily come and go.

Alexandra pressed a delicate white hand that was wearing a pretty blue ring to a panel on the door and murmured a word.

Purple lightning flashed for a moment across the ancient wood doors, and there was a loud grinding sound before there was a small click and she pushed the door open.

The entire first floor was one immense white room with the ceiling over a hundred feet above the women milling about in it. Slitted windows of clear ice let in sunlight that reflected off the walls and illuminated the room. White staircases spiraled up support poles, accented with gold wrought hand rails of ivy. There were a few small blue carpets with railings around them, but what they were for, Hermione didn't know.

Fireplaces lined the walls and witches in different light colored toga-style robes popped in and out with a burst of amber flame. Hermione wondered if they were hooked up to a secure Floo Network, hence the amber flames instead of the green she was used to.

Enchanted doves carved out of ice flew about with parchments and scrolls, seeking out different women.

"This is incredible," Hermione breathed.

"A lot of thought went into it," Alexandra said proudly. "It holds some of the most valuable and rare books in the world."

"I'm hoping you'll be able to help us with our dilemma," Hermione admitted.

"If we can't, I'm not sure who will be able to," Alexandra said. She made a face like she had just smelled something foul. "No doubt you have already asked the Brotherhood for help."

"They helped us with part of our problem, but another has come up," said Hermione as Alexandra stepped onto one of the spiraling staircases. Hermione was relieved to see the stairs moving of their own accord. "Our answer was rather cryptic."

"All things of true importance are," said Alexandra sympathetically. "Hopefully my mother will be able to help you."

As they traveled upwards, Hermione noticed that it was cool, but not cold in the tower of ice. The walls must be enchanted to prevent them from melting and to prevent the occupants from freezing. She watched as they passed several unmarked identical landings. She wondered how often women got lost.

Alexandra stepped off the winding staircase at a landing, and Hermione followed Alexandra down a stark, white hallway until they arrived at a door made of ice with the head of an eagle etched into it.

The door slid upwards after Alexandra laid a hand on it, and Hermione was shocked at the interior of the room.

No windows decorated the walls of the small room. Dark wood paneling lined the walls and only a few candles burned for light. A few dark colored, comfortable looking chairs crowded the room and a tiny, elderly witch who was hunched over a parchment, scribbling furiously and sitting behind a large oak desk. Piles of books were everywhere.

"Hello." She smiled as Alexandra and Hermione wound their way around the chairs and stacks of books. Her small wrinkled face beamed at them, and her white hair was pulled behind her in a thick braid.

"This is the girl, mother," said Alexandra, bobbing slightly.

"I am Sophia," said the older witch to Hermione with, surprisingly, a hint of Scottish brogue in her voice. "And you have a problem."

"Yes, I do," said Hermione, reaching into an inside pocket of her robes. She brought out Charlie's translation.

"You do not have the original?" Sophia asked, taking the translation.

"No," said Hermione. "I was just given this to give to you."

Alexandra snorted.

"Have you seen the original?" asked Sophia, pointedly ignoring her daughter.

"Yes, I have," said Hermione.

"Get the Pensive, Alexandra," said Sophia. "And a bit of tea, dear. Thank you."

Sophia waited until she Alexandra was busying herself with a small tea service in the corner before turning to Hermione again. "You had to find a translator?"

"Yes," said Hermione. She hoped she wasn't going to be chastised.

Sophia rose and walked out from around her table, leaning on a thin knobby cane. Her toga-robes were dark grey and tied with a pewter cord with gold tassels.

"Why didn't the Brotherhood have a translation?" asked Sophia. "They've had it in their possession for some time."

"I don't know," said Hermione, wondering why she hadn't thought of that before.

"Probably because they didn't know what it was until recently," snorted Sophia. "Damn knowledge hoarders. Don't even know half of what they have. Only look for the prophecy after trouble's already started. Bunch of buffoons."

"Here's the Pensive," said Alexandra, setting a wide stone bowl on Sophia's desk that Hermione had seen her take off a shelf near the tea service.

"Have you ever used one of these before?" Sophia asked.

"Yes," said Hermione, taking her wand out and placing the tip to her temple. She pulled a smoke-like thought about the parchment from her head and placed it carefully in the bowl.

Sophia put her face in the bowl. Hermione watched as Alexandra waved her hand and shrank some of the books and furniture so there was room for them to sit and drink their tea.

Hermione blinked. Was it the ring? No one seemed to have wands here.

Sophia pulled her head out of the bowl and smiled at her daughter. "I do need to tidy up a bit, don't I?" She cackled merrily as she tottered over to a large green chair.

Hermione placed her thought back into her head and sat in a purple chair near a small table.

Sophia waved her hand and a plate of biscuits appeared. "Your translator was good. One of the Brothers?"

"Friend of the family," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Convenient," said Sophia, nodding as she took a cup and dipped a biscuit in it.

"So what do you need to know?" asked Sophia. She leveled a look at Hermione.

"Well, it's obviously about Harry Potter," Hermione said hesitantly. "I would think the mark of thunder would mean his scar. And his father and godfather were both taken from him."

Sophia nodded.

"What else?" the elder Amazon asked.

"It sounds as if Harry's going to have a struggle between dark and light within him," said Hermione uncomfortably. "Are they suggesting Harry's going to be tempted to join Voldemort, because if they are --"

"We don't know anything," interrupted Sophia. "Continue."

"Then it says the givers of life will show the path to under the sea," said Hermione. "That's where it confuses us."

"Such things are never conveniently clear." Sophia nodded as she poured herself another cup of tea and waved off Alexandra when she tried to help her. "Perhaps it is not

meant to be clear to you yet."

Hermione frowned.

"But what if it's important and I don't see it?" Hermione worried aloud.

"Then you are not the only person who did not see it," said Sophia. "We will be here for whatever you need."

"You are very gracious," said Hermione, recognizing a dismissal when she heard one. "Thank you."

"We'll be in touch with you," Sophia said as Hermione rose to leave. "We'd like to stay informed of events."

"Absolutely," Hermione said, relieved. She hadn't blown it. "We'll be waiting for your communication."

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Hermione walked into her kitchen a little after noon and was greeted by the sight of Severus and Charlie eating piroshkis.

"How did it go?" asked Charlie, handing her a pastry.

Severus' eyes seemed to bore into her.

"They're staying in touch," said Hermione. "They want to stay informed."

"Are you serious?" asked Charlie, his jaw dropped.

"Why? Is this bad?" Hermione worried.

"On the contrary," said Severus. "It is exceptionally good news. Cherv!"

The little house elf scuttled around the corner and into the kitchen at Severus' command.

"A bottle of wine," barked Severus. "We have celebrating to do."

"Yes, master," said Cherv happily.

Hermione threw a look at Severus, which he ignored.

Cherv zipped away and returned shortly with an opened bottle of wine and three glasses on a silver tray.

Hermione, Charlie and Severus toasted Hermione's good fortune, although she still wasn't sure what they were so happy about.

"How did it go with the translation?" said Charlie.

"She said it was dead on," said Hermione. "And if we don't see it maybe we aren't meant to yet."

"Typical," spat Severus. He muttered to himself as he took a deep drink from his glass.

"Maybe when they owl me, they'll be further along," said Hermione.

"When they owl *you*?" *Severus asked sharply. "Not when they contact the Order, but when they'll owl you?"*

"Sophia said they'd owl *me*," said Hermione nervously. Was something wrong? Had she done it?

"You're born an Amazon, Hermione. They don't recruit," Charlie said suspiciously with a sidelong look to Severus. "They normally don't even talk to outsiders."

"Then why me?" Hermione squeaked.

"That's a very good question," said Severus. His face darkened for a moment. "One would think they'd go to Dumbledore. Stay on your toes."

"I will," promised Hermione. "Maybe they're interested in me because I'm so close to Harry."

"That would make perfect sense." Charlie folded his arms. "But I'm not sure it's good news."

"Be careful when dealing with them," Severus cautioned. "We don't know what to expect with them."

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"Are you sure, Mother? All the way to Atlantis? No one's had contact with them for centuries."

"It will be a most difficult journey," admitted Sophia. "And it will be an important story. If we can get the girl interested in us now, we can get the chronicle firsthand."

"Does she have any idea what is going to happen to her friend?" Alexandra asked.

"No," said Sophia sadly. "It is best she not know. Her anger will fuel her determination when she finds out."

"It must be a burden to see prophecies so clearly," said Alexandra, feeling a bit sorry for her mother.

"Perhaps," said Sophia shrugging. "But I have never known any other way."

Sophia padded out of her office, her silk slippers making a soft noise on the floor as she walked to the moving staircase and rode it up to the library.

It was going to be a long day.

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"I think we should go out for dinner," said Severus suddenly. "I don't feel like staying in. Do you like the ballet?"

He felt immediately like a babbling fool, but her face brightened. They had been looking through his father's library on anything

"Dinner would be nice," said Hermione. "I've seen ballet on the telly, but I've never been."

"Well then, it will be something new," said Severus. "Be prepared to leave at seven o'clock."

"I will," said Hermione. Part of her felt confident. Another part of her worried what to wear.

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The house elf, Sloozhanka, buttoned the back of Hermione's new red velvet dress robes.

Hermione felt the last hook clasp behind her neck as she sat on the small stool in front of the vanity in her room at the Snape estate.

"I'm really sorry for the inconvenience," Hermione apologized to the little elf.

"No need for sorry," said Sloozhanka in a thick Russian accent. "Is a pleasure to help madam prepare for ballet."

Sloozhanka wore the Snape uniform. It was a scaled down version of typical wizards robes with a different color corresponding to each section of the household. Sloozhankas were blue because she was considered household staff.

The small elf waved a wand over Hermione's head, and Hermione watched as her frizzy curls tamed down to ringlets, and the elf clipped her hair into place with a bronze barrette inlaid with red gems. Hermione was pleased to know, at least here, elves were allowed restricted use of wands, because they were considered tools.

"Madame has such pretty hair," Sloozhanka pouted as she rearranged the curls into a more natural looking cascade.

"When it behaves itself," said Hermione sarcastically. "Which is rarely."

"I could do madam's everyday," the elf said, giving Hermione's hair a final pat.

"I don't think that's necessary," said Hermione reluctantly. "I keep odd hours and it would be too much trouble."

"If you decide otherwise, pull the silver tassel near the bed," said Sloozhanka. "You can summon me that way."

She hopped off the wooden footstool she was standing on. "I think madam is ready."

Hermione looked at herself in the mirror. Her deep red robes were high necked. Small beaded flowers in black crystal decorated the front. Her hair was pulled behind her head, but it fell free, long curls snaking their way over her shoulders.

"Thank you," said Hermione, and the elf bowed out of the room. At least some of the elves weren't afraid to be freed, although the bowing would have to go.

Severus popped his head into her rooms, and Hermione turned to face him.

Severus felt his body stop as she turned, one perfect moment etched forever in his mind. He felt as if ice had caught flame in his veins.

Her skin glowed golden in the amber shaded hurricane lamps. The color of the dress brought out the amber highlights in her hair, as he had suspected. The rubies in her hair glittered in the flickering light, and the heavy robes slid across the stone floor in a perfect swishing motion. Severus felt his chest tighten.

She could never, would never, be his.

Hermione looked at Severus.

His hair was once again tied back, this time with a burgundy ribbon that matched her dress. His layered silk black robes were short in front, showing his black silk trousers, leather boots, and white frilled shirt. The rest of his robes trailed behind him. He had a strange look on his face and she felt her knees go weak.

His eyebrows furrowed slightly and Hermione began to giggle.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"You need a three pointed hat and an eye patch," Hermione giggled.

"Arrr," Severus indulged himself. "Jewels for milady?" He opened a wooden box, and a pair of ruby earrings matching her dress lay inside on a pillow of purple satin.

"Wow," Hermione whispered. She looked at Severus.

"They're Mother's. You should put them on. She'd want you to wear them," said Severus as he tried to hurry her along. "We need to get going."

If he stayed with her, alone, much longer, he'd start babbling.

Hermione fastened the rubies to her ears and Severus helped her into a black fur cloak.

"I doubt it will be chilly," said Hermione. "I'm already dressed too warmly for summer, especially with the sun out all the time."

"The theatre will be cooled so people will be comfortable in more formal attire," Severus explained.

He offered her his arm, and they walked down to the ballroom so they could Floo to the theatre.

Charlie whistled at them as they passed by the door to the den.

Hermione paused and looked in the door at him. He was reading a book with one leg flung over the arm of a red chair. His green t-shirt, bare feet and jeans with a hole in one knee was a drastic opposite to Hermione and Severus.

"What are you going to see?" asked Charlie.

"Faust," said Severus.

Charlie bit his bottom lip and tried to look innocent.

"I hear it's lovely," Charlie said, sneaking a look at Hermione. She hadn't the faintest.

"It happened to be what was playing," snarled Severus.

Hermione looked at him oddly, but was afraid to ask. She'd find out soon enough.

At the ballet, Hermione watched the tragedy unfold as a decent man fell to darkness and embraced depravity. She watched Faust kill his potion-seduced love's brother because he threatened to keep them apart. When he ran to Walpurgis Night, she grinned at the prancing mythical creatures. When Hermione saw his love, her belly full of child, on trial for his crimes, she scowled. When death came in the end, his love followed the light and he fell to the abyss.

Hermione felt Severus slip a handkerchief in her hand as she tried not to cry. She sniffled as she took it and dabbed at the tears leaking from her eyes.

Severus tried not to smirk. She was moved by the piece. He hoped she would enjoy dinner.

Perhaps he was just getting his hopes up.

The food at the Wizarding restaurant was French, and small plates of food kept appearing in front of Hermione as she finished the few bites each course allowed her.

"How many courses are there?" asked Hermione. She watched as the wine in her glass refilled itself. This could be dangerous.

"I'm not sure," said Severus absently as he examined a tiny artichoke. "Fifteen?"

"Good Lord," Hermione said weakly.

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Hermione and Severus stumbled across the dim ballroom floor drunkenly giggling, the only light from the doorway to the dining room and a soft glow from above.

"Shhh," warned Severus, stopping suddenly. "Gonna wake whatzizface."

"Charlie?" Hermione offered with another giggle.

"Tha's him," said Severus, raising his finger. He looked at it. He moved it back and fourth, watching it. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Hermione grabbed his finger and pushed his hand down. "Shhh!"

"That's what / said," said Severus insistently.

Hermione looked down at her feet and watched the ripples her robes made.

"This floor is fantastic," she said as she shook her hips, making the ripples fan out.

"I used to dance in here as a child," admitted Severus, shuffling his feet and making the waves seem to rise a few inches. Hermione grinned at him.

"Your mother probably thought it was adorable," said Hermione.

"My mother *always* thinks I'm adorable," said Severus as he grimaced. "The woman has a very loose grip on reality."

"I like your mother," said Hermione, making a face at him, watching him dance a little jig, causing the floor to wave into an 'S' pattern under him. "You must have had a lot of time on your hands."

"You'd be amazed," said Severus. "Tango!" he cried suddenly. He seized her hands and spun her around.

It probably would have helped if Hermione knew how to tango.

It also would have helped if her thick robes didn't have a train. Her legs were almost immediately bound together, and she stumbled into Severus, and they fell to the floor in a heap.

"Perhaps that wasn't the best idea," said Severus, now laying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

Hermione noticed it was inset with crystals in the shape of constellations.

Severus shook his head slightly as he stared at the ceiling and the universe spun.

"Imagine that," said Hermione sarcastically, sitting up and rubbing her head.

Severus looked at her quizzically.

"You elbowed me." She scowled.

"In the head?" asked Severus incredulously, still lying on the ballroom floor. "How did I do that?"

"Damned if I know," said Hermione, laying beside him and staring at the ceiling. "Wow, that's pretty."

"My grandpapa enchanted it to glow. Before that it was just stone in the ceiling," said Severus. He sighed. Then he raised himself on one elbow and kissed her. Then he lay back down beside her.

Hermione was stunned. She chanced a glance at him, but he seemed to still be examining the galaxy.

What on earth was that, and where had it come from? He must have had too much wine, she decided.

Dear God, he had consumed a lot of wine this evening, Severus thought to himself.

He lay back staring at the ceiling. Well she hadn't screamed. Perhaps she was still stunned. He was 23 years her senior, for crying out loud.

He would have to apologize for his inappropriate behavior tomorrow, but until then perhaps he could figure out how to kiss her again.

He started as her face appeared above his, blocking his view of the stars. Before he could begin apologizing, she pressed her lips to his.

Then she lay next to him and snuggled against his side.

She was beautiful, and either she had way too much wine or she actually fancied him.

His head swam. His groin tightened. She was a pretty girl, very smart, his parents liked her- this was madness.

If the marriage was consummated, he would never agree to divorce.

Hermione laid a hand on his chest. He had kissed her. She had worked up her nerve and kissed him. Now he was just laying there. Maybe he hadn't liked it when he kissed her and was repulsed now? She wondered whether she should remove her hand from his chest when he turned on his side and pressed his lips to hers once again.

She shyly reached a hand up and placed it on the side of his face. It was smooth from being freshly shaven, and he smelled like sandalwood. He drew a single finger down her jaw line. She shivered.

"This is a very inappropriate place for this," whispered Severus hoarsely, feeling a lot more alert than a moment before.

"Where should we go?" asked Hermione nervously. She was a little afraid of where this was going to lead. The morning he had spooned her, she had awoken aroused and ready for him; now that she had given it a little thought, she was a little unsure.

What if he led her down to the dungeons? What if he hurt her? Perhaps the wine was making her paranoid. She had spent enough time with him to know he had no intention of harming anyone without being provoked.

"Perhaps my room?" Severus thought his voice sounded a little high.

"Alright," she said softly, not seeming to notice.

She was glad it was dark so he couldn't see how red her face was.

He rose to his feet and held a hand out to her. She struggled to her feet under her voluminous robes and straightened skirts.

"You truly look beautiful," said Severus, looking down on her, and he meant it.

Hermione bowed her head slightly, and Severus imagined she was blushing prettily.

He leaned down to kiss her again and felt her arms encircle his waist. He tried to avoid pressing his erection into her.

She started a little as she embraced him and encountered it, but gently began pressing into him trying to appear bold.

He opened his eyes and looked at her kissing him. He parted his lips a little and flicked at her lips with his tongue.

Her eyes flew open to see him looking at her. She snaked a hand down to his buttocks and deepened their kiss.

Severus groaned. He knew she was a virgin, but should have known better than to think she had never engaged in a few heavy petting sessions during her time at Hogwarts. At least she wasn't shy once she got going.

Hermione's mind went completely blank.

Her head was light from all the wine, her body felt like it was in overdrive, and Severus was obviously attracted to her. She heard him groan and she broke their kiss.

Severus saw her catch her breath and was surprised when she went for his collar and began kissing and nipping at his neck.

"Bedroom," he gasped out. It seemed God had finally forgiven him after all, and it was time for a bit of rewarding.

Severus saw in the low light of his bedroom that Hermione had flushed a most bewitching color of pink. Severus felt his mind catch fire.

It took him forever to undo the hundred little buttons up the back of her dress. He had felt too tipsy to wield his wand at her and had undone them by hand. He made a mental note to have his own clothing altered with snaps. Apparently the elves had felt the robes would not hang right without the proper undergarments, so Hermione was left in bloomers and a white sparse undershirt.

He undid the three buttons to his robes, and they slid heavily to the floor.

He leaned down to kiss her as her undid his trousers and they fell. He was wearing more old fashioned under things as well, his pants reaching halfway to his knees.

He broke their kiss and pulled his shirt over his head.

Severus reached out and took Hermione's hand. He kissed the back of it and led her to the bed.

"We don't have to go any further than you want to," he said gently as he slid between the sheets. He propped himself up on one elbow and turned on his side to face her as she got into the bed beside him.

"I'll keep that in mind," said Hermione as she pressed her lips to his. Her lips moved down the side of his face to his bare shoulder, and she squeezed his hip with her hand as she wrapped a leg around one of his.

"Perhaps this wasn't the best idea, after all" said Severus, instantly regretting the whole thing.

He couldn't control himself. She was young and sweet, and the wine was buzzing around his head. He had to leave.

"Why?" said Hermione, pulling back from him.

"I don't know if I'll be able to control myself," he said through clenched teeth.

"Do you promise?" she whispered in his ear and traced a trail down his back with her fingernails.

She blushed at her own words. The wine had made her bold.

He slid a hand under her undershirt and caressed one of her breasts.

"I would like to kiss you here," he said, his voice full of nervousness.

She nodded at him shyly and helped him take her undershirt off. She buried her fingers in his hair as he kissed and caressed her small breasts.

Severus felt Hermione wrap her legs around his waist. He even dared to place a hand on her bum, and he rubbed his mid-section against her.

"Take your pants off, Severus." Hermione groaned as he nibbled at her.

"Hermione-" Severus began.

"We're married, Severus," said Hermione with a sigh of... was that exasperation?

"If we do that, we have to stay married," Severus warned. Surely the girl would be dissuaded by that idea.

"Take your pants off, Severus," Hermione squirmed against him impatiently.

Well, if it's was she wants...

Severus pulled her bloomers down roughly, startling Hermione.

He dove under the covers, and Hermione felt her legs being pried apart and flung over his shoulders.

She hoped Charlie couldn't hear her cry of pleasure as Severus buried his face between her legs.

He penetrated her with his fingers, and she moaned his name. When she begged, pleaded with him, she felt him remove his mouth, and he stripped off his remaining clothing under the covers.

She felt him rise and lay on her. Something both rock hard and velvety soft nudging between her legs.

"Hermione, I need you," moaned Severus into her hair. He felt the beads of sweat forming in his brow as he fought his instinct to plunge into her. He felt himself slide around in her slippery wetness and felt the small dip where he wanted to plunge violently.

"Oh, God, Severus," Hermione burst out; eyes squeezed shut as he nudged her where she wanted him the most. "*Fuck me.*"

He was taken over the edge by her obscenity and began pushing himself into her without regret. He tried not to hurt her as he entered her: he'd never had a virgin before and wasn't sure what he was doing.

Thankfully, she placed both her hands on his hips and directed him. Once he was entirely inside her, she began moving against him in a steady rhythm.

He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them wide. She was still there. This wasn't a dream. This sweet, intelligent, charming, beautiful, virginal woman was out of control and moaning on the end of his cock.

Something in him broke and he threw himself on top of her. Hermione started as he pressed his teeth into her shoulder firmly and began grinding himself into her in a circular pattern.

Hermione cried out, but Severus was delighted to hear her scream his name and felt her hands frantically running over his back and buttocks.

"My God, I want to make you come," growled Severus in her ear. Not knowing, not even caring where this new boldness came from.

"A little to the left," said Hermione through clenched teeth, before kissing him violently and bucking up to meet him.

Severus shifted slightly, and he heard Hermione begin a low cry underneath him. He moved faster.

Severus heard her cry out loudly and shudder. He slowed down, but kept moving inside her. "Did you come?" he asked her, nuzzling her neck.

"Yes," she said, trying to catch her breath. "Thank you."

"Good," he purred at her. He continued a steady rhythm on her, placing soft kisses on her shoulders. She purred soft nothings to him and scratched his back as he took his pleasure from her.

When he came, Severus collapsed on her, leaning his head to the side so he didn't smother her.

Did she even comprehend that their marriage had been consummated? Would she want to back out tomorrow?

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at Severus. She ran a finger over the little worry crease between his eyebrows. "What's wrong?"

"I'm wondering if you're going to regret this tomorrow," said Severus, truthfully. He was feeling much more sober now.

Hermione leaned over and kissed the end of his nose.

"I regretted not taking advantage of you the morning you tortured me," said Hermione, giggling and sinking under the covers.

"You little vixen, you were awake?" asked Severus, finally sliding out of her.

"How was I supposed to sleep through that?" asked Hermione, reaching for him and cuddling near to him as he lay back on the bed.

He felt his member twitch. It seemed someone had a mind to make up for lost time.

Severus turned her on her side and spooned her like he had that morning. Hermione was surprised to feel him ready again and pressing into her lower back. She snuggled back into him, and he inhaled the scent of her hair.

He felt her take him in hand, as it were, and felt her impale herself on him. She moved her hips in small circles and heard him groan as he let his breath out.

Severus felt himself slide into her easily and imagined she would probably be tremendously sore tomorrow. He would rise early and make her a healing potion.

Then he'd have the opportunity to begin acting out all his fantasies on her.

An image of Hermione on her knees in her Hogwarts uniform servicing his member swam before him, and he felt himself explode deep inside her, completely lost in his fantasy.

The second he regained himself, he felt guilty.

What a perverse thought. He had no idea where it came from and felt instantly embarrassed.

Suddenly the reality of what had happened dawned on him.

Severus looked down at his wife, withdrawing himself again, leaving the bed to get his wand before he performed a cleaning charm.

Hermione snuggled back against him and sighed contentedly. She took one of his arms and wrapped it around her. He relaxed against her form and felt his heart beat against her.

She really was lovely.

Dumbledore was going to kill him.

Secrets Revealed

Chapter 14 of 17

The morning after. An Amazonian secret.

Chapter Fourteen: Secrets Revealed

When Hermione woke in the morning, she snuggled deeper under the covers.

It didn't take her long to remember she was in Severus' quarters. She quickly noticed she was alone.

'Well, it wasn't a dream then,' Hermione thought groggily to herself. *'Wonder if he's off somewhere trying to forget.'*

Her question was answered when the door to the room opened and Severus tip-toed in. He was wearing his yellow bathrobe and carrying a small bottle made of blue glass.

"What's that?" Hermione asked curiously.

Severus jumped. Hermione tried not to chuckle.

"A healing potion," he said, clearing his throat. "I thought I would be able to return before you stirred."

"Almost," said Hermione. "I just woke up. What is it for?"

"I assumed you might desire it," said Severus, looking a bit embarrassed. Hermione shifted her weight as she propped herself up on one elbow and winced slightly.

"I think you may be right," said Hermione, blushing.

Severus took his robe off, he had put his under things back on, and slipped in bed with her.

Hermione tightened the sheets around herself possessively.

He looked taken aback, but handed her the bottle.

Hermione took it from him slowly and felt a little guilty of sending him the wrong message, but she wasn't used to being nude in front of anyone.

She downed the contents of the small bottle and put it on the bedside table before reaching for his hand under the covers.

Her hand brushed his thigh in her search, and she felt him get more comfortable under the sheets. She lay down beside him, and she felt his hand encircle her bare waist.

'Merlin's Beard, she looked beautiful when she blushed.'

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Hermione woke for the second time that day and noticed two trays of breakfast on the low table near the couch.

She also noticed Crookshanks purring at the foot of the bed.

"How did you get in here?" Hermione asked.

Crookshanks raised his head and yawned widely.

She turned to look at Severus sleeping on his side of the bed and reached out tentatively for her under things. She prayed he wouldn't wake while she was looking for her undershirt and bloomers.

Thankfully, he didn't wake until she was reaching for one of the trays. He groaned loudly and sunk deeper under the covers.

Severus suddenly wished he had thought to make himself a healing potion.

She certainly was bewitching, but to think he could perform like a twenty year old with no consequences was insane. He hadn't been this sore in years.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked as she approached the bed with a tray for him.

"I think I may have over done it," said Severus, wincing as he sat up.

"Would you like a potion?" Hermione asked, a worried look passing over her face.

"I only made one spare," said Severus as he shook his head. "The rest are for Anna."

"I *did* take healing classes my seventh year," Hermione said in an annoyed tone. "I can brew a simple healing potion."

"Third basement down. Take a right at the wine cellar," said Severus with a chuckle.

"Excuse me?" asked Hermione, somewhat taken aback.

"My laboratory," said Severus.

"Why is it all the way down there?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I was a sullen teenager," Severus said dryly. "I liked to be left alone."

"Who would have ever thought?" Hermione remarked sarcastically.

Hermione wolfed her breakfast down quickly and then looked down at herself. "I should put normal clothing on."

"I'm sure the elves wouldn't comment, if you happen to see one," Severus said suggestively.

"It will be cold in the basement," reasoned Hermione.

"Take my robe," said Severus, motioning to the pale yellow robe that was now draped over the back of his couch.

"You just don't want me to put clothing on!" Hermione accused, her cheeks flushing.

She would have to do something about that. She imagined she looked like a tomato.

"Your under things do cover quite a lot," remarked Severus. "But I would like you to walk around half-naked, yes."

He tried to cover his smirk by sipping his tea, but Hermione saw it and scowled at him.

"I was talking about poor Charlie," said Hermione exasperatedly.

"Good point," said Severus. "You should handle that as you see fit."

"What does that mean?" said Hermione, suddenly feeling nervous.

"If you want Mr. Weasley to know our union has been consummated, then let him know," said Severus in a voice that almost sounded unsure.

"Oh." Hermione swallowed.

Honestly, she assumed he would want to handle it professionally until the war was over. She knew very well that sometimes people said things they don't mean in the heat of the moment, and she assumed it had been the talk of a lonely man that had a bit to drink. The second round this morning had been nice, but unexpected.

She had planned to be logical about this, but it looked like she wasn't the only one that wanted more. She felt lighter, like a weight was lifted off her.

Severus set his tea cup down and placed the tray of unfinished breakfast on his night stand.

"Hermione," Severus began, reaching out and taking one of her hands in his. "Our marriage has been consummated. Several times over."

Hermione stared at the back of his hand. Small black hairs dotted the back of his knuckles. She stroked them absentmindedly. She was tremendously relieved.

"If you want to tell people, you may," said Severus, sounding nervous. He was afraid she was going to ask for a divorce immediately.

"I don't know," said Hermione. She scooted next to him and kissed him on the neck. "If it suits me."

"I think you'd better get that potion," said Severus, feeling his body respond enthusiastically. *She did* fancy him!

"I'll be back," said Hermione, kissing his cheek and hopping off the bed.

Severus lay his head back on the pillow and allowed his eyes to rest. He was married to a competent young witch that seemed to like him. It all seemed too good to be true.

Hermione returned about an hour later and handed Severus a glass tumbler with a gold liquid at the bottom. He downed it and smiled at her.

"Very good," he said. "I would not have thought of using lemon to cut the aftertaste. What are you wearing?"

Hermione looked down at herself. She had changed into Muggle jeans, a blue cardigan and a white t-shirt. Her low sneakers were poking out of the bottoms of her jeans.

"I didn't know I was required to look like a cover girl," Hermione said haughtily. "This was sensible for potions brewing."

"Indeed," said Severus, swinging his feet out of bed and stretching. He stood and leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Well, it's lovely."

While certain pure-blood wizards and witches would sneer at her clothing as being unfeminine, Severus couldn't help but appreciate the view from behind.

Especially when she bent over to scratch Crookshanks behind his ears.

"Your supplies need to be restocked," said Hermione over her shoulder. Severus shook his head as he pressed on a panel on his wall. It swung open and Hermione saw a sparse bathroom.

"Figures," said Severus, standing in front of the toilet.

Her eyes widened in shock.

Apparently this married thing came with some unexpected surprises as well. Well, he certainly wasn't shy.

When Severus was done, he started the shower that was tucked into one corner.

"Mother has a habit of using up everything and never replacing anything. It was the only way she could get me to go out as a teenager." He sounded irritated. "She probably wanted to make sure I showed you around the city."

Hermione laughed.

"I'll go to the library and wait for you," said Hermione.

"And what are we doing today?" Severus asked, a frown creasing his brow.

"Restocking your supplies," said Hermione, leaving the room with a wave.

Severus shook his head and smiled to himself as he stepped into the warm steaming water. At least he had been saddled with a sensible girl.

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"Maybe we should have brought an interpreter," remarked Hermione as they stepped out of a fireplace and she brushed a few stray ashes from her jacket. They had appeared in what looked like a pub.

"Severus!" a jolly voice called out. "Vodka?"

Hermione spied a short, stocky wizard behind the bar cleaning mugs with a clean red cloth.

"On you?" asked Severus, a corner of his mouth quirking.

"Of course," said the barkeep, slamming a shot glass on the counter and pouring clear liquid into it. "Is this your new bride?"

"Yes," said Severus, pulling Hermione closer. "Hermione, this is my cousin, Yuri."

The barkeep had dark blue eyes, thick, brown curly hair, and a wide toothy smile that reminded Hermione of Pieter.

"I'm beginning to think you're related to everyone," remarked Hermione.

"Sometimes it seems like that to us as well," said Yuri, pouring Hermione a little vodka in a glass and covering it with cranberry juice.

Hermione drank it and thanked Yuri when he handed her a piroshki in a paper pouch.

"Replenishing supplies?" Yuri asked.

"However did you guess?" Severus asked dryly.

"It's the only time you come into town," said Yuri, smiling. "Svetlana would like to see you while you're in the area."

"We'll try to stop by, then," said Severus, his smile looking slightly pained.

"Well," said Yuri. "I have drinks to serve and you have things to get. Send me an owl later."

"I'll do that," said Severus, seemingly relieved the conversation was over.

Hermione and Severus waved good-bye and walked out into Mageeya Topeek. The small, magical shopping area was crowded and bustling with Russian-speaking wizards.

"What was that about?" Hermione asked.

"Svetlana's mother was killed by the Dark Lord," said Severus uncomfortably. "She got in the way when he first appeared in the area and was terminated."

"So, Yuri's a widower?" asked Hermione abruptly, stopping before she banged into Severus in front of a store with an incomprehensible sign.

Severus nodded. He opened the door for her as she finished her piroshki, and she hastily shoved the greasy paper in her pocket.

"Yuri's mother has never quite forgiven me for becoming involved in the Dark Lord's plan," Severus said. "She thinks the killing of Svetlana's mother is God's punishment for evil in the bloodline. I think she petitioned to have me burned the last time I came to visit."

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, truly meaning it, wondering if they were in danger.

"Master Snape!" A high reedy voice called out.

To Hermione's surprise, it had an Irish lilt mixed in with the thick Russian.

"How good to see you've decided to visit us instead of going to France this year!"

Severus chuckled.

Hermione was surprised at his response. Although she was getting used to the likable Severus behind closed doors, she was surprised to see it in a public arena.

A tiny man hopped off the stool he was standing on behind the counter and ran over to shake Severus' hand. He barely came to Severus' waist, and his coarse, stiff amber hair stood out in all directions, although he had tried to force a green cap on top of it to keep in out of his face. He wore a tan shirt, blue vest, and brown pants in a fashion that reminded Hermione of the Renaissance.

However, he was also wearing Muggle basketball shoes in obviously a child's size, and a belt with silver studs on it.

Severus laughed out loud.

"You don't like them?" the small man asked, flashing his shoes at Hermione and smiling. "They're very comfortable."

"I bet they are," said Hermione, happy to see logic applied anywhere in the world of magic.

"Where did you get those?" Severus asked.

"Traded for a silver cauldron," said the tiny man.

"You let a cauldron go for a pair of shoes?" Severus asked, aghast.

When Hermione told him how much money those shoes would go for in the Muggle world, he looked shocked.

"For a pair of shoes!"

"They're *very* comfortable," smiled the little man. "I'm Brian," he said, holding out his hand to Hermione.

"Hello," said Hermione. "Hermione."

"Now, what are you looking for today?" the little man asked Severus, rubbing his hands together.

Hermione and Severus arrived back home with mounds of packages heaped in their arms.

Severus convinced Hermione to leave them in the ballroom for the elves to put away.

"They're really bored," Severus insisted. "It will give them something to do."

Hermione reluctantly agreed, and they went to say good-bye to Charlie. He would be returning to England to make a report to the Order.

Not to mention Molly was expecting him for dinner.

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"But Madam, most elves are happy here. They do not want to be paid." Sloozhanka sighed as she braided Hermione's hair.

"Wouldn't you like a bit of money for your own?" Hermione asked insistently.

"We have no need for money," said Sloozhanka. "Our masters provide for us, and whatever we don't have we can conjure."

"Not all masters are as kind as yours are," Hermione pointed out.

"I agree," said Sloozhanka. "Cherv has a cousin that had a terrible family."

"I know his cousin," said Hermione. "And I agree, the Malfoys are horrible."

"Since Cherv's cousin has been freed and works for a wage, does that mean he can take time off as well?" asked Sloozhanka slyly.

"I suppose," said Hermione slowly. "The summer holidays are in full swing. I can't imagine he has a lot to do."

"Perhaps he could come for a holiday," said Sloozhanka firmly.

"That's kind of you, for never having met him," said Hermione suspiciously.

Sloozhanka tried to look nonchalant, but blushed slightly.

"Spill."

"What has spilled?" Sloozhanka, looking on the ground.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, embarrassed. "It's a term for telling me what is on your mind." She had to get used to the idea that not everyone knew words that she found common place. She felt rather stupid.

"I hear Dobby comes from very good breeding stock," said Sloozhanka, trying to look innocent.

"Ah," said Hermione. She began to wonder what house-elf courtships involved. "He is a very good person. I know nothing of his parentage."

She wasn't sure she agreed with the joining of anyone for purposes of creating more efficient slaves at all, although if both parents were freed, the child would be born free, wouldn't they?

Suddenly, there was a scratching at Hermione's bedroom window. She looked up to see a small white beast waiting for her on her windowsill.

"What on earth is that?" Hermione exclaimed as Sloozhanka hopped off her stool to open the window.

"Snow dragon," said Sloozhanka. "Very rare. Someone interesting wants to communicate with you."

The elf struggled with the latch on the window for a moment before she pointed her wand at it and it opened easily.

"Could Dobby have a wand if he came to visit?" Hermione asked, suddenly getting an idea.

"Of course he could," said Sloozhanka as the little dragon leapt into the room and padded across the floor to Hermione on four feet.

He was the size of a bread box, and to Hermione's shock, covered in white downy feathers. His feet looked similar to large dog paws, and he walked like a canine although his face looked serpentine.

"You are a strange looking little guy," she said, reaching for the tube bound around his neck.

"Looked in the mirror lately?" said the dragon in a high, reedy voice as he looked at her half-braided hair critically. His large amber eyes blinked at her.

Hermione froze in shock. Not only did she encounter a creature she had never seen before, it was intelligent and she had perhaps offended it.

The dragon made a strange clicking sound, and by the way Hermione assessed his movements, she suspected he was laughing at her.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione. "I need to learn manners, it appears." She flushed a deep red.

"I suspect you have never seen one of my kind," said the dragon. "Your apology is accepted if you manage to fix my ear tuft." He swiped at his head with one of his legs, much like a cat trying to clean one of its ears.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, sliding to the floor and sitting near the small creature.

"It started itching somewhere near Stockholm," complained the dragon.

Sloozhanka frowned at the dragon and marched across the floor to it. She pointed her wand and said something in a mixture of Latin and Russian that Hermione didn't understand.

Hermione scooted back suddenly as a long, slender, electric blue worm was magically pulled from the dragon's ear tuft.

"What is that?" she squeaked, horrified.

"Parasite," said Sloozhanka. "Perhaps the master can make use of it in his laboratory."

The small elf left the room, and Hermione was left with the dragon that was shaking his head as if to rid itself of the feeling the parasite had given him.

"What a first impression," the dragon said. Hermione thought he sounded embarrassed.

"We're even now," said Hermione, reaching out to scratch the head of the dragon. She gently unbuckled the tube bound around his neck.

She wasn't surprised to see a sparkling blue envelope fall out.

Hermione,

Your home has been added to our transport network, so you can just use your fireplace to transport yourself to the Bibliotheque oo Amazon.

We realize it is short notice, but we would like you to join us this afternoon around three, your time.

Alexandra

"Only slightly short notice," said Hermione sighing. "That's only a few hours away."

Severus walked into Hermione's bedroom and looked slightly taken aback at the dragon's presence.

"Hello, fellow," said Severus.

The dragon sniffed the air in the direction of Severus and padded over to him.

Severus sank to his knees and scratched the dragon's head gently.

"Which tuft did it come from?" said Severus.

"The right one," said the dragon. Severus carefully parted the fine, downy feathers and looked at the small puncture wound left by the parasite. He frowned.

"Do you need to return immediately?" Severus asked.

"Why?" The dragon looked suspicious.

"It looks as if it has laid a small cache of eggs," said Severus, sounding sorry for him. "They need to be removed carefully. If you need to return immediately, I suggest you go by Floo."

"I don't think I will be reprimanded if I do not return immediately, as long as the sisters know where I am," said the dragon.

"What was that thing?" Hermione asked.

"Parasites that leech magic," Severus said. "Very dangerous. I can remove them, but it will take some time."

"Well, I think that's a very good reason to stay put," said Hermione, a little repulsed. "Sounds frightening."

"They aren't deadly if you catch them early," said Severus. "I shall write a letter to the Amazons telling them where he is, unless you just want to tell them," he said, looking at the opened envelope.

"I'm sure that would be fine," said Hermione. She watched as Sloozhanka returned and led the little dragon out of the room, patting him supportively on his back. "I'm supposed to see them this afternoon."

"Excellent," said Severus. "I'm going to meet with Pieter. We can catch up at dinner."

"Perfect," said Hermione, relieved last minute plans were going smoothly.

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Sophia looked at Hermione, her face full of concern.

"I wonder where he picked it up," Alexandra said nervously.

"He said somewhere near Stockholm," said Hermione.

Alexandra and Sophia exchanged quick glances as a soft knock sounded at the door.

They were once again sitting in Sophia's office, although it was much cleaner than the last time she had visited. A young witch that appeared to be Hermione's age brought in their tea. Her face looked similar to Alexandra's, although her hair was thick and golden blonde, cascading almost to the back of her knees. She smiled shyly at Hermione as she served them.

"This is my youngest daughter, Kari," said Sophia. "Her training will be completed at the end of the summer." Sophia beamed proudly.

"Congratulations," said Hermione. She began to wonder exactly how long training was or what it was comprised of. Kari seemed to be a bit older than Hermione.

"She's half a decade early," explained Alexandra proudly. "Our little prodigy."

"How long is training?" asked Hermione, surprised.

"Usually two decades," Sophia said. "Incredible, considering her parentage."

Hermione looked at the witches, not knowing what to say.

"We're not sure who my father is," said Kari. "Mother was assaulted."

"I'm sorry," said Hermione to both Sophia and Kari. She didn't quite know what to say.

"It was years ago, a few moments of time, and I daresay we all recovered," said Sophia, patting Kari on the arm as she poured Sophia's tea. "And I got a beautiful, brilliant daughter out of it."

Hermione got the impression Sophia had been repeating that to Kari since she was a child.

"How are Amazons usually born?" Hermione blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Well, a witch and wizard get together and do a kind of special hugging--," began Alexandra, her eyes twinkling as she reached for her tea. Kari burst out laughing.

"Naughty girls," Sophia admonished, half-heartedly. "You know precisely what she means."

"I kind of set myself up for that one," said Hermione, looking chagrined while she reached for her tea and a biscuit.

"Usually we get a volunteer from the Brotherhood that is willing to create a child," said Sophia. "We keep the girls and they keep the boys."

"Wow," said Hermione, a little shocked. She couldn't imagine being raised in an enclave of only one sex and brought up to see men as only sperm donors. She glanced at Alexandra.

"That's not how Lexi was born," said Kari, practically swooning. "Mother was in/love with her father."

"That was a long time ago," said Sophia gently. "And I made my choice to stay here."

Hermione could see that this seemed commonplace for the girls, but saw the flash of pain across Sophia's face when Alexandra's father was mentioned.

"You would have been miserable in England," said Alexandra.

Sophia shrugged and sipped at her tea, but she seemed to be shooting warning glances at her daughter, who didn't seem to notice.

"Have you gone to England to see him?" asked Hermione conversationally.

"No, but I've heard of him," said Alexandra. "He's a great wizard, and I'm proud to be part of his bloodline."

"Maybe I know your father," said Hermione, thinking of all the Ministry Wizards she knew.

"I know you do," said Alexandra before her mother stopped her. "He's Albus Dumbledore."

Hermione left her tea cup pressed to her lips, but she stopped drinking, frozen in shock. No wonder she had instantly trusted Alexandra. No wonder the twinkle in her eye looked familiar.

Alexandra continued chattering about Dumbledore's accomplishments and how proud she was to be his daughter.

There was one thing Hermione knew for certain: Dumbledore had no idea.

Hermione nodded politely while the wheels turned in her head. She would have to talk to Severus. He was older, her partner in the Order, and he knew Dumbledore better than she did. He would know what to do. She glanced at Sophia, but she seemed to be totally absorbed in her biscuit and said nothing.

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"How did your meeting go?" asked Severus as they sat at the small table in the kitchen in the Snape mansion.

"It was very... informative," said Hermione, reaching for a piece of steak and kidney pie. She was relieved the elves had prepared a British meal. All this foreign food was good, but not nearly as satisfying as food she was familiar with.

The elves had gone back to their den for the night, and a small fire was crackling merrily in the hearth. They had no other light, but the small fire was enough to lend a golden glow to the kitchen.

"That was the idea," said Severus, annoyed. "Feel like sharing any of it with me."

Hermione hesitated and reached for her glass of water.

Severus looked at her, and she felt his beetle black eyes piercing her skin and looking directly into her brain.

"Do you ever use Legilimency on me?" asked Hermione suddenly.

"No. Not unless you think I need to," said Severus, frowning. "What do you know?"

"Does Dumbledore know he has a daughter?" Hermione blurted out.

"I beg your pardon?" said Severus, completely taken aback.

"I think you heard me," Hermione snapped. She didn't mean to and felt instantly ashamed but she felt jittery at this information. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

Severus felt the corner of his mouth quirk unwillingly. It was slightly amusing to see his temper wrapped up in such a cute package. No wonder his mother thought he was adorable.

"No wonder you've been acting strange," said Severus, dryly. "You've dropped your fork twice, and I'll be amazed if your glass of water makes it through the meal. Tell me what happened."

Hermione relayed the events during tea.

"So this girl claims to be Dumbledore's daughter," said Severus, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back in his chair. "It can be proven with testing, of course, but it might be a trap to lure him here."

"Why would the Amazons want to lure him here?" asked Hermione. "And it seemed like Sophia never had the intention of telling him."

"Good question," said Severus, frowning. "How old does the girl look?"

"Mid-thirties?" Hermione guessed, pushing her now empty plate away.

"We need to tell Dumbledore," said Severus after a long pause. "I know how messy this might make things, but it's very important."

"Why?" asked Hermione. Severus frowned.

"I thought you would see it as your moral duty to tell Dumbledore," said Severus stiffly.

"Initially, yes," said Hermione. "But he has a lot on his plate, and I don't see this as a help to his state of mind. Sophia has already raised Alexandra, and although she has kept up with her father's exploits, she didn't seem all that motivated to seek him out."

"It's a bit more complicated than that," said Severus slowly. "Hermione, if I give you access to my library, will you promise me you won't become a power-hungry dark wizard?"

"What?!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I have some books that are better off lost forever," Severus muttered.

"I solemnly swear," said Hermione, holding her hand up.

"That you are up to no good?" Severus said, smirking. "I already knew that."

"No, I won't turn you into a toad in your sleep," said Hermione. "Get to the point."

"If a powerful dark wizard got a hold of this girl, he could use her blood to magically track and kill Dumbledore," said Severus.

"What!?" Hermione gasped. "How?"

"Hermione," Severus said patiently. "Why do you think bloodlines are so important to wizards?"

"I assumed it was left over from long ago," said Hermione weakly. "Like some of the noble families still see it in England."

"It's not just societal," said Severus. "There is a science to everything we do, although it does seem backwards at times. I'm sorry, Hermione, we're going to have to tell him."

Hermione sighed deeply. "Well, they didn't tell me to keep it a secret."

Severus rose from his chair and kissed Hermione on the forehead.

"I'll take care of it," said Severus. "Have Cherv show you where my special books are."

"Will do," said Hermione.

It was only after he left to write his letter, Hermione realized they hadn't really talked about their important meetings at all.

All Bets Are Off

Chapter 15 of 17

Family reunions. The attack.

Chapter Fifteen: All Bets Are Off

Remus Lupin sat at the large, wooden table in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, drinking a cup of cocoa and reading the *Daily Prophet*. He was just getting absorbed in an article on a new Irish Chaser when green flames leapt up in the hearth.

"Hello, Remus," Charlie Weasley said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Hello," said Remus, setting his paper down. His sleepy eyes crinkled around the corners when he saw Charlie.

"Is Mum around?" Charlie asked.

"No," said Remus. "She went shopping for supper. Anything I can help you with?"

"Just wanted to tell you all bets are off," chuckled Charlie. "Mum would kill us if she knew."

"Really?" Remus said, his eyebrows raised. "I thought 'Mione'd hold out until at least July."

"They went to the ballet." Charlie rolled his eyes.

Remus shook his head, a half-smile playing around his lips. "So who won the pool? I know I lost two knuts."

"Fred and George," said Charlie. "It figures; they were always good at divination."

"I don't know why Mundungus let them bet at all," said Remus, disgusted.

Charlie shrugged and sat down at the table. "I wouldn't have let them, but I know better."

"Well, I'd better go tell Dung so he'll have a head start when they begin looking for him," said Remus, rising from the table. "Give me an hour."

"Will do," said Charlie, waving his wand and watching a cup of cocoa float to him. "It'll give me plenty of time to read your paper."

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Dumbledore was sitting on the balcony of his family home in Switzerland, sipping a glass of mint lemonade, when a large owl swooped down and landed next to him.

"Hello, there," Dumbledore said, reaching for the parchment attached to the owl's leg. "What do you have for me?"

Dumbledore unraveled the parchment and began reading. His face paled as his eyes ran over the page. His pallor turned red as his eyes reached the end of the page.

"Damnedable woman!" Dumbledore thundered, startling the owl on the railing as he leapt from his chair. "Of all the pig-headed, stubborn..." He flapped his arms helplessly for a moment as his mind searched for words.

He bellowed in frustration instead.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked a small squeaky voice.

Dumbledore looked down to see a small house-elf, slightly cowering behind a chair.

"No, Tiddles," said Dumbledore. "This is something I have to handle myself."

He raised his wand in the air and with a loud crack, he was gone.

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"Madame?" a young witch said tentatively as she knocked at the door to Sophia's office.

"The door is open. You're more than welcome to come in," said Sophia, her eyes crinkling over the top of her silver-rimmed spectacles. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the witch. Her short black hair curled out in all directions and her red toga made her light skin and dark eyes stand out. "My name is Helen."

"Odessa's girl?" Sophia asked. "I hear you do well in Charms."

"Yes, ma'am," said Helen, looking nervous. "Unfortunately I'm not here for a pleasure visit."

"Out with it, girl," said Sophia, frowning. Helen looked a little nervous.

"There's a ... well..." Helen looked pained.

Sophia raised an eyebrow.

"There's a man outside demanding to see you," Helen blurted out quickly.

"Ah," said Sophia, taking her glasses off and folding them up. Her hands were shaking slightly as she pushed them into a worn brown leather case. "I should have been expecting that. Lower the bridge, I'm going out."

"But ma'am," Helen said. "How did he find us?"

"He followed his line," said Sophia, shaking her head.

"Ma'am?"

Helen looked confused, but Sophia said nothing more as she used her cane to rise to her feet and toddled out of her office.

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Dumbledore tapped his foot impatiently on the floating piece of ice in front of the floating fortress and watched as the drawbridge lowered.

He knew better than to storm in, as much as he wanted to. He assumed this place had the same type of wards the Brotherhood had.

The heavy double doors creaked noisily as they opened, and he watched a small, hunched figure draped in green begin walking towards him, a dozen or more Amazon warriors in close ranks following behind her. The older woman's descent was slow, and the younger females had to pace themselves, but they finally made it to the end of the drawbridge after what felt like an eternity.

He wanted to bellow at her. He wanted to smack her. He wanted to shake her. She lifted her eyes and met his, her jaw set in the same stubborn way he found so attractive so many long years ago.

"Why, Sophie?" he found himself asking quieter than he would have thought himself capable of. He was surprised at how much the sadness came out in his voice.

"We both had obligations," said Sophia, her face pained. "I didn't see any reason to ruin your life."

"We could have made that decision together," said Dumbledore. "I would have liked to have taken some part of her life."

"I know," said Sophia softly. "I was planning to tell you, but years began passing, and you began having all that trouble with You-Know-Who. I didn't want to bring attention to her. She was safer here."

"But now she's grown and not a child anymore," said Dumbledore. "And we're in trouble again."

"I can't change what has happened, Albus," said Sophia, shaking her head. "All I can say is I was trying to protect you and our daughter."

She laid a hand on his arm gently. She felt him tense up, but he did not pull away from her.

'Our daughter.'

The words sliced through his chest and went deep into his heart. He closed his eyes for a moment and let his emotions wash over him. He opened them and looked at Sophia.

Her blonde hair had gone white and gotten much, much longer. Her back was hunched, and Dumbledore remembered her tall, with a spine of steel, and a stubborn streak to match. Her heavy, green cloak was pulled tight around her to keep out the cold so he couldn't tell if she had kept her slight figure, but he guessed she had by her thin face.

He shook his head sadly at her.

Alexandra stood in the middle of the ranks of Amazons, her wand at her side and her bow slung over her shoulder. She heard her arrows rattle in their case as she began shaking. Kari nudged her slightly with her elbow. It wouldn't do to become a shaking mess when she was supposed to be setting an example of professional behavior to the new trainees.

She stared at Dumbledore and tried to memorize every detail of him.

Something stirred inside her that she hadn't felt since she had been a very small child, and her stomach began feeling queasy. Her head felt light. She noticed she was chewing on the inside of her bottom lip and her jaw was clenched. She was trying to convince herself that she was too old for this. Another part of her screamed he was going to go and she was going to miss her chance.

Something in her broke as she saw him shake his head and her inner-child won.

"Father!" Alexandra cried out and pushed her way through the ranks that hadn't turned at her cry.

She didn't know how he really felt about all this. She knew he wanted to know of her existence, but didn't know about his opinion about being a father. At this point she didn't care.

Dumbledore raised his eyes and saw a pretty red-headed girl pushing her way through the ranks of archers. She vaguely resembled his mother.

"Mighty Merlin," Dumbledore whispered, stepping forward to see her. "My baby. Gods, Sophie, she's beautiful."

Alexandra wanted to hug him, to shake him and ask him where he had been, to kiss his wrinkled face, to smack him for losing contact with her mother. As she got closer to him, she realized she didn't know what to do.

She felt stark, naked, and open.

Dumbledore made the decision for her by pulling her into a tight hug.

Alexandra was being held so tightly, she was having trouble breathing, but she didn't care. Her eyes were wide open and tears were streaming out of them, but she wasn't

sobbing. The water ran freely down her face and pooled on the purple velvet of his shoulder.

Alexandra vaguely thought she wasn't setting a very good example, but didn't care. The other girls wouldn't understand. They didn't know their fathers either, but most of them considered love to be an impractical thing that happened to other people.

"Run along now," Alexandra heard her mother say to the troops. "We'll be fine."

Alexandra looked over her shoulder to see the troops walking back up to the fortress in broken ranks. She caught Kari's eye as she looked over her shoulder, and the sisters locked eyes. Kari quirked a corner of her mouth at her.

"I think," said Dumbledore carefully, "that we have some catching up to do."

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Hermione sat in Severus' laboratory with a black leather book in her hand. She ate an apple as she turned the pages. An otherwise hidden portal was open behind her and about a dozen books sat on a shelf.

"Find anything interesting?" Severus asked as he walked into the room, empty bottles in his arms.

"It's all interesting," admitted Hermione. "I'm just not sure why anyone would want to do some of it."

Severus shrugged. He looked a little uncomfortable.

She decided not to push it any further. She continued reading *Divination by Reading Entrails* by Marissa Lumpkettle.

"I thought you hated divination," said Severus, glancing at her.

"I do," said Hermione. "But this seems a bit more scientific than staring at a hunk of glass."

Severus shrugged. "Not really."

Hermione turned the page to see an illustration of a vivisected Muggle. She felt goose bumps rise on her arms and she closed the book.

"Stopping already?" Severus said, an eyebrow raised. "You've only been reading for three hours."

"I feel like stretching my legs," Hermione lied. "It would be a shame to waste the day."

"Would you like to see the grounds?" Severus asked. "We could go to the lake."

"So you could fish?" Hermione asked, an eyebrow raised in mimic of his.

"Well, it would mean we could have fresh dinner," said Severus.

"Yes, we would starve were it not for your ability to fish," said Hermione sarcastically, a smile playing around her lips.

"We could, you know." Severus shrugged, but she saw him smirk as he turned his back to her.

She walked up behind him and shyly encircled his waist with her arms. "We can go to the lake if you want."

"The carpet is ready to go," said Severus. "You should go to the main library and get a book."

"It will only take a minute," she said as she trotted out of the room.

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Severus steered the flying carpet out of his mother's garden and started west to the lake.

"How large is your property?" Hermione asked, startled.

"It is a clever illusion," said Severus. "The lake is behind that crop of trees."

Hermione squinted at the trees in the distance. The land dipped a bit beyond it, and Hermione could see where water must run off.

"Lake?" Hermione spluttered. "It can't be any bigger than a pond."

"Well, it appears to be quite large when you are six," said Severus, scowling.

Hermione chuckled silently.

"Is that when you and Pieter named it: 'The Lake?'" Hermione asked.

"About then," said Severus, nodding as the carpet brushed over the tops of the fruit trees in the orchard. He reached out and pulled an apple off a branch as they passed and bit into it.

Hermione tried to picture Severus at six and couldn't. His mother had to have pictures lying around somewhere.

They soared over the fields, past the orchards, and brushed the tops of the evergreen trees near the water.

Hermione was delighted to see trees enchanted to grow in the shapes of tables and chairs. A couch-shaped tree with the main trunk protruding out of the back of it sat comfortably by the side of the pond.

Severus waved his wand and a golden dome surrounded the area. The air began warming immediately. Hermione slipped her fur cloak off and shook the chill out of her limbs.

Severus walked over to a tree with a huge base that seemed to stop about a meter off the ground. A single thin sprig tapered out of the center of it and jutted upwards a few meters before thin branches laden with light leaves spread out overhead to form an umbrella.

Severus took what looked like small glass blocks out of his pocket and set them on the surface of the naturally formed table. He waved his wand and they grew into preservation chambers. He slid the top off of one and took out a sandwich.

"This is very nice," Hermione said pleasantly. She slid the top off another one to find it full of bait. "EW!"

"Oops," said Severus, setting his sandwich down and closing the top of the box she had opened. "I believe that one is mine."

"Thank heaven for that," said Hermione grimacing. There were creepy things in that box.

"The other one should be safe," said Severus, walking to the shoreline with his box of bait.

Hermione sat near Severus, eating her lunch as he cast his line. When she was through, she went over to a reclining tree and nestled into a nook that seemed carved out just for the purpose of creating a cozy place for reading.

Hermione glanced up from her book from time to time to watch Severus reel in his line.

After a few hours, feeling cozy and satisfied with her reading material, she looked at Severus curiously. "Is the pond fit for swimming?"

"Yes," Severus said over his shoulder. "The bottom is sandy so you don't have to wear shoes."

"Perfect," said Hermione, walking by him, completely nude, and descending into the water.

Severus watched as his line wriggled itself away from her.

He was thankful it was enchanted to avoid anything but fish so he didn't have to worry about snagging her or untangling his line.

"Are you going to come in?" Hermione asked.

"No," said Severus. "I don't have a towel." He smirked at her.

Hermione suddenly wished she had planned ahead but tried to play it off. She had her wand. He was just making excuses.

"Suit yourself," she said, floating by on her back and sneaking looks at Severus' expression.

Severus watched Hermione float on her back and sighed contentedly. She certainly was a pretty girl, if infuriating at times.

On the other hand, if she weren't so infuriating, she wouldn't be running through his mind half as much as she did.

"Hermione?" Severus called out.

"What?" Hermione asked, righting herself, her toes sinking into the sandy bottom of the pond.

"I've never had any reason to do the Bubble-Head Charm," he said, clearing his throat. "Do you understand its theory?"

"Of course," said Hermione snippily. "Everyone did after the Tri-Wizard Tournament."

"If you wanted to encapsulate another part of your body in air, would it be plausible?" Severus asked, slightly annoyed at her matter-of-fact attitude.

"Well," Hermione said, screwing her face up as if she were trying to recall a textbook page. "I don't see why not, but what would the point be?"

He felt the color creeping into his face and hoped she was too far away to see it. She was his wife, for heaven's sake. He shouldn't be so coy when asking for something so minor.

"I understand a woman's natural lubrication has an annoying habit of washing away," Severus muttered as he reeled in his line. "I wouldn't want anyone to get injured."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione, blushing furiously. She had to stop that; it was embarrassing.

She watched as he disrobed and he applied the Bubble-Head Charm to his pelvis. She began giggling hysterically as he entered the water.

"What's so funny?" he demanded as he swam to her and wrapped his arms around her. He hoped desperately it wasn't something he had done.

"I'm not sure that's the head they had in mind," Hermione said, unable to control her laughter.

"How would you know that?" Severus asked as he pulled her closer.

She had an enchanting way of squirming in his arms when she laughed.

"Practicality?" suggested Hermione as she felt him nudge her under water. She wrapped her legs around him and put her hands on his shoulders. She was nowhere near ready to receive him, but she sighed at his persistent nudging as she felt herself begin to smolder.

"Oh, I don't know. It seems quite practical to..." Severus growled suddenly and let go of her, effectively dunking her.

Hermione came up spluttering and resembling a wet sheepdog.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked, concerned, between coughs. "What's wrong?"

Severus brushed the hair out of her face and patted her on the back. As his hand went by her face, she saw a black skull and snake etched into his skin of his left forearm.

She grabbed his hand and stared at the burn.

Severus didn't know what to do. Perhaps she had forgotten he had it. Did she find it repulsive? Did she now find him repulsive?

"It looks like it was branded into you," Hermione said, her fingertips hovering above the mark as if she wanted to touch it.

"It was," said Severus.

Hermione looked at the crinkled skin around the brand.

"It doesn't look as if it's healed. Why does it look fresh?" Hermione asked sharply.

"It's frozen in stasis," said Severus, dipping it under the water. The cool water eased the burning a bit. He raised his arm to the surface so Hermione could see it, with the water still covering it. He'd never really shown it to anyone before like this. "It's hidden inside the body and when the spell is woven, it 'wakes up' as it were."

"Does it hurt?" Hermione asked.

"What do you think?" Severus asked sarcastically.

"Well, that was a silly question," said Hermione, embarrassed. "Never mind."

"I think we should get back in the house," said Severus, looking at the sky. "Just to be safe."

Hermione looked up and failed to see anything unusual.

Hermione and Severus climbed on the carpet with just their cloaks wrapped around them and flew back to the manor.

Hermione followed Severus through the house and down to the basement levels of the manor to get to his laboratory. He pushed on a picture of a Mandrake, and Hermione was startled to see a small fire burning cheerfully in a cubby hole in the wall.

"This is a direct line to the Order." Severus threw a pinch of brown powder in the fire before the flames turned green, and he stuck his head in. "Twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

Cherv padded into the room with a change of clean clothing for Severus and Hermione. He smiled cheerfully and waved, but didn't say anything while Severus talked to someone in the wall.

"Hold tight," Severus said indignantly as he pulled his head from the flames. "The Dark Lord is on the loose and he says 'hold tight!'"

"Who?" asked Hermione.

"Lupin," said Severus, his lips pressed thin. "Apparently Dumbledore is off somewhere and no other news has arrived."

A small silver bell started ringing somewhere nearby, and Hermione noticed a small glass orb on a shelf began glowing orange.

She watched as the little color Severus had drained from his face.

"What's going on?" asked Hermione, her voice quivering.

"The Ministry's under attack," whispered Severus.

The Battle

Chapter 16 of 17

The fall of Voldemort.

"What the bloody hell is going on!" Severus thundered, his head submerged in the green flames of the Floo box.

Hermione waited while he was silent for a moment, as if he was listening to a reply.

"Well, I figured that out, Remus," Severus said dryly. "Do you have anything to add to that observation?"

If the situation were not so dire, Hermione would have laughed. At the moment she felt the need to be clothed and ready for combat.

Severus stared into the kitchen of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place and fixed Remus Lupin with a stare that would melt steel.

"My orb had been orange for a total of thirty seconds, Severus," said Lupin, visibly annoyed. "Obviously I don't know more than you. Just be prepared to receive casualties, if needed."

Severus nodded sharply. At least it gave them something to do.

He pulled his head back in his laboratory and turned to look at Hermione.

She was bristling like a wet cat. The state of her damp, windblown hair didn't help. She had hastily donned her Muggle clothing and was clutching her wand, white-knuckled. Her eyes were aflame with rage.

"Heavens, that would make me think twice," said Severus sarcastically as he looked her up and down, an eyebrow raised.

"It isn't funny!" shouted Hermione.

Severus took a step back in spite of himself.

"Your friend isn't out there, part of some stupid prophecy out to wreck his life before it started!"

"I did lose friends in the first war, Hermione," Severus said in a deadly calm voice. "Now, I suggest we follow the measly orders we were given and stop bickering while our friends may be falling."

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. She slipped her wand into a long pouch she had hung on her belt, turned abruptly, and marched out of the laboratory.

Severus rolled his eyes and sighed. She didn't even know their orders yet.

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Hermione sat in an armchair near the ballroom fireplace, biting her fingernails.

"Stop that," Severus chided her gently.

She glared at him, but took her fingers out of her mouth.

Cherv poured Hermione a cup of tea, and she sipped at it nervously before setting it down on a small table nearby.

Cherv patted her hand wordlessly before he left them alone.

Hermione watched Cherv leave the room and wondered if Dobby and Winky were safe at Hogwarts. Where was Dumbledore, anyway?

She frowned at her thoughts.

"I'll be right back," she said, getting to her feet and throwing Floo powder into the fireplace.

Hermione steered the small sheet of ice with magic to the Bibliotheque oo Amazon. She was lucky the Floo connection to the small ice cave had still been in working order. She sighed in relief as she rounded the giant iceberg and saw the small table set up on the lowered drawbridge where Dumbledore, Sophia, and Alexandra were eating their lunch.

"Hermione, do join us," Sophia said genially as Hermione grew nearer.

"Thank you," said Hermione, her breath coming in great heaves. "But I have to talk to Professor Dumbledore. I'm sorry for ruining your lunch."

"What's wrong?" Dumbledore asked sharply. He threw his napkin on the table and rose to his feet.

"The Ministry," gasped out Hermione. "It's under attack."

"Duty calls," sighed Sophia. She shook her head sorrowfully.

"I'm going with my father," said Alexandra abruptly, rising to her feet.

Sophia looked alarmed.

"We have sworn a feud with the Dark One as well; it is acceptable for me to go," Alexandra said stubbornly

Sophia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You are far past your age of ascension. You are free to go."

She opened her eyes and looked at her daughter. Alexandra's chin was set in an expression that reminded Sophia of Albus when they had been much younger.

"You will be missed if you are killed," said Sophia reluctantly.

"I have to say goodbye to Kari first," said Alexandra, running up the drawbridge.

Sophia watched her daughter go with a soft expression that turned to panic.

"Hermione, quickly," said Sophia, grabbing the young witch's arm. "Go to the hall and blow the silver horn. It is near the Floo fireplaces."

Hermione didn't question, but ran up the drawbridge.

"What does the silver horn signify?" Dumbledore asked as he drew his wand.

"It evacuates the bastards," said Sophia, looking at him sharply. "You found your way here, didn't you?"

Dumbledore looked as if he were going to argue, but shook his head and Apparated with a loud *pop*' instead.

Sophia stood on the drawbridge alone.

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Severus sat in his chair near the ballroom fireplace, biting his nails. The wait was nerve wracking.

When the flames leapt up in the hearth, he jumped and upset his untouched cup of tea.

Hermione walked through the flames with a pretty blonde girl in a light yellow toga behind her.

Severus leapt to his feet and realized he didn't know what to do.

"Err... hello?" Severus said awkwardly.

"Hello," said Kari, holding her hand out to him. "I believe I will be hiding here until things calm down."

As Hermione made introductions, the flames crackled and Charlie Weasley's head appeared.

"Those fools stormed in, there was nothing we could do to stop them!" said Charlie, half-shouting.

"The Death Eaters?" Hermione asked, panic stricken.

"No! Ron, Harry, Neville and the young 'uns," Charlie yelled, nearly hysterical, obviously distracted by something else going on in the room he was in. "It's all we can do to keep Mum under control."

Hermione breathed in.

"I have to go," she said, pulling her wand out and appearing to ready herself to walk into the flames.

"I don't think so," said Severus, grabbing her arm.

"You can't stop me!" Hermione shouted at him.

"I most certainly can!" Severus said, drawing himself up to his full height and fixing her with a steely glare.

"It's my duty to go!" Hermione yelled, ignoring his posturing.

"It's not your prophecy, Hermione," Severus said sharply. "You don't have to die!"

Severus never saw it coming.

When he opened his eyes, there was a loud ringing in his ears and his jaw ached. He was also on the ground.

He looked up to see Hermione waving her hand about in pain. Behind her, Charlie's head conveyed an expression of shock and amusement. He threw Charlie's head a look that instantly changed his expression to that of innocence.

Kari watched with interest and poured herself a cup of tea.

Severus looked at Hermione.

She was eighteen years old and only by pulling some strings. She looked vulnerable standing there in Muggle clothing, her hands covering her mouth in horror, her wand forgotten by her side.

My God, what was I doing at eighteen?

Probably things best not thought about. Things that could be happening to her friends right now.

"I'm sorry," said Severus, getting to his feet and brushing himself off. "That was uncalled for."

"I'm so sorry," Hermione said, bursting into tears and flinging herself into his arms.

"Couldn't you have just hit me with a Jellylegs?" Severus asked, patting her on the back and allowing himself a small grin while she couldn't see. The girl had a perfect right hook.

She sniffled into the front of his robes.

"I hate to break this up," said Arthur Weasley, his head popping up in the fire near Charlie's. "But we're going to need your help."

"Anything," said Hermione, turning around to look at him, her face set in a mask of grim determination.

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Hermione had never seen a Disillusionment of this magnitude before. She stood before the Bibliotheque oo Amazon with 100 Amazonian archers, all Disillusioned, lined up on flying carpets behind her.

She gave a look to Severus that he interpreted as overly proud as he guided their carpet into the sky.

A deafening bird-like scream ripped through the air, and Hermione looked up to see the sky ripple as if something huge was passing overhead.

"What the hell was that?" Hermione blurted out as their carpet rocked in the air.

"Probably K'pluur's mother," said Severus, smirking at her. "He was just a hatchling, you know."

Hermione looked at him blankly before remembering the tiny snow dragon.

"By the way, we're picking up some Jotuns on the way," Severus said conversationally.

"Why do you know all this?" Hermione asked, slightly annoyed no one had told her anything.

"I'm driving," Severus said simply.

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Kebnekaise Mountain in Sweden rippled, and a large door appeared in its side. Severus shifted in obvious discomfort by Hermione's side on the carpet.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Well," said Severus sarcastically. "They can only be killed by gods, haven't been aground for nearly 2000 years, and aren't rumored to be very polite."

"Jotun." Hermione rolled the word around in her mouth. Severus could see her thinking and realization dawning on her. "Like *Loki*' Jotun?"

Her expression went from one of interest to horror.

"Well, I'm fairly sure he won't be showing up," said Severus testily. "But the few like him that survived, yes."

"Severus," said Hermione warily. "According to legend the Jotun never had problems having children. The last time you saw them was 2000 years ago?"

Severus leaned over to the next carpet with Alexandra and several other archers sitting on it.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

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Hermione stared at the eight-legged horse flying next to her carpet. She was desperately trying not to stare at the rider on its back, but it seemed to be as fascinated with her as she was with it.

Its skin was black and shiny like obsidian, although it moved like normal flesh. Its eyes were clouded over like storm clouds; if you watched, you could follow small bolts of lightning through them. Its mouth was a toothless yawn of bloody saliva when it opened.

Right now it was molded in a smirk. Its straight, dark hair was intertwined with small black adders, slithering about. Hermione wondered if they grew from its scalp. Hermione couldn't tell if the rider was male or female.

All the Jotun were different, and if Hermione didn't know better, she would have thought they were all different species.

Some had more than one head. Some were fair, others dark. Some no bigger than a cat, some huge. A covered figure let her veil slip, and Hermione was stunned into awe by the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

The Jotun claimed their kind had a natural defense to Muggles. If the Muggle disbelieved in the Jotun, they just didn't see them. Wizards and magically inclined creatures could see them just fine, but there was not worry over Muggle sightings. Hermione certainly hoped so.

The Jotun wove a strange magic that Hermione didn't understand, and the air started to ripple around them. They all flew their carpets through a ring of blue fire that had appeared in the sky and found themselves in London.

After they arrived at the scene, the battle was a joke.

Hermione had never seen or imagined anything like it.

The top of the Ministry had been blown off, leaving a gigantic hole gaping in the center of London, splintered bits of blown apart buildings and ruptured streets scattered about like a ruined playset.

Muggles were running through the streets screaming. Small fires burned here and there, and Muggle firefighters had to fight the panicked crowds to get to them.

The Jotun barely had to do anything but growl, and the hundreds of well-drilled Death Eaters began breaking up in panic.

The few Death Eaters that took to the air seemingly vanished into nothingness, followed by loud crunching noises and the occasional wail.

Hermione was relieved to see Ron unconscious on the ground, a broken flowerpot by his head.

Of all the things that could have happened to him in battle, he got conked. She breathed out a sigh of relief.

She searched desperately for any sign of anyone she knew in the ruins. They could be anywhere. How many floors were there, anyway?

A hole suddenly melted in the floor of the entrance hall and Death Eaters began flying out on their broomsticks in organized ranks to attack. They were met with a volley of ebony arrows that had a pinkish glow. As they reached their targets, instead of piercing their opponents, they encapsulated the target in a clear pink glowing egg. The prisoners' wands and brooms were sucked from them and expelled, clattering to the ground.

Hermione watched as the pink eggs fell from the sky, wands and brooms raining down into the wreckage. The egg prisons didn't seem to cushion their landing, and she was happy to see some of them fall quite a distance.

Hermione was disappointed to feel her carpet fall back behind the action.

"What are we doing?" Hermione demanded.

"Apparating to the hall," said Severus shortly as he raised his wand and grabbed her arm.

Hermione and Severus appeared near Ron, and she assessed his wounds. She was right. Just a bump on the head. She saw his wand on the floor near him and put it in his hand so he could find it if he woke up.

Severus was dodging a curse from a small Death Eater and slipping behind a bust of Lothar the Lucky.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," said Hermione with a swish of her wand, and the figure fell to the floor.

"Thank you," said Severus, brushing the marble powder from his clothing. He walked to the figure and ripped the mask off. "Jones," he sneered.

Hermione was startled to see the face of a young boy behind the mask.

"Second year," Severus sneered, kicking the boy aside. He marched to the melted hole in the floor and looked down.

Hermione felt pity as she walked by the form, but left him.

They found Neville in a room full of Pensieves with locked covers. To Hermione's horror, he was torturing a Death Eater crumpled on the floor.

"Crucio!" Neville screamed and the Death Eater's back bowed violently.

"Neville!" Hermione cried out as she ran to him.

Bellatrix Lestrange panted weakly, and her fingers convulsed as they scrabbled at the floor. A thin line of drool fell from her mouth and pooled on her robes.

"One curse for each wrapper, you bitch!" Neville shrieked madly as he raised his wand again.

Hermione knew Neville kept the candy wrappers his mother slipped him, but had no idea how many he had accumulated over the years. There must be hundreds.

"*Accio wand*," Hermione heard behind her.

Neville's wand flew past her ear, and she heard it *thwap* into a hand near her.

"I think that's enough, Mr. Longbottom," said Severus sternly.

The fury drained out of Neville's face, and he stood, shaking and pale, before them.

"Professor?" Neville whispered. His eyes were dilated. "Hermione?"

"He's in shock," said Severus, moving to him slowly.

They could hear the sounds of battle coming from deep within the bowels of the Ministry. The Jotun certainly were efficient.

Hermione hoped they wouldn't cause any trouble once the battle was over.

Hermione heard a low rumble growing under them, and the floor began to shake. She looked at Severus, who had placed a hand on Neville and was examining his eyes. Severus looked up and turned to look at Hermione.

Just then a wave of green energy vibrated up through the floorboards and hit them.

Then all they knew was darkness.

Recovery

Chapter 17 of 17

Waking up in St. Mungo's.

Hermione began to feel a twitter of consciousness and slowly, groggily, became aware of her surroundings.

Her thoughts felt sluggish and her movements were stiff. She assumed she had been out for quite some time and that worried her.

As she struggled to lift her eyelids, the little light in the room nearly blinding her, she was able to notice that the bed she was reclining on was surrounded with a thick white curtain, blocking her view of the rest of the room. She heard murmuring from beyond the curtain and the sounds of people moving about.

She let out a sigh of relief. She must either be in St. Mungo's or a Muggle hospital, so she tried to relax. She reflexively groaned in discomfort as she attempted to shift her position on the hard, uncomfortable bed.

"I think we've got another one." Hermione heard an unfamiliar female voice outside the curtain.

The curtain was quickly whipped back, and Hermione saw a wide-faced, blond woman in the lime green robes that marked her as a Healer enter her small, private area. Her kind, green eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled down at Hermione.

Hermione smiled weakly at the Healer and felt relieved.

St. Mungo's. Perfect. She didn't have to worry about trying to explain anything to a Muggle doctor.

"Don't try to move, dear," the Healer said in a gentle tone as she pressed a cool hand to Hermione's forehead. She took Hermione's wrist to feel her pulse and pointed her short, white wand at the prone girl.

"Where is... What is... How..." Hermione tried to whisper, but her mouth felt dry and her tongue heavy, as though she hadn't spoken in quite awhile. She noticed her skin had a greenish tinge to it, and she frowned at her wrist where the Healer held onto her. The Healer put her arm down gently, and Hermione tried to look at herself, but her arms felt as if they were made of lead.

"Don't you worry, now." The Healer gently fluffed Hermione's pillow under her head. "Just lie still and save your strength. You've had quite the adventure."

Hermione tried to relax and closed her eyes, her stomach churning. "Am I a widow?"

The Healer was silent. Hermione opened her eyes and looked at the woman's worried expression.

The Healer glanced quickly over her shoulder. She shuddered.

"No, dear," she said as if she felt very sorry for Hermione. "He woke last week and has been waiting for you ever since. He must have stepped out for something to eat."

Hermione let out the breath she had been holding and smiled contently. How long had she been here? She found she didn't care as long as he had been waiting for her.

She hadn't expected that it would literally be by her bedside, but the idea gave her a small thrill.

"He is a good man," Hermione said as she tried to relax. She wanted to kiss him, to feel his skin under her fingertips. "Thank God he's all right."

Hermione closed her eyes so she couldn't see the expression on the Healer's face. The woman was obviously one of his former students.

To Hermione's surprise, she felt herself slipping back into sleep, but the little she had done had taxed her and made her too tired to care.

The next thing she knew, Hermione's ears recognized the low tone of Severus' voice on the other side of her curtain and the higher tone of the blond Healer that had seen her.

When Severus pulled back the curtain surrounding Hermione's bed, her eyes were open and she was smiling weakly at him.

"Hello, Severus," she croaked at him through parched lips.

He took the three large steps that covered the distance between them and took her hand in his. His eyes looked as if they were tearing up, and he pressed her hand to his cheek as he knelt by her bed. She felt it becoming moist, and he gently dabbed at his eyes with her sleeve. When his eyes rose to meet hers, they were dry, but red around the edges.

"I thought I might die without you," Severus whispered hoarsely, pressing her hand to his chest.

She reached up with her other hand, slowly, painfully, and caressed his cheek, her green skin tone bright against his pale white. She pulled him closer, and he kissed her gently on the lips, afterwards taking both her hands in his own and kissing each of her knuckles in turn.

There was a loud snuffle behind Severus, and he turned sharply to see the blond Healer, along with another female Healer with long brown hair, gazing wistfully at him and Hermione and looking quite sentimental. The blond Healer had the nerve to pause in her gawking to dab at her eyes with a small white handkerchief.

Severus frowned at them sternly. The blond Healer busied herself by scuttling to one of the other curtained beds while the other squeaked and all but ran out of Hermione's area.

"I've really got to learn how you do that," said Hermione softly as she tried not to laugh. The shaking hurt her ribs too much.

He dipped his head so his hair fell into his face so only she could see his smirk. "No. You'll do it to me."

"Smart boy," Hermione said, closing her eyes and relaxing on her pillow as he pressed her hand to the side of his face.

Severus smiled down at his wife and shook his head. He hadn't been called a boy for years, but didn't really mind when she did it. Though, he certainly hoped no one else had heard it.

He heard a small noise behind him and turned around quickly. The blond Healer quickly darted back behind the partition, silently wiping her nose.

He finally placed her. Brainless twit. Hufflepuff. Class of '90. Hopeless romantic. He briefly wondered if he should hit her with a memory charm, but then he figured he'd also have to hunt down the brunette one and anyone she might have talked to. It wasn't worth it.

Severus hoped his name wouldn't be tacked onto a propaganda article on the Marriage Law. Hopefully with the Ministry trying to piece itself together, they'd drop the whole idea. He and Hermione had been lucky but he knew not everyone had been.

He sighed in resignation and looked back at Hermione's green face.

No one knew exactly what had happened deep in the bowels of the Ministry when Harry and Voldemort had fought. What they did know was that the backlash from the final blow had knocked people unconscious for miles. The Ministry was now working closely with the British Muggle authorities in a frantic attempt to cover it up.

Most of the Muggles that had suffered physical damage were quickly healed before they were brought to. Their memories had been heavily modified, and the worst of them were being kept at a Muggle hospital for evaluation.

Voldemort's lifeless body had been found near Harry's unconscious form. It was presently on ice and in storage in one of Gringotts' highest security vaults until the Ministry could get to it.

Severus had had no idea that the goblins were in possession of that type of technology in their storage facility. It made him wonder what else they had, deep within the bowels of their facility. He decided it was safer not to think about it.

Harry had yet to regain consciousness, but the staff at St. Mungo's were observing him round the clock because of his injuries.

Harry now appeared to possess slitted eyes; his scar had spread, getting longer and wider, splitting his face in two and coming to rest on the left side of his jaw. No one had a clue as to the cause or the significance of it. He was confined to a padded room, bound to the table he rested on with wide, steel enforced leather straps. He was surrounded by Aurors at all times.

Ginny was now missing the little finger on her right hand. She was also sporting a large blue scar on her left arm in the shape of Italy, but had no recollection of how it had

got there.

Cornelius Fudge and many, many other members of the Ministry had been killed in the attack.

Mrs. Weasley had managed to keep Percy, Fred, George and Arthur busy trying to subdue her, and they hadn't even been involved in the combat. She would look back in her later years and be terribly pleased with herself.

Neville was still unconscious. His grandmother sat by his side every day, repeating how proud of him she was with tears in her eyes.

Bellatrix Lestrange had lost what was left of her mind. Ironically, she had been placed in the same ward as Frank and Alice Longbottom.

At the first sight of her, Alice Longbottom had raised one finger, pointed it at Bellatrix Lestrange, and laughed. Her Healers said it was the most progress she had ever made.

The captured Death Eaters were being kept in a secret location so they could be tried and convicted.

The Amazons had lost thirteen girls in total, although many had gone back injured. Alexandra boasted proudly that she had encapsulated seven Death Eaters and driven four more to death by dragon.

Dumbledore was fiercely proud.

The Jotun had politely asked for the unclaimed dead humans. The few Ministry members that were left had granted them their request and had asked no further questions.

The onyx-skinned warrior with hair of slithering adders had given Alexandra a small wooden box to give to Hermione. He had explained it would assist her in her journey and that it was Hermione's by birthright.

Alexandra had been quietly relieved when the Jotun had retreated into their mountain and the door had disappeared. She had cautiously kept the box safe for Hermione, knowing better than to open a box which wasn't meant for her.

Ron had gained consciousness the same day as the attack and had been waiting in St. Mungo's for everyone to wake for weeks. He had known the Snape union had been consummated, but had weeks to think about it. In the end his arguments were weak and unenthusiastic at best when he confronted Severus.

After Ron had finished blustering, and after they had managed to talk to each other without shouting, they had sorted out their differences, waiting for Hermione to wake. Ron now waited on the other side of the curtain, practically dancing with excitement, waiting for Severus to call him in.

Ron burst into Hermione's area, not willing to wait anymore, and saw Hermione's face light up at him. Then she winced as her dry bottom lip cracked. Greenish liquid trickled from the wound.

"Don't hurt yourself," Ron said, sitting on the other side of the bed and taking her other hand. "You look a right wreck."

"I've been here for weeks," Hermione said. "At least it sounds like it. Why haven't I healed? Why am I *green*?"

"You got hit with an experimental potion," said Ron excitedly. "They didn't know if healing you quickly would complicate things."

Hermione frowned at this and turned to look at Severus.

"We'll save a bit of money on food for awhile," said Severus, smirking.

"What happened?" Hermione asked suspiciously. They both looked like they were trying not to snicker. Whatever it was, it wasn't serious.

"It was an experiment for the Aurors. When they have to go to remote locations, it was a way to conserve rations," Ron said excitedly. "I wish Neville could see you."

"Neville?" Hermione frowned and looked at Severus.

"You now possess the ability to photosynthesize," said Severus as his eyes swept over her face. "Open your mouth." She did so, and he used a small light at the tip of his wand to look inside. "It'll wear off eventually, but you were hit with the full supply. It's only supposed to be consumed a few drops at a time, but glass from the broken bottle cut you. It got directly into your bloodstream."

"You looked really cute a few weeks ago," said Ron teasingly. "You were *really* green and your eyebrows looked like bushy grass. Wish I'd thought to have Colin take a picture."

Severus couldn't believe Ron was joking at a thing like this, but Hermione chuckled and Severus felt himself relax a bit.

"I hope they were smart enough to observe me and gather more test results," said Hermione weakly. She pulled a strand of her bushy hair away from the pillow and up to her face. It looked as if long, curly blades of grass were intertwined with her bushy brown hair.

"I ran the tests myself," Severus said hoarsely.

Weasley had seen him break down in the last week, and that had been bad enough, but he didn't want Hermione to see him like this. He had been worried she had become too vegetative and would never recover. The idea had nearly driven him to madness. "I kept careful notes. You'll find them very interesting."

A brunette male Healer with a thick German accent and bushy moustache bustled in and told them it was time for Hermione to rest and she should not overtax herself. Severus tried to protest but the Healer finally managed to shoo him and Ron from the room.

Over the next week Hermione felt herself get stronger. She suspected this was because the Healers had finally moved her near a window. The color of her skin faded until it was just tinged with green and, thankfully, her hair had went to normal.

Reporters from the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler* came to her room in a steady stream; although Hermione was quick to point out someone like Neville or Ron knew more about the initial attack than she did.

The Healers tried to discourage them at first, but after the third reporter tried to sneak in on the food cart, they reluctantly gave in.

On the day she was released, Severus had led her down to the main lobby where her parents were waiting for her, her father trying to politely sidle away from a young wizard that was reading a newspaper, his hair replaced with daisies. The daisies were humming a cheerful tune and bobbing along with it.

The reunion was tearful and Hermione was grateful to know she and Severus would be returning to her parents' house for a few days.

"Why didn't you come see me?" Hermione asked her mother as they climbed into the car the Ministry had sent for them.

"No Muggles or unregistered persons allowed in!" Severus snorted. "They wouldn't have let them come with me to pick you up if I hadn't raised a bloody riot over it."

Hermione laughed, and her father had gave and Severus a strange look before cocking a corner of his mouth at them.

Hermione found the time spent at her parents was more relaxing than she had given it credit for. Severus didn't stay with her, but Flooed over every night for dinner. To Hermione's relief, her father was civil, and they actually managed to have several conversations without incident.

Time passed so quickly, Hermione was startled to learn the new school year would be starting soon. She assured her parents that she would be safe at Hogwarts with Severus, and after several false starts, she said goodbye to her parents and rejoined her husband at Hogwarts.

Early one morning, a few days before the start of term, Hermione found herself facing Helga Hufflepuff as she walked from her rooms into the common area in their quarters at Hogwarts. (Severus still snored from time to time and Hermione appreciated a place to retreat to.) Helga's powder-blue, pointed hat was in her hands and her white hair was swept up into an untidy, loose bun.

"Your friend has finally awakened," Helga said gravely. Helga's mirror had been returned to Severus' quarters, but an empty blank canvas had been placed in Dumbledore's office so she could take her place with the other headmasters if she so chose.

"Which friend?" Hermione said, thinking of both Harry and Neville.

"The Potter boy," said Helga. Her fingers were working the brim of her stiff hat from nervousness.

"How is he?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"Alive," said Helga grimly. "Dilys Derwent is reporting to Dumbledore as she finds out information."

"How does it look?" Hermione asked, afraid to know the answer.

"No one is sure," Helga confessed. "I wish I had more to tell you, but Derwent hasn't come back with any more news yet. The boy is still fairly groggy at this point."

"We'll meet you in the Headmaster's office," said Hermione quickly as she went to find Severus.

--

Severus and Hermione hurried through the halls of Hogwarts to Dumbledore's office as quickly as they could, Severus revealing several passages that Hermione didn't remember seeing on the Marauder's Map.

"*Key-Lime Truffle!*" Severus boomed when they finally reached the statue of a gargoyle on the seventh floor that guarded the headmaster's office. It hopped to one side and allowed them to proceed.

When they entered, Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, a grave look upon his face. The frame Dilys Derwent usually occupied was floating, empty, in the air near Dumbledore's desk.

Severus and Hermione quietly sat down in pair of the black leather chairs in front of the heavy desk. Hermione folded her hands in her lap and stared at them. She wished someone would say something, but it was obvious they were waiting for Derwent to return.

After a few moments that seemed like an eternity to Hermione, the former headmistress finally appeared in her frame and gave a distasteful look to Dumbledore.

"The boy seems to be, in fact, the boy," said Derwent with a sniff. "I don't think anyone would stop you from going to see him if it really is what you want to do. His face will take some getting used to."

"Thank you, Dilys" said Dumbledore brusquely as he waved his wand and the portrait was whisked through the air and back to its usual location.

Derwent scowled as the frame thumped into place on the wall.

It was the best they was going to get from the painting, Hermione knew. She snuck a glance at Severus. He was frowning, but said nothing.

She felt very uneasy, but couldn't put her finger on why.

--

"Hermione," Harry said, giving her a tired smile from his reclined position on the hospital bed.

He was still in the padded room, but his restraints had been removed, and he had an untouched pile of comic books next to him that Ron had left.

Two dark-haired Aurors, one tall and whip-like, the other of medium height and stocky, flanked the bed, their eyes evaluating everything that went on.

Hermione smiled weakly at the men. Severus stood behind her with a hand on her shoulder. They were to be expected. It was for Harry's protection as well.

Harry looked frightful. His scar had cleaved his face in two. Cold, reptilian, slitted eyes stared out at her in the same bright green they had always been, from sockets that crinkled at the corners in a familiar way, and Hermione couldn't help but think back on the prophecy.

When the mark of thunder shines upon one

And Darkness retreats into the night to rest

The midnight sun shines bright in the sky

One with fathers taken twice shall rise into the light

Plunging darkness into he will fall

Within him power will grow

Two paths here are laid

Light and Dark will be inside

Cleaving one into two

The answer lies with the givers of life

To show the path

Under the sea

How are you feeling?" said Hermione tentatively as she approached the bed. A shiver went up her spine, but she couldn't say why.

"Really tired," Harry admitted as he shifted, the sound of the rough hospital sheets loud in the tiny room. "My brain feels slow."

Hermione nervously sat on the edge of the bed, but Severus stood near the door, his arms folded as he watched them. "Has anyone told you anything about what happened? Do you remember anything?"

"I killed him," said Harry, letting his head fall back on his pillow. His eyes closed and he looked serene. "Voldemort is dead. I know that much."

Hermione reached out and took Harry's hand. It was easier with his eyes closed.

"Now you're *really* a hero, Harry," said Hermione, quirking a corner of her mouth at him.

He barely lifted his eyelids at her and chuckled. "Guess I am. Nice to be able to live up to it for a change."

Severus snorted from the doorway.

"Well, you'll always have people around you to keep your head from swelling," said Hermione, shooting Severus a look. He scowled at her.

Harry snorted.

"Now, what's so amusing?" Hermione asked gently as she brushed a wild lock of black hair out of his eyes.

"I heard you two fancied each other, but this is hilarious," Harry said. "I never would have guessed it would have turned out like this."

"How did everyone find out?" Hermione demanded. "I mean...," she spluttered.

"The house-elves told Charlie," said Harry, chuckling.

"Charlie was spreading gossip about our marriage?" Severus frowned.

"Well, he had to tell Mundungus," said Harry, beginning to snicker harder.

Severus saw where this was going quickly, and his cheeks flushed in both embarrassment and anger. He felt his fingers clench and unclench and the tic under his left eye begin to act up.

"Mundungus?" Hermione asked, confused. She looked from Harry to Severus and wondered what she was missing.

"Well, he was the one running the betting pool," said Harry, laughing and suddenly regretting it as his body was wracked with pain. He took a deep breath and groaned.

Hermione gasped, obviously appalled. If Harry wasn't in such a state, she would have been shaking him.

The Aurors looked as if they were trying not to smirk.

"There was a betting pool?" Hermione managed to squeak out.

"Who won?" asked Severus curiously. Hermione was obviously upset enough for the both of them, and any curses she threw would probably be overlooked.

"Fred and George," said Harry with a twitch of his upper lip. It was apparent he had lost whatever he had bet.

Severus sniffed.

"You're all disgusting," said Hermione, scowling and folding her arms.

"I didn't bet anything," lied Harry. "And Ron didn't even know about it until the end. He was furious."

Hermione relaxed a little but would be having a word with both Mundungus and the twins later. She shivered at the idea of having to marry the dirty little wizard. What would he have pulled if she was his wife?

She entertained a small evil thought about having him framed and put away, leaving her to live an independent life.

"What do you remember, Potter?" Severus said evenly. "Do you remember any details about the incident at the Ministry?"

Harry took a breath and acted like he was trying to determine the best way to word things. "We locked wands, and Voldemort tried to get in my head," said Harry. "We fought in our minds." Harry stared into a faraway place for a moment.

Severus knew what had happened. Harry had seen the life of Tom Riddle, and they had exchanged memories. Severus could only imagine what horrors he had seen, but a part of him vaguely worried about what Harry had learned about his own life.

"I believe I won," Harry finally said as he snapped out of it.

Severus knew they'd never get much more of an explanation than that. He looked at Hermione sharply, and she closed her mouth before she could persist with any questions.

"Potter, have you seen a mirror?" asked Severus cautiously.

"A mirror?" said Harry, confused. "Why would anyone give me a mirror?"

"Your scar is now quite a bit larger," Severus said slowly, glancing at the Aurors. "I'm guessing it was because of the level of the melding."

"Well, I'm a hero," said Harry, feeling like he could rest peacefully for the first time in years. "I don't have to be pretty." Harry secretly hoped it made him look cool.

"And your eyes, Harry," said Hermione trepidatiously. "They look like a snake's."

Harry reached up to realize he wasn't wearing his glasses.

"What happened to me?" Harry asked as he felt his face. His expression went blank for a moment. "Oh, that makes sense, I suppose."

"What makes sense?" Severus asked warily, taking a step forward.

"The knowledge of Abraxas would change my appearance, and I am a Parselmouth, aren't I?" said Harry.

This made almost no sense to Severus, and he shifted uncomfortably. "Knowledge would be enough to change your appearance?"

"This knowledge would," said Harry, placing his hand on the side of his head as if it ached.

The door to Harry's ward opened and Dumbledore walked in, his thick robes swishing around him in his haste. He was closely followed by Arthur Weasley in tweed and Kingsley Shacklebolt, whose deep red robes looked as if they had been slept in for several days.

Arthur tried not to show anything in his face, but a muscle in his jaw twitched. Kingsley had been there when Harry had woken up. He had no reaction to Harry's appearance.

"Hello," said Harry, sitting up. "Where's Ron?"

"In the waiting room with the rest of the family," said Dumbledore, trying to look cheerful although worry lines deeply creased his forehead. "We wanted to see how you were before Molly got the vapors over you."

Harry chuckled. "I feel a little tired. Really groggy."

"I think the family reunion can wait for another day," said Arthur as he cleared his throat. "You've been through a lot, Harry."

"I really think he's right," Hermione said quickly before Harry could protest. "Tomorrow will be here before you know it, and you'll feel a little bit stronger."

Harry scrunched his face at her before laying his head back onto his pillow.

"You'll thank us later," said Kingsley, thinking of what Molly's reaction would be without any warning about Harry's appearance.

A dark-haired male Healer walked into the room with a gold potion bottle on a tray. Severus stopped him before he got to Harry's side and took the bottle with a suspicious look at the Healer. He unstopped and sniffed the contents of the bottle before putting it back on the tray. The Healer seemed taken aback by the intrusion, but allowed the examination. Severus nodded after returning the bottle, and the Healer continued to the bedside before gently tipping the potion into Harry's mouth.

Harry almost immediately fell into a relaxed, dopey state, and the Healer told the other men that Harry would need more rest.

"That's fine," Dumbledore nodded, smiling through a strained expression as his long, grey beard brushed against the front of his robes. "Thank you for taking such good care of him."

"It's the very least we could do," the Healer said with a surprised expression on his face. "After all he's done for us."

"We'll see you tomorrow, Harry," said Hermione, smiling at her friend in a way she hoped looked close to cheerful.

"I promise to be more awake tomorrow," said Harry sleepily.

"Of course you will," Hermione said softly.

--

Molly Weasley spooned hot, thick potato chowder into the long line of deep, polished wooden bowls running along the long table in number twelve, Grimmauld Place and

tried not to worry about Harry by concentrating on the fact that there were mouths to feed.

Molly had been unusually silent since Arthur and Dumbledore had taken her into a quiet room, away from all the others, to tell her about what had happened to Harry.

Since the complete destruction of the Ministry, Grimmauld Place was being used as a temporary place for Aurors to gather information, rest, eat, and plan the reconstruction of their department. There was room to spare and Molly rather liked it. She felt well protected with all of them about, even though she knew that she and Arthur would be relocating back to the Burrow soon.

The Aurors had been a tremendous help to Molly in her seemingly endless task of getting the old house livable and the last of the questionable dark objects removed or destroyed. Some of the more dodgy items were in observation where the Department of Mysteries had been temporarily relocated to.

"I'll serve, Molly," Remus Lupin offered, taking two of the bowls from the counter. Remus looked older these days, but he had a peace about him that he hadn't possessed before. "You sit down. You've already done more than your share."

It was a sign that not all was right with Mrs. Weasley when she sat down wordlessly, not even bothering to protest. When Remus set a bowl of chowder in front of her, she ate without saying a word.

The few Aurors that had been milling around the kitchen grabbed bowls and took seats at the table. They all started eating when Tonks slipped into the room with a few more Aurors, brought out by the smell of good food, and took a seat between Molly and Remus.

"How's Harry?" Remus asked her quietly.

"Awake and talking to Dumbledore," said Tonks, shrugging. "Harry's seen a mirror."

"And?" Remus asked, raising an eyebrow as he waved his wand and a bowl floated down the length of the long table before coming to rest in front of Tonks.

"He seemed to take it well," said Tonks as she picked a spoon out of a pile of silverware. "But you never can tell."

Remus nodded and laid a basket of bread on the table as other Aurors filed into the room.

The fireplace suddenly leapt to life, and Severus and Hermione, who was still slightly green, walked through the hearth with a whoosh of green flame.

Molly looked up at them and shook her head at Severus.

He frowned at her. How dare the woman insinuate he had seduced Hermione? He had kissed her, he admitted that much, but Hermione had returned it, and she was a perfectly capable, logical young lady.

Severus decided not to voice his opinion. Molly had enough stress, and Severus didn't want to be her target when she finally snapped.

"Harry's really awake now," Tonks said to Hermione and Severus as they approached the table.

Tonks' view was Hermione seemed perfectly fine with her marriage and frankly, Tonks had other things to worry about. Severus had an attitude but he was mostly bark, Tonks knew that. Hermione could handle him.

"How is he?" Hermione asked as a young red-haired witch in bright green robes bustled her way past to get her meal.

"Feeling much better," Tonks said, waving to a handsome, middle-aged blond wizard in dark blue robes as he grabbed a bowl and swept out of the room. "He's up and talking to Dumbledore."

"Are there any insights into what happened to him?" Severus asked, getting jostled by an ancient little wizard in orange robes trying to balance four bowls of chowder on a tray for people elsewhere in the house.

"As far as we can tell, Voldemort's brain went wonky during battle," said Tonks as she blew on a spoonful of chowder. "Harry got all of it. Sort of like a memory download."

"What?" Molly whispered, looking up from her bowl, her face pale.

"Voldemort's not hiding in there," Tonks said quickly. "Dumbledore examined him extensively. Harry said it was like watching a movie in fast-forward."

"My God," Hermione said, collapsing onto the bench across from Molly and Tonks.

The green-robed witch sat beside her and started eating quickly.

"He'll be alright," said the witch between mouthfuls of food. "Listened to some of the interviews. Very informative. We'll learn a lot from him."

Molly sighed and stirred her chowder absentmindedly.

"He was born to do this, Molly," said Lupin, handing her a generously buttered hunk of bread. "Nothing we could have done. We did try, you know?"

Molly nodded and nibbled at the bread. Hermione reached across the table and squeezed Molly's hand. Molly didn't look up but clutched Hermione's hand.

Green flames leapt up in the hearth again, and all of them turned to look at Dumbledore as he entered the kitchen. No one said a word.

"I have never seen all of you looking so glum," Dumbledore said, a tired smile playing around his lips. "Harry will recover, though he's been through more than anyone should ever have to in any one lifetime."

"He'd been through more than anyone should by the end of his fourth year," Severus said under his breath. Only Dumbledore heard him, but the older wizard ignored him.

"He can see visitors tomorrow," Dumbledore said as he gave a pointed look at Molly. "Although it was advised that no one excite him. His system is still frail."

"I'm sure we can manage to hold it together," Hermione said before anyone else could say anything.

Molly sighed resignedly, but nodded in agreement.

--

Hermione, Severus, and Ron sat quietly in a waiting room at St. Mungo's, the only sound the scuffing of Ron's feet on the white marble floor and the sound of shuffling cards.

This room had only two doors: one going out into the main hospital and the other the only door to enter or exit Harry's room.

The Aurors that had been assigned outside, in the hospital hallway, stood erect on either side of the door, impressive looking and grim.

The Aurors that had been assigned to the waiting room were playing cards on a small plastic-covered table. Most of the Aurors had been called back for other assignments, but six were on duty here at all times, including the two in Harry's room.

The Ministry was taking Harry's condition *very* seriously.

Molly, Arthur and Dumbledore had been in there for nearly thirty minutes, and Ron was beginning to fidget more and more with each passing moment.

After what seemed like an eternity, the door swung open.

Molly looked pale and slightly ruffled, but had a tired smile on her face. "He's going to be all right, I think. Considering."

Hermione nodded and took a deep breath.

"You can go in and see him now," Dumbledore said as he put a hand on Molly's back and guided her away from Harry's door. "I'm sure he will appreciate seeing someone acting fairly normal."

Molly gave him a sharp look, and Arthur tried to hide a small smile at this, but Hermione and Ron practically leapt to their feet and ran to Harry's door.

Hermione stopped Ron quickly with a hand on his arm before he flung open the door.

He stopped in his tracks. She gave him a meaningful look, and he took a deep breath before opening the door calmly.

Severus watched cautiously as Hermione and Ron quietly entered the room that held their friend.

"Hello, Harry," Hermione said as the door closed softly behind her and Ron, leaving the older adults in the waiting room.

"Well?" Severus asked Dumbledore, steeling himself for anything.

"Are you familiar with the idea of mind-melding?" Dumbledore asked.

"It's part of a Muggle fable, is it not?" Severus asked with a curl to his lip.

"Not such a fable anymore," said Arthur, running a hand through his receding red hair. It seemed to have become much lighter in the last few weeks.

"He has all of the Dark Lord's knowledge?" Severus asked cautiously.

"All of it," said Molly brusquely. "He's lucky to be alive."

"Or sane," Severus said bitterly. He wondered exactly what depraved knowledge Harry had been exposed to. Specifically, what Harry knew about his own life.

"But apparently he's completely Harry," said Arthur, shaking his head. "Horrible burden for a boy to have to bear."

Dumbledore sighed. "If he travels the right path, he'll become a very wise man."

No one could think of anything to say. No one wanted to think about what would happen if he travelled the wrong path.

--

"Wow, Harry," said Ron, shaking his head and looking at his friend's deformed face.

Harry had dismissed the Aurors on duty in his room, assuring them that Hermione and Ron wouldn't attempt to poison him or worse. They now stood out in the waiting room with the card playing Aurors.

"The Healers say they're working on it," said Harry, shrugging. "But I wouldn't hold your breath."

"You thought people stared at you before," Ron mused.

"Ron!" Hermione said sharply.

"He's right, you know?" said Harry quietly as he set down the hand mirror he had been holding. His light blue pyjamas looked rumpled, and a stack of Ron's comic books sat scattered near the bed.

Hermione didn't know what to say to Harry. She had a stint as a cat once and felt deep sympathy for him, but she had recovered from the Polyjuice Potion. He would probably never recover from this.

"Well, look at the bright side, Harry," said Ron cheerfully. "You'll probably never have to wait in line for anything ever again."

Hermione and Harry both looked at Ron in bewilderment.

"Never mind," muttered Ron.

"You'll probably never be able to return to the Muggle world," said Hermione softly.

"I know," said Harry as he smoothed out his bedclothes. "I don't know if that upsets me or not."

"Wouldn't be that upset if I was you," snorted Ron.

"Why is that?" Hermione asked curiously.

"A scout for the Wasps happened to be in the Ministry the day of the attack, trying to get a Floo connection for his new house," said Ron excitedly. "Saw you on your broom, Harry. He was *really* impressed."

"What did you do on your broom?" Hermione asked Harry curiously.

"Well, there was a bit of trouble getting in," said Harry, shrugging. "It was kind of tricky, trying to maneuver around everything that was going on."

"Are you joking!?" Ron exclaimed incredulously. "It was some of the best flying I've ever seen. You should have seen it, Hermione!"

"You're lucky you're such a good flier," Hermione snapped at Harry. "I can't believe you just ran off to do this yourself. It was stupid and thoughtless of you!" Her stern tone had risen in pitch and was approaching a screech. She had finally snapped.

Dumbledore opened the door to Harry's room to see what the commotion was. Hermione shot him a look and he backed out quickly.

"Hermione..." Harry began.

"Don't you start!" Hermione boomed. "You could have got killed, or worse. You should have waited for the others."

"They never would have let us go," protested Ron.

"With good reason!" Hermione yelled. "What if the Death Eaters had got a hold of Harry?"

"Well, they didn't," said Harry, raising his eyebrows. His green serpentine eyes flashed with annoyance.

"Well, isn't that convenient," Hermione said testily. "Just because it worked, it's justified!"

Ron threw his hands up behind her in frustration, and she wheeled around on him. He stepped back and stumbled into a chair.

"And you!" Hermione began. In Ron's eyes, she seemed to get bigger than she really was. Her nostrils flared and her eyes flashed with anger. "You should have known better. Of all people."

"What, 'of all people?'" Ron exploded back at her. His fingers were white clenching the arms of his chair. "You weren't here, Hermione! It was pandemonium! No one could organize, the Ministry was in pieces, Dumbledore was missing..." Ron rattled out.

"I know," Hermione muttered. "I had to go get him."

"You knew where he was?" breathed Ron. "Everyone's been really secretive about it."

Harry was politely silent. He knew nothing about this, Hermione could tell, but was curious.

"I-I don't know if it's something he really wants everyone to know," said Hermione. "I really wish I could tell you."

Harry nodded in understanding, but Ron's face screwed up at her.

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Ron persisted. "It's all over now."

"It may not be," said Hermione. "The Amazons have an obscure prophecy that still might come to fruition."

"How many prophecies can one person have about them?" Ron asked, looking at Harry.

Harry shrugged. "If it makes you feel better, I'd rather there were no prophecies about me at all."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said. "But you idiots had me so worried and I was so far away..." Hermione trailed off.

"How was Russia?" Harry asked, interrupting her.

"Oh, you don't want to hear about my trip," said Hermione, shaking her head.

"Of course I do," Harry said insistently. "It will be a normal subject for a change. Maybe you'll even stop yelling."

He quirked a corner of his mouth at her. It made him look slightly sinister.

She made a face at him and told him about her trip.

"Snape's mother sounds desperate for grandchildren," laughed Harry. "Be careful if you don't want a brood."

Hermione blushed furiously.

Ron didn't look deliriously happy, but he managed to shake his head at her and give her a small smile. He kept repeating to himself that Snape could offer her more and she loved him. The pain would pass. Percy could counsel him that much.

Ron awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. Hermione felt a pang of regret.

"I just don't think it's the practical time to start a family," said Hermione. "I mean, if a family were to ever happen."

"You haven't even got that far, have you?" Harry asked, laughing.

"Well, it's not as if we've had a lot of time to talk about it," Hermione said, flustered.

"You haven't even *talked* about it?" Ron asked incredulously.

"We haven't been ... intimate for that long," Hermione said, annoyed. She could not believe she was having this conversation. "I've known you for years and I don't know how many kids you want."

"None," Ron said firmly.

"None?!" Hermione and Harry echoed.

"I'm sure I'll have plenty of nieces and nephews to entertain me," chuckled Ron. "Then I can give them back and go far away."

Harry laughed.

"You'll change your mind when you meet the right girl," said Hermione. "That's the same thing Viktor said and look at him and Tristan."

Ron scowled at being compared to the Quidditch player. Hermione ignored his look.

"I'd like a couple, maybe," said Harry thoughtfully. "Although I'm not sure who'd be with me now."

"Don't say that, Harry," Hermione said sympathetically. "And that's stupid. I can think of someone."

"Yeah," said Ron, sitting on the edge of the bed and picking up a comic book. "If you aren't married to Ginny by the time you're thirty, the Ministry will assign you a wife. She might even be nice."

"Ron!" Hermione said, shocked.

"I'm sure that's going to be one of the first things to go," Harry laughed. "I have a feeling a lot of things at the Ministry are going to change."

"I don't doubt that," Hermione said. "Mr. Weasley has been working really hard. There's talk he may become Minister of Magic."

"My dad?" Ron asked, stunned. "Minister of Magic?"

"Well, there's not many from the Ministry left, are there?" Hermione asked. "A lot of people remember Fudge trying to discredit your father when he wanted to prepare for the Dark Lord's return."

"Your dad's a hero, Ron," said Harry softly.

"Wow," said Ron, looking surprised and a little proud. "Might get a little respect out of this after all."

"We've *always* respected you, Ron," said Hermione exasperatedly.

He grinned at her and hugged her back when she flung herself in his lap and threw her arms around him. It was good to have her back as part of the trio. They had felt like they were missing something when they had gone to the Ministry without her.

"I leave for two minutes and I find you in the arms of another," came a cold voice from the doorway. Ron felt the color drain from his face.

Hermione looked at her husband's expression and burst out laughing.

"Stop *doing* that!" Hermione demanded. "They're not your pupils anymore."

"I am aware of that, wife," said Severus, sneering at her.

She blew a raspberry at him. Harry was fine. Ron wasn't mad at her. She was in a fine mood.

Severus felt his lips tremble and finally let out a small chuckle.

"How am I ever to keep up my reputation if you keep amusing me so?" Severus asked, placing his hands on his hips.

"Not my fault your façade is so easily shattered," Hermione snorted.

Ron wrapped his arms around her, feeling her weight in his lap. He firmly nodded in agreement. It was easy to do when he could hide behind her if need be.

"Just don't let it get out," Severus sighed.

"Mum's the word," said Harry with a smirk.

Severus looked at the slitted green eyes and shivered. The boy truly looked frightful. "I would hope so."

"Hermione, Ron, can you please leave us for a moment?" Harry asked. "We have a bit to talk about."

"Of course," said Hermione, realizing that Harry possessed knowledge of Severus' Death Eater days. She imagined they would have quite a bit to talk about.

"Want us to smuggle you in anything, Harry?" Ron asked as he and Hermione rose to leave the room.

"Chocolate frogs, if you can find any," said Harry. "There should be some money in my pouch. It's in the drawer over there. Get whatever you want, as well."

Ron walked over to a small, wooden chest of drawers that held Harry's personal belongings. He rustled a bit in the top drawer and came up with a heavy blue coin purse that jingled.

"Thanks, Harry," said Hermione. "We'll be back in a bit."

She looked at her husband worriedly before retreating from the room. She and Ron left with a soft click of the door.

Severus turned and looked at the face split by a lightning scar. The slitted green eyes narrowed at him.

Severus looked into the eyes of his two greatest enemies rolled into one. He could do any number of things. He could Obliviate him. Hex him. Tie his tongue into a knot.

However, Severus chose the most painful option, for the sake of his wife. He told the truth.

"I love her," Severus said uncomfortably.

Harry examined Severus, as if for the first time. Severus looked very tired and worn.

"You must," said Harry. He paused. "I do remember everything that ever happened in Tom's life."

Severus looked at Harry quizzically. "Tom?"

"Well, no matter how much power he got and what titles he gave himself, he always thought of himself as Tom," said Harry, rubbing his forehead and the area between his eyes. "He hated himself for it."

Severus felt sorry for the boy. Historians would be bothering him for the rest of his life.

"It..." Severus started. "Your knowledge must be..."

"Incredible," said Harry, looking very tired. "You have no idea."

"I have a small idea," Severus said as he raised an eyebrow.

"You..." began Harry fumbling for words that he didn't ever think he would hear himself say. They had a difficult time coming out of his mouth. "Are an incredibly brave man."

"Thank you," said Severus sincerely, bowing his head slightly.

"Take care of Hermione," Harry said, a very serious look on his face. "If you don't I will be most displeased."

Severus shivered for the second time that day. "I will."

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"What do you think they're talking about?"

Ron and Hermione were walking back to Harry's room from the cafeteria, their hands full of vending machine candy and sandwiches.

"Probably about Severus' time as a Death Eater." Hermione shrugged. "I wonder if Harry can activate the Dark Mark."

"How much do you know about Snape's past?" Ron asked curiously as they turned a corner.

"Not a lot," Hermione admitted. "He tells me in bits and pieces. I think he's more embarrassed about it than anything."

"Aren't you curious?" Ron asked.

"I'm not sure I want to know, honestly," Hermione said with a shake of her head. "I've already seen his library."

Ron suddenly stopped in front of a door with a small glass panel set into it. Hermione stopped and looked to see what he was staring at.

A stuffed vulture perched on a witch's hat. It bobbed slightly as the witch talked. It didn't look as if anyone was sitting up and talking back to her.

Hermione looked at Ron and he looked at her guiltily.

Hermione pushed the door open and the witch turned around.

"Hello, Mrs. Longbottom," said Ron as he and Hermione walked into the room.

"Hello, children," said Mrs. Longbottom in a tired voice.

Hermione mused they'd be grandparents and Mrs. Longbottom would still be calling them children.

"How's Neville?" Ron asked and was instantly sorry. He winced slightly.

"Still sleeping." Mrs. Longbottom sighed. "He did have a bit of a shock. It will probably take him a bit longer than you did to come around."

"Probably," Hermione said, forcing herself to smile.

"They say he can hear people when they talk to him," said Mrs. Longbottom, gesturing to the prone body in the bed. "You should say hello."

Hermione forced Ron to walk forward and go around to the foot of the bed. Neville lay motionless on white sheets. His face looked thinner than she remembered it ever being. His new blue pyjamas looked crisp and his hair freshly combed.

"Heya, Neville," Hermione said cheerfully. "We miss you terribly."

"We sure do," said Ron. "Harry beat you in waking up. You need to catch up with the rest of us."

Mrs. Longbottom beamed at them. "I keep telling him he managed to avenge his parents. I don't know if he understands yet."

"I'm sure he does," Hermione said softly. "I was there when the wave hit."

Mrs. Longbottom's smile seemed frozen for a moment, but she nodded at Hermione. "Good. He was very fond of you, you know? If he'd been of age, he'd have petitioned for you himself."

Hermione blushed slightly.

Ron stiffened beside her. How much competition had he been up against, anyway?

"He's always so thoughtful of others," Hermione said a bit awkwardly.

"That's our boy," said Mrs. Longbottom proudly. "Just like his father."

Ron smiled and nodded politely, a forced smile frozen on his face.

"Look at the time!" Mrs. Longbottom exclaimed. "If I want to see Frank and Alice, I have to get going."

Hermione and Ron said their good-byes to Mrs. Longbottom and Neville, then quickly left the ward.

"Well, that was creepy," muttered Ron, walking quickly along a corridor. Hermione had to quicken her pace to keep up.

"Most of her family is here, Ron," chided Hermione. "I can't imagine how she holds it together."

Ron was quiet for the remainder of the walk back to Harry's ward, though his pace had slowed down to a stroll instead of a retreat.

