

# Dark Veela

*by kittyperry*

Severus Snape lies dying in the Shrieking Shack when he sees a vision of his mother.

## Prologue/Chapter One: And So It Begins

*Chapter 1 of 40*

Severus Snape lies dying in the Shrieking Shack when he sees a vision of his mother.

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Severus Snape had had a miserable childhood. His parents had married for entirely the wrong reasons, and his childhood home had been filled with strained silences punctuated by raised fists, yelled accusations, threats, beatings and mindless terror. So when he had come to Hogwarts he had not been surprised to be despised or bullied. He had quickly learned though that if he was useful, cunning, resourceful, he could find a place amongst his equally cunning and ambitious housemates. Lily's friendship had been the one and only spot of happiness, but that too had ended with what he had come to call 'The Incident'. It had hurt him greatly to discover that she could never forgive him. This wound had been made more raw by the fact that she had began dating Potter soon after. Her betrayal of marrying Potter, the nemesis of his youth, had destroyed Severus' hopes in friendship, in love. And although his love for her, his desire for her forgiveness had never died, in time, he had come to realise her shallowness, her worthlessness for his continuing devotion, even as he had continued to use her, his love for her as the only drop of light in his very dark ocean of misery and torment.

He had tried to find meaning and belonging through the study of the Dark Arts, and service of the Dark Lord, but that had soon revealed itself to be nothing but false promises and empty dreams. Lucius Malfoy had been the one honest constant in his life, and that relationship had been one of mutual ambition and exploitation. Severus had brewed him complex lust potions, poisons and elixirs and Lucius had given him the opportunity and backing to enter into pureblood society. Although in truth, entry into pureblood society had given him nothing but heartache and trouble. Indeed, he'd tried to gain a place in pureblood society purely because Potter and that mongrel Black had been born into it, and because he had thought, foolishly, that Lily would be impressed and lured away by Severus' rising prominence in society.

Dumbledore for all his merry twinkling had used him and given him no thought or consideration ever. Severus was no fool, he knew the only reason the Headmaster had taken him back was because he had something precious to offer. Information. And though over the years, Dumbledore had come to trust Severus, the trust had never turned to genuine friendship. It had always had the cloying taste of duty, of power held, and oaths sworn.

However, when he finally thought that life was done with him, when he finally thought he could be free in death, he was once again prevented from accepting the happiness, the light he had always desired, because as he lay dying alone in the Shrieking Shack, he saw a vision of his mother. His mother, not as she had seemed in his childhood and early youth, but as she should have been, her face blooming with love and happiness, her hair long and luscious, her figure ripe and unbearably beautiful.

"Mother, is that you, Mother?" asked Severus, bemused. He had thought he'd see Lily in death or the old twinkling goat, Dumbledore. In his worst nightmares he had thought he'd see the accusing eyes of Potter and all the others he had been forced to kill under the Dark Lord's orders. Sometimes he had even dreamt he'd see Charity Burbage, pleading with him to save her. But he'd never thought he'd see his mother, looking sensual and alive.

"Dear heart, it is me," said Eileen Prince.

"But you look so different," stated Severus stupidly. And then, seeming to recover himself, he looked round at what appeared to be billowing clouds and mist and demanded, "What's going on? Where am I?"

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## Chapter Two: Family History

*Chapter 2 of 40*

Severus is told of the Dark Veela curse.

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Eileen Prince smiled. Her smile was so open, so captivating that for a moment, Severus felt as if the heavens had opened and sent moonbeams and sunlight to flood his starved and bruised soul.

But Severus was not one to be easily distracted by a smiling woman, even if that smiling woman was his mother. So he asked again, louder this time, "What's going on, Mother? Where am I?"

Eileen took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. Then she began to speak. "I'm not sure where to begin really, my darling boy." But seeing his rising impatience, she quickly continued by saying, "I guess I should begin with your grandmother, Antonina, my mother. A long time ago, when my mother was a young girl on the cusp of womanhood, she went to visit her Great Aunt Livia in what was then Prussia. There, she learned that what she had always thought of as her ugliness and inability to find friendship, love, was because of a Dark curse. The curse of the Dark Veela."

Taking a moment to pause, she went on. "You see, dear heart, Antonina's father, my grandfather, Claudius, was part Veela through his mother, Juliana's, side. But when she, the beautiful golden Juliana, left her family in Prussia to come to England and marry a man they thought unfit for a Veela, she broke their hearts and their expectations. Veela at that time were brought up to marry into wealth and bring continued glory to the family name, not love, and so the clan elders placed a curse on Juliana's descendants."

Eileen continued to speak, her voice growing sadder, more leaden. "As Juliana had left convention and position for love, then should love be the only thing that a Dark Veela, her offspring and their offspring would find hard to acquire. They would be the antithesis of the Veela she had sprung from. The Dark Veela would repel everyone. In order to find true love, that which Juliana claimed was the only thing that mattered as she left her family, and clan, the Dark Veela must find that one special someone immune to their anti-charm. Only then, with the finding of true love, would the curse be lifted. Juliana scoffed and gave no heed to the curse of the clan, and never told her husband or son about it.

Claudius was fairly fortunate because his mother's beauty and his father's ambition helped him to grow up to be both a wealthy and powerful man. He did not marry for true love, but his wealth and position meant that his wife was cowered enough to do his bidding and produce the requisite heir and daughter. The fortune his father had acquired continued to grow, and Marcus was found a partner from a penniless but prominent bloodline. Marcus and his wife lived in style, with great affluence and misery, and died childless and hating one another with their last breath.

Antonina, however, learned from her Great Aunt Livia the truth behind her parents' and brother's unhappiness and vowed that she would marry for love, that she would break the curse of the Dark Veela. For Antonina, despite her ability to repel everyone, was a romantic. As time passed and she failed to win the affections of the man she desired, one of the younger Malfoys if the tales are true, she married Edgar Prince, an older, kinder man who was in need of her money. My parents never loved each other, but they didn't really hate each other either, at least not until I was born. For not only did I repel them but with two Dark Veelas in the house, misery and discord was all that remained of the mutual unhappiness and desperation that had brought them together." Eileen was quiet after this long narration and seemed lost in thought.

Severus listened quietly to all of this family history. But he was growing impatient, for his questions had still not been answered. As he was about to open his mouth to question his mother for the third time, however, Eileen went on with her tale.

"I was foolish. I didn't know anything about love and fell in lust with your father. He was such a handsome man, and I thought that if I had a Muggle I could bind him to my bidding. And so I drugged him with lust potion and forced him to marry me when I became pregnant with you for, despite it all, Tobias Snape was an honourable man. Poor, but oh so charming, handsome and honourable. I made him love me at first, but soon I grew tired of constantly plying him with lust potions and love potions, and once you were born, I just couldn't bring myself to live a lie. That is why I never fought back."

Eileen sighed and shook her head sadly. Then she went on, "I think seeing you just made me realise the futility of it all. I loved you, but didn't know how to show it, and neither did you. I guess that was the Dark Veela curse stopping us expressing our love. And this is also why your father, who I know was looking forward to having you, could never really love you. It was the curse, destroying all hope of love."

Eileen suppressed a smile as she saw the fury and impatience on her son's face. "And now, my darling boy, I shall get to your questions. You are here, that is to say, you are in limbo while the magic of the Dark Veela heals you. You are the last of Juliana's descendants. If you die, then the curse has been effective and Juliana's quest and belief in love will die forever. Therefore, each of your ancestors from Juliana onwards, at the point of death, was informed by the Veela spirits of the curse and asked if they accepted that love was immaterial or if they believed that Juliana had done the right thing in marrying for love. And surprisingly, all the love-starved, angst-ridden lot, myself included, agreed that love was the most important thing of all, for spending a life without love had taught us all the importance of it and of doing everything to nurture it and let it bloom."

Eileen continued quickly, for she could see Severus getting ready to explode. "You are being given another chance at love, my son; you are being sent back to break the curse of the Dark Veela, or at least to have an heir, so that there is one more generation that has the opportunity to find true love."

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## Chapter Three: Back to Life, Back to Reality

Chapter 3 of 40

The retrieval of Snape's body.

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As Eileen finished speaking, she stroked Severus' lank hair away from his face and kissed him gently on the forehead. Then she said, "Know that I love you with all my heart. Know that the image you see now is my true form, the form that I would have taken if I had found true love. Don't be afraid; as your mother, I feel very strongly that the next stage of your life is going to be the best part yet."

Severus once again attempted to speak, but was once again hushed by his mother. "Let me finish," she said tenderly. "I don't know how long we have, and there is much for me to say. Don't let the curse colour your thinking. You are a Slytherin; use Slytherin cunning to get what you need, be it friendship, love or contentment. Just as you have used your tongue to wound, now use it to heal. You can do this, my son, I know you can."

Severus was speechless. Finally he seemed to regain himself and nodded slowly to his mother and said drolly, "I shall do my best, but I doubt that I shall be able to find true love in Azkaban."

Eileen laughed. "I don't think you'll go to Azkaban. I think if you play your cards right that you will have a wonderful future ahead of you."

As she said these final words, Severus felt pain like he had never known before take hold of his body. As he gasped in shock, he felt his mother's hold on him start to lessen. "Mother," he called in anguish, "Mother."

"Remember my words, my son," said Eileen. "Good luck, and know that I am with you always."

And then, the pain took hold like it never had before, and the last thing Severus remembered as darkness overcame him was his mother's bright and beautiful smile.

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Harry, Hermione and Ron left the Headmaster's office and walked back towards the Great Hall.

"I'd really fancy going to bed, and perhaps a nice tasty sandwich," said Harry.

"I know," said Hermione, "but perhaps we should be with the others for a short while longer." Then looking at Ron, she went on, "And I think we need to let Ron be with his family. Fred..." And then she stopped, unable to go on.

As they entered the Great Hall, Ron was immediately called over by Molly, who was surrounded by the rest of the Weasleys. **Ginny was sitting with her head on her mother's shoulder.** Arthur clasped Ron to him and beamed at Harry, who sat down next to Ginny.

Hermione, however, felt extremely uncomfortable, and with a sobbing George being held by the pale-faced but dry-eyed Percy, very out of place.

As Hermione looked round the Hall, she noticed **the three Malfoys, huddled together as though unsure whether or not they were supposed to be there.** As she continued to watch them, her thoughts turned towards Professor Snape. All the fallen Order members and those who fought for the Light were placed together, but the body of Professor Snape was still lying in the Shrieking Shack. Wracked with guilt, the thought of his body out there alone in death, as it had been in life, felt wrong, and Hermione felt that she at least should do something about it.

Hermione looked towards Harry, but she knew that he was very tired and so very relieved to be with Ginny again. He would not really want to be disturbed. And Ron, she looked at Ron thoughtfully and realised that he would not want to help her. He had always disliked Professor Snape and would not want to go help 'the Greasy Git' even if he had been working for the Light. No, Hermione realised, if she wanted to bring the body of Professor Snape back to the castle, then she would have to do it herself.

Or perhaps not. Squeezing Harry on the shoulder to let him know she was moving away, she walked towards the Malfoys. Of all those in the Great Hall, they, in spite of being Death Eaters, were the only Slytherins who would care about recovering Professor Snape's body.

Reminding herself that she was a Gryffindor, even as she recalled the events at Malfoy Manor, she approached the huddled trio. As she approached the table at which they sat, Lucius Malfoy looked up questioningly. He sneered at her and said, "What do you want?"

Gathering her courage together, Hermione spoke. "Mr Malfoy, I know you were a friend of Professor Snape. I need help in recovering his body; he was killed by Voldemort's snake in the Shrieking Shack."

As Hermione finished speaking, Draco looked up. He didn't sneer at Hermione; in fact, he looked quite traumatised. "I'll help," he said immediately. "I'm alive because of Professor Snape."

Lucius Malfoy looked at his son searchingly, and then said, "Yes, we will all help."

Hermione looked around to see if anyone was watching her speak to the Malfoys, but everyone was busy with their own grief. Quickly the odd quartet walked out of the Great Hall and headed across the grounds towards the Whomping Willow. Dawn had broken, and the carnage of the battle was littered all over the grounds.

They didn't speak; there was nothing to say. Lost in their own thoughts, they moved as swiftly as four weary people could through the tunnel, Hermione in the lead until they came to Snape's body.

Seeing the pool of blood, the ever so pale, lifeless body of Snape, Hermione was again immobile. The only thought going through her mind was *He's dead.*

Narcissa, however, was quick to push past Hermione and kneel, unmindful of the blood soaking through her elegant if now torn and battered silk robes, beside the body of Snape. She felt for a pulse, then pulled out her wand and performed a series of complex diagnostic spells with quick precision.

Turning to Hermione she stated, "You said he was dead. He's not dead; he's deep in a coma, almost like a magically induced sleep." Then turning swiftly to her husband, she stated, "Lucius, we need to take him to Malfoy Manor now."

Lucius Malfoy leaped into action, quickly transfiguring his cloak into an illegal Portkey. Before Hermione could utter a word, the three Malfoys surrounded the prone body of Snape, activated the Portkey and vanished.

Hermione had not moved since entering the Shrieking Shack. All she could think was, "He's not dead, he's not dead," which was quickly followed by the thought of how foolish she had been to not cast any diagnostic spells or to think about retrieving Snape earlier.

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The two quotations in bold in the chapter have been taken from J. K Rowling, 'The Flaw in the Plan', Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007) p. 597.

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## Chapter Four: Snape's Alive?

*Chapter 4 of 40*

Hermione informs Harry of Professor Snape's survival. Plans are made.

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Once the Malfoys left, Hermione slowly made her way back to the castle. She knew that she needed to make some important decisions before she rejoined the others. Most importantly she had to decide what she was going to tell everyone about Professor Snape.

Immediately following that thought came the issue of what to do about Ron. For although Hermione had not shown it, it had hurt dreadfully the way Ron had abandoned her to go to the side of his family. Not once had he looked to see if Hermione was okay; not once had he even turned his head or tried to pull her into the embrace with Mr. Weasley. And she knew deep down that Ron would never support her dreams of wanting a career, of being anything other than a house-witch like Molly. When they were out in the wilds camping, Ron had never helped with the cooking or the gathering of food. He'd never even offered, as if it were expected that as the only female all the house-keeping tasks fell on Hermione's shoulders. His improved behaviour after his return, Hermione knew, had only been motivated by guilt and shame, and that was not something that meant his attitude or expectations had changed.

Hermione's parents had always shared the burden of cooking and cleaning. Because they had both been professionals and partners in their dentistry practice, working together had been implemented into all the facets of their life. If her father had cooked, her mother would wash up; and if her mother had cooked, then her father would wash up and take out the bin. They were a true partnership in every sense of the word, and Hermione knew that she could never settle for anything less. Ron had always found Hermione's intelligence unimportant and on most occasions threatening, unless it was useful to him, and he had never really understood her fascination for learning and knowledge. No, Hermione knew deep inside that though she had kissed Ron in a moment's elation at his thoughtfulness over the house-elves, Ron would never appreciate her for who she truly was. However, Hermione also knew that kissing Ron at that crucial moment was as good as accepting an engagement ring. She would have to tread very carefully and make it perfectly clear that she was not Ron's girlfriend.

The morning had dawned bright and beautiful. Somehow this felt like a travesty as well as a gift. The sunlight seemed to indicate that despite the carnage of the grounds and the shattered remains of the castle, hope was beaming down from the heavens. Breathing in the fresh air tinged with the fumes of smoke and hex residue, Hermione wearily entered the Great Hall.

The first thing she noticed was that a lot of the people had left. The Great Hall was startlingly empty, as if the departure of the Malfoys had heralded the exodus of the weary. The Weasleys were no longer at the Gryffindor table, and as she looked around, she saw that only Harry remained seated next to a sooty and dusty Luna. Making her way carefully over the scattered debris, Hermione joined them at the end of the Hufflepuff table. Harry and Luna both looked up wearily as she joined them.

"Where were you?" asked Harry sharply. He seemed on edge, as if gearing up for battle, as though Hermione's absence from his side implied a personal abandonment. However, seeing the look of utter exhaustion on Hermione's face, Harry seemed to see reason and continued more gently, "Ron and Ginny left with the rest of the Weasleys. I said that you and I would join them later. I felt it was a time for family."

Hermione nodded, but said, "You're practically family too, Harry."

Harry looked at her thoughtfully then. "And so are you, you know."

Hermione sighed. "Maybe, but I didn't feel part of the family a little while ago. No one even looked at me." She sighed again. "Don't worry, Harry, I'm just tired."

Though Hermione didn't say anything further to Harry, she felt extremely hurt and disappointed with Ron and his behaviour. He had left her no message and had gone home, neither wanting nor needing her to be by his side. She knew her feelings were silly; had she not just thought about how she was going to distance herself from Ron, and here, she was furious with him for leaving without her. Admonishing herself for her foolishness, Hermione once again paid attention to Harry.

Harry seemed liked he was about to argue the point, but then seemed to accept her assertion and nodded. "I'm shattered too. But where were you? Did you go for a walk? What's it like outside?"

Hermione looked carefully at Luna, then, as if coming to a decision, said, "There's something I must tell you, but you mustn't react or cause a scene. Promise me, Harry."

Harry and Luna both sat up from the slouched position that they had both been lounging in before Hermione's request and looked intrigued and concerned. Luna, however,

was the first to respond in her dreamy voice and asked, "Is it something to do with you leaving with the Malfoys?"

"Bloody Hell!" burst out Harry. Then seeing the reprimanding look on Hermione's face, he questioned more softly. "You spoke to the Malfoys? After what happened at the Manor? What's going on?"

Taking a deep breath, Hermione began. "As I was watching you and the Weasleys comfort each other, I thought of all the dead, and then I thought of Professor Snape. I felt horrible that we couldn't do anything to save him. It seemed so wrong that we just left him lying in the dirt and the blood on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I didn't want him to be alone in death, even as he had been in life. Imagine, Harry, having to kill your friend, because it was your friend's request and order. Poor man, he must have been so tormented. And then to not be able to seek comfort in anyone or anything, and having to go on, being hated by everyone for something he had to do."

Harry's eyes softened. "I couldn't believe it when I saw in the memories that Professor Dumbledore demanded that Snape be the one to kill him."

Hermione nodded. "It's like if I were forced to kill Ron, in order to make sure that you lived. No, I couldn't let his body just lie there like some unwanted thing. But I could see that you were too content to leave Ginny, and she would have never forgiven me if I had taken you away from her then. And you know Ron; he wouldn't have wanted to help me bring back Professor Snape's body. So I asked the Malfoys."

"So where's the body?" asked Harry. He looked around him to see if the Malfoys had returned with the body while they were speaking. Not seeing them, he turned once more towards Hermione.

"Well, the thing is, Harry," explained Hermione carefully, "When we got there, Narcissa did some very intricate diagnostic spells and insisted that Professor Snape wasn't dead. That he was in a magically induced coma."

"Not dead?" said Harry dumbfounded. "But we saw him die. I took his memories, and there was so much blood, and..."

"I know, Harry," placated Hermione. "But I was a fool. I didn't cast any diagnostic spells, and what if he had been taking anti-venom that contained the poison and slowed down his pulse enough to put him into a coma? Remember his speech from first year, about putting a stopper on death? What if he was prepared for such an outcome?"

At Hermione's questions, Harry looked thoughtful.

As the two felt silent, Luna said quietly, in a voice totally removed from her usually dreamy one, "I always liked Headmaster Snape. He was so beautiful to look at, and he never did let any of us get hurt too badly. Even when we broke into the Headmaster's Office, he didn't give us to the Carrows. Instead he said that he'd love to see what would happen to interfering do-gooders and busy-bodies in the Forbidden Forest and gave us detention with Professor Hagrid."

Latching on to the one seemingly odd comment, Harry snorted. "Professor Snape beautiful?"

Hermione hushed Harry and said thoughtfully, "I can't believe I missed all the clues. Most brilliant witch of her age, what rubbish. The clues were all there, Harry. Even after killing Professor Dumbledore, what did Professor Snape do as he left? He taught you. He never brought the Death Eaters into Grimmauld Place or gave away the names of those in the Order."

Hermione sighed.

Then, pushing her bushy hair away from her face, she continued briskly, as if just speaking about it was giving her strength, "Anyway, we need to figure out what to tell the others. If he is in a coma, perhaps it is better to let the Malfoys take care of him? If we tell the others they will just insist on moving him, and we can't afford to have the Aurors trying to arrest him or question him or something. Even with Kingsley being temporary Minister of Magic, the Ministry will do their best to assert control of the situation."

Harry nodded. He knew from first-hand experience how wrong the Ministry was in their handling of most things.

"We need a proper plan, Harry," said Hermione urgently. Then carefully looking round the Hall at the Ministry officials taking statements from the remaining Order members, she went on, "And we need a place to speak in private."

Both Luna and Harry nodded once more. Harry's face took on a very thoughtful expression, but it was Luna who spoke up, suggesting, "We could use Ravenclaw Tower. There shouldn't be anyone there right now."

Hermione quickly agreed. "Good thinking, Luna. No one will consider looking for Harry there."

Harry added, "I think we best get moving before the Ministry officials decide they've given me enough time to recover and begin the second round of congratulations and questioning."

"Indeed," said Hermione, feeling more positive and suddenly displaying a very Snapish smirk.

She then continued more thoughtfully, "I was thinking, let's ask Headmaster Black for assistance. If he is duty bound to the current Headmaster, and if Professor Snape is still alive, then, Headmaster Black must help us. And I think that we really do need someone on the inside. Professor Dumbledore will not agree to this deception because Kingsley is in the Order, and Professor McGonagall is no help either because she'll tell Professor Dumbledore, who will tell Kingsley."

"Yes, I see," said Harry contemplatively.

Silently, so as to not draw unwanted attention onto themselves, the trio moved out of the Great Hall. They made their way carefully through the armour and statue strewn staircases and landings, up the spiral staircase on the fifth floor, to the Ravenclaw common room entrance. Luna's rap on the bronze knocker in the shape of an eagle made the beak of the eagle open and question in a musical voice, "When you have too much of me, you are bored. When you have too little of me you rush. What am I?"

Luna looked thoughtful for a minute and murmured, "Hmm... Time."

"Very good," said the voice, and the door swung open.

Hermione looked impressed. Turning to Luna, she said, "That's much more interesting than a password."

Luna seemed to ponder that and then said, "I guess," with a vague toss of her head.

"But not more secure," said Harry. "Anyone with sense and reason can eventually guess the answer, but with a password, you've got to have been told."

"Yes, I suppose," countered Hermione, "but a password can be leaked. To reason an answer, you can't be rushed, and it can't be accidentally divulged either."

Everyone was silent while that thought sank in. Hermione thought of Neville's list of passwords that had been passed on to Sirius in their third year. Surely, felt Hermione, that couldn't have been the only time the password had been told to people who weren't at that point, current Gryffindor students. Then as if shaking herself from her contemplation, Hermione took charge once more. "Harry, see if you can call Kreacher and get us something to eat and drink. We need brain fuel if we are to make a proper, water-tight plan."

At the prospect of food, Harry immediately perked up. Almost straight away, Harry called out, "Kreacher, Kreacher."

With a crack, Kreacher appeared and bowed low before Harry. The elf's eyes shone brightly in adoration.

"We would like some breakfast," said Harry. Then, thinking, he said, "and a change of clothes, if you can manage that next."

"Of course, Master Harry," said Kreacher. "For the defeater of the Dark Lord, anything is possible."

"Umm... thanks," said Harry uncertainly as the now adoring elf popped out of sight.

Hermione smiled to herself at the change in the house-elf. How well she remembered the insults of old and the refusal to respond to anything but a direct order.

Luna led Harry and Hermione to a circular table by a large window which flooded the common room with bright sunlight. The windows were bordered with thick floor-length velvet curtains in a rich burnished bronze, drawn back with midnight blue tie-backs. Hermione had never been to the Ravenclaw common room before, and in the sunlight streaming in through the tower's many windows, it looked very warm and inviting. Gryffindor Tower had been lovely, but this, felt Hermione, was very conducive to long hours of study. *This could have been my common room*, mused Hermione silently before grinning at her foolishness. She had wanted a challenge, and by asking the Sorting Hat to place her in Gryffindor, seven years of challenge was what she'd got. Pulling out comfortable, high backed chairs upholstered in a deep midnight blue with bronze fleur-de-lys, they sat down gratefully. Within moments, a large tray filled with succulent Cumberland sausages, crispy bacon, scrambled eggs, toast, white fluffy rolls, a round-bellied pot of tea and an ice-cold pitcher of pumpkin juice appeared. For a good few minutes, the only sound that could be heard was that of contented eating.

Once they had eaten their fill, Hermione pulled out a parchment notebook and a Self-Inking Quill from her beaded bag and prepared for the eventuality of taking notes. Then looking at Harry, she asked, "Ready?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, let's get this show on the road."

Smiling at Harry's sudden light-heartedness due to a long-wished-for full stomach, Hermione pulled out the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black and leaned it against the now empty pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"Good morning," began Harry politely.

At being addressed by Harry, a sharp look graced the painted face of Phineas Nigellus. "What do you want now, Mr. Potter?" he asked rudely.

Taking over the conversation, Hermione replied instead, "Headmaster Black, we need your help and your promise of discretion to ensure the continuing glory of Slytherin."

At that, Phineas Nigellus looked positively entranced. "Go on," he said with a tone that boded well for his support.

"We need your help to be of assistance to Headmaster Snape," said Hermione tentatively.

"Headmaster Snape," said Phineas Nigellus, thoughtfully. "Hmm... I wondered why his portrait did not appear in the Headmaster's Office, but I thought it was because he had killed Dumbledore."

"Yes, well," said Hermione, quickly. "He's not dead, but only we four and the Malfoys know. We'd like to keep it that way until we're assured of his safety from the Ministry, and," said Hermione, more thoughtfully, as if just realising it, "revenge attacks from Death Eaters or their sympathisers. He is in a magically induced coma, and is in no position to defend himself."

"Quite," said Phineas Nigellus. He then asked curiously, "But why approach me?"

Harry answered that question. "We trust you, and you wouldn't want to see a Slytherin hurt. Besides," said Harry, as if he too were coming to stunning realisations as the conversation progressed, "you didn't like the way Professor Dumbledore let Sirius' life be wasted. You won't let that happen again, especially not just to appease the sensibilities and comfort of others."

"Indeed," said Phineas Nigellus. "You lot have grown up since our last meeting."

Hermione laughed and replied bitterly. "Fighting a battle with crazed psychopaths does that to you, Headmaster." She then said more seriously, "We've also realised how well and how much we have been manipulated our whole lives, and we'd like to be in charge of our own actions and destinies if it is at all possible from now on."

"Commendable," said Phineas Nigellus. "Right then," he continued, briskly with a gleam in his dark eyes. "Tell me what evasion and subterfuge you would like me to perpetrate. It will be enjoyable to thwart Dumbledore and the Ministry."

Luna was, curiously, the first to reply. "Sir, you must ensure that no one suspects anything unusual about the lack of Headmaster Snape's portrait."

"Yes," said Hermione, catching on. "Perhaps you can blame Professor Dumbledore for blackening the reputation of Slytherin and creating a situation that allows a true Headmaster of Hogwarts to not be granted the honour of a portrait in the Headmaster's Office."

Phineas Nigellus' eyes now twinkled merrily. "The Mudblood does not care for the old goat, it would seem."

Harry's anger was immediate. "Don't you dare use that despicable word! Have you learned nothing from the battle we just fought? It's stupid, blind prejudice of that sort that allows for murderers like Voldemort to gain power."

Phineas Nigellus looked startled at this scathing reprimand. He then conceded, "I apologise, Miss Granger. I shall endeavour to not use that term again."

"See that you don't," said Harry imperiously.

Hermione was extremely moved by Harry's quick defence. She reached out and patted his hand that lay on the table.

Harry smiled briefly at Hermione, and then continued, "And it is not just Hermione who hasn't completely forgiven Dumbledore for his manipulation. We all realise that we were moved around like pawns on a chess board. That he cared for me may be true, but ultimately, we were tools, not people to him."

"A bit harsh," said Hermione gently, "but true, nonetheless." Then, moving on to the next point of business, she asked, "Is there a portrait of you at Malfoy Manor, sir? It would be helpful if we have a means of communicating with those responsible for Professor Snape's immediate care."

Phineas Nigellus looked even more closely at Hermione. "You are the first person to ever ask me that question," he said thoughtfully. "There is a painting of me and my wife, Ursula, in the ballroom, but I doubt I'll be able to find out anything from there."

"Perhaps you could speak to the portraits there," suggested Hermione helpfully. "If you could find someone who could contact the Malfoys more easily, we would be most grateful. It is imperative that we are in a position to communicate."

"I'll take care of it," said Phineas Nigellus grandly. "If I can't use my position as the first Headmaster from Slytherin in that rabble, then there's no place on earth that I can truly wield it."

"Thank you," said Hermione, and Harry too joined in with his murmured "Thanks, Headmaster."

Luna was the last to speak. "Sir, is there any advice you'd like to offer us?" she asked softly.

Luna's words made Hermione look at the blonde as if for the first time. Her thoughts on Luna had undergone a tremendous change over the last few days, just as her thoughts on everything she had ever believed in had altered too. But this time, she was in a position to really reflect. *Who was this intelligent woman, and where had Loony*

*Lovegood gone?* she wondered silently to herself.

Phineas Nigellus on the other hand was bursting with pride at having been asked for his opinion. "That cat, McGonagall, is going to be mortified when she realises she was lied to by Dumbledore and fooled for so long by Severus. You can use that, as well as her guilt and shame over her treatment of Severus to your benefit. You can also shame Dumbledore into action if you have to. He knows he has disregarded the fabled Gryffindor codes of honour in this war. You must not let your own sense of honour stop you from achieving your goals. Be as ruthless and as cunning as a Slytherin, if you can."

Harry laughed. "I may have it in me," he said then to Phineas Nigellus' raised eyebrow. "The Sorting Hat offered to put me in Slytherin, but I asked for Gryffindor."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Five: Plans and Actions

*Chapter 5 of 40*

Harry and Hermione work to clear Severus' name. A press conference is held at Hogwarts.

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(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I just play with them because they are so fabulous.

(ii) Thank you most sincerely to everyone who left such kind reviews. I am so touched and encouraged. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story. Your words of acknowledgement are treasures beyond measure.

(iii) A big thank you to Queen\_of\_Stars, my lovely beta. Your help has been much appreciated.

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After their conversation with Headmaster Black, Hermione suddenly felt the weight of her exhaustion crash down upon her. She felt like she couldn't do anything more. Everything else they had to do could be done after a short rest.

Defeated by her own frailty, she said tiredly, "I think we should nap for a bit. I'm so shattered I can hardly think"

Harry nodded. "I feel the same. A nap sounds heavenly."

Luna led Hermione up to the girls' dormitories while Harry made his way to the boys'. Kreacher had brought some of their belongings that had been left behind at Grimmauld Place, and Hermione still had a lot of their things in her beaded bag.

Hermione wanted to weep with delight as the hot spray of the multi-headed shower made her feel human again. After a final, long scrub and a double shampoo to her hair, she used the conditioner she found in the bathroom liberally.

The two tired young women collapsed onto the first beds they found in the dorm room closest to the showers. It didn't matter whom they belonged to. They were convenient. The last thing Hermione did before dropping off to sleep was to set her wand to chime in exactly fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes later, the two girls groaned in unison. It was obvious neither of them really wanted to leave the comfort of their soft four-posters. However, Hermione especially was aware of all the tasks that still lay before them. Yawning, she forced herself to leave the sanctuary of soft white cotton.

The power nap had helped, and feeling much more refreshed, if not completely back to normal, Hermione retrieved the soft and romantic, lilac-coloured dress she had worn to Bill and Fleur's wedding and looked at it critically. Pulling out her wand, she transfigured the frock into a severe black dress robe before settling finally for a midnight blue shade. She wanted to look as mature as possible for the meeting that was required with Kingsley and the Ministry officials.

Luna seemed to understand the need for a more formal appearance as well. She had pulled on her best school robes.

Hermione, however, felt that Luna's school-girl appearance, even though that was her position, was not in their best interests and said so. "Perhaps we could transfigure them to look different from our school robes. We don't want them to think of us as children and push us aside because of it."

Luna nodded. "Will you do it? I'm not quite sure what you think is best."

Hermione paused and then, with a flick of her wand, changed the colour to a muted shade of grey. "They bring out your eyes, and if we do something to our hair, we'll both manage to look more grown-up," explained Hermione.

"Yes," said Luna, "though I'm not really good with hair."

The blonde looked about the room and then walked towards the far back. "Fiona's got lots of clips and things; I don't think she'd mind if we borrowed something, if you think it will help."

"Excellent," said Hermione. Moving over to the bedside table indicated by Luna, she chose a large, silver hair-clip. "This might help me put your hair up for you."

Soon, Luna's hair was brushed and pulled up as neatly as Hermione could manage it. Luna's fine, blonde hair looked good done up, and with her gray robes, she looked nothing like the Loony Lovegood people would remember from Hogwarts. Pleased with her efforts, Hermione turned back to find something for her own hair.

Meanwhile, Luna had drifted off in the direction of Catriona's table and returned with a large, unopened bottle of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion.

"You're brilliant," said Hermione, spotting Luna's discovery. Emptying most of the bottle's contents into her hair, Hermione managed to smooth her bushy mane until it lay sleek and glossy down her back. Then, she quickly did her hair up into an elegant French twist. "Perfect," said Hermione, in a satisfied tone. "I look like I've been out of

school for a couple of years at least."

Harry came down grumpily when he heard the girls in the Common Room. He had pulled on his old school robes, which Hermione soon fixed until they fit his new, skinnier frame better. "There," she said approvingly. "Now you look ready to face the Interim Minister for Magic."

Harry smiled. "Do you know what we are going to say to people?" he asked.

Hermione bit her lower lip as she walked towards the comfortable three-seater sofa that had been placed close to one of the bookshelf lined walls. "Not really," she said finally. "I was just so focused on getting ready for the meeting; I've not really planned what we should say."

"Right," said Harry disbelievingly.

"Oh, alright," said Hermione with a small laugh. "I do have a rough idea of what I think we ought to say, but I was hoping that you would do the talking, Mr. Voldemort slayer."

"I don't mind doing the talking," said Harry plainly, "but I think we should prepare before we go down." He then added, "Something more to eat before we go down sounds like a good idea too."

Hermione laughed then. "Oh, Harry! You sound just like Ron. We had breakfast minutes ago."

Harry grinned ruefully. "I've been hungry for months now and one Hogwarts breakfast just doesn't seem to be enough. Some nice pastries or some sandwiches would really be welcome," he said, and then blushed as though he knew he was being cheeky. "Hot chocolate would be great as well."

As soon as Harry finished speaking, Kreacher appeared with a large plate of piping hot croissants, chicken and chutney sandwiches and steaming mugs of hot chocolate for the three of them.

"Wow, thanks, Kreacher," said Harry.

Kreacher bowed and said, "Anything for Harry Potter, sir. You is allowing Kreacher to honour brave Master Regulus."

Harry was at a loss for what to say, and while he struggled to find something appropriate, Kreacher popped out again.

When he turned to look at the girls, Hermione just shrugged her shoulders. Luna smiled and patted the seat next to her.

Harry blushed, but then joined the others on the inviting sofa. Soon, the trio were munching on deliciously moist chocolate and almond filled croissants, tucking into sandwiches and drinking their creamy, hot chocolate.

"I didn't think I could eat more food," said Luna in wonder as she bit into her second sandwich.

"Neither did I," said Hermione, who was just reaching for her second almond croissant. "I guess I was much hungrier than I had originally thought."

Then, turning to Harry, she continued. "I think we should ask Professor McGonagall to organise a press conference. It's the best way to answer a lot of the questions in one go, and it will allow you to get your version of events out. Then, you can make sure that you get Professor Snape's name cleared once and for all."

Eating another bite of the croissant, Hermione continued explaining her thoughts. "I think it would also be a good time to appeal to the public and the Minister, mentioning Kingsley by name, even that you feel it is crucial that Order members are given amnesty from war crime persecutions and that all charges are dropped for the heroes of the final battle."

Harry nodded. "You're right, Hermione. This is the one time I can ask for anything, and the Ministry and the public must give it."

At Harry's mature response, Hermione smiled brightly. "I'm so proud of you, Harry," she said, misty-eyed. "The old Harry would not have listened; he would not have been willing to clear Professor Snape's name and plan things in advance."

"Yes, well," said Harry bashfully, "we've all grown up, and it's not right that you have to keep doing all the thinking. Besides, it really is time we stopped acting like children. When I think about how idiotic and self-centred I've been, I feel ashamed. I'm lucky you guys stuck by me. Now that the hunt for Horcruxes and the need to defeat Voldemort is past, I've been thinking about the last year on the run. I'm sorry for being such a prat so much of the time. I've been such an arse."

"Oh, Harry!" exclaimed Hermione. "It was just the Horcruxes. I understand. Nothing can change the way I feel about you. I love you. You know that, don't you, you great prat? You're the brother I never had."

Harry was bright red at the end of Hermione's speech, and his eyes were filled with moisture. He even submitted to her hug and returned it with equal fervour.

Luna had been listening to their conversation with quiet thoughtfulness. As they broke apart, she quietly said, "It is during our most difficult times that we learn who our real friends are. Some stay, and some go, and the ones who stay are the only ones who truly matter. I'll never forget that you rescued me from Malfoy Manor, Harry. And I'll never forget that Headmaster Snape protected me as best he could from the Death Eaters."

Hermione wondered if Luna had always been this way and if she, the so-called brains of the golden trio, had just failed to notice. Luna was still strange, but now, as Hermione listened to her, she realised that Luna spoke with great insight.

Finally, they finished their second repast of the morning. Then, while brushing off crumbs and drinking the last sips of their cooling hot chocolate, they prepared to face their next task.

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Walking down to the Great Hall, Hermione could see the castle slowly being put to rights by the many house-elves of Hogwarts. Some were efficiently cleaning debris off the floor, carting off rubble and gathering the fallen masonry. Others were busy cleaning up the shattered remains of windows while yet others were industriously straightening, polishing and doing their best to reposition paintings, tapestries, armour and statuary. Yes, the damage was still unrepaired, but the hard-working elves were cleaning and tidying things up as much as possible.

About to step onto the main marble staircase, Harry turned to look at Hermione. "Where shall we go? Who should we talk to first?" he enquired.

"Hmm..." speculated Hermione, biting her lower lip. "Perhaps we should try the Headmaster's Office? Professor McGonagall might be there."

"Right," said Harry. Leading the way, he stepped onto the grand, moving staircase that would take them to the seventh floor.

Hermione was gearing herself up for the coming discussion, but she was distracted by Luna, who seemed to be paying close attention to the castle walls. Perplexed, Hermione asked, "What are you doing?"

"Can't you hear the castle?" asked Luna in surprise.

At Hermione's blank look and firm shake of the head, Luna explained. "The stones are humming with magic. I think the castle is getting ready to repair itself."



At Hermione's shocked expression, Luna went on, explaining in her sing-song voice, "The castle is sentient. That's how the staircases move, you know."

Hermione had never even considered this possibility. "I've never heard about that. Why isn't it in *Hogwarts, A History*?"

"*Hogwarts, A History* doesn't contain everything about the castle. Besides, you don't pay attention to what's going on around you," said Luna kindly. "You always look for rational, logical explanations and forget to pay attention with your inner being."

Hermione looked sceptical, but she accepted that she was far too rational in general. With a thoughtful frown, she finally said, "Perhaps when we come back to finish our final year, you'll tell me all about it."

"Of course," said Luna happily. "I've always wanted to share the secrets of the castle with someone. No one has ever wanted to before, though. Only Professor Dumbledore seemed to know what I meant. Others just thought I was strange."

Feeling chastised, Hermione did not respond.

Soon, however, they had made it to the seventh floor corridor. Perhaps it was luck, but knowing now that the castle was sentient, Hermione noticed how the stairs had swung directly to the seventh floor without any wasting of time. Looking across to Luna, Hermione was rewarded with a nod.

"Yes," said Luna serenely with a smile. "The castle is helping us."

The gargoyle had been straightened, but it immediately stepped aside at seeing Harry. "Acting Headmistress McGonagall has been looking for you," said the statue helpfully.

They moved past him and stepped on to the spiral stone staircase. Reaching the top, Harry knocked on the door.

"Come in," called Professor McGonagall's fatigued voice.

When Harry walked in, flanked by the two girls, Professor McGonagall looked most surprised.

Hermione was taken aback to see her favourite professor looking very much her age. The Scotswoman was still wearing her tartan dressing gown, which was now covered in blood, dirt, soot and a multitude of hex burns and rips.

"Harry, Miss Lovegood, Hermione," began Professor McGonagall.

She was prevented from continuing by Harry, who suddenly seemed to appear very mature and in control of himself. "Before you say anything further, Professor, we feel that the first order of business for us," he paused and looked at Hermione, "is to give a press conference before people have time to concoct their own versions of what happened last night and early this morning."

At Professor McGonagall's obviously startled expression, Harry continued. "It's important that there are no lies told to the press or by the press. Hermione and I also think it's really important that we ask for an amnesty for war crimes. We and the Order have done enough to give cause to the Ministry to persecute us if they so desire, so it is really important that we clear our names as soon as possible."

When Professor McGonagall seemed too stunned at this mature pronouncement to speak, Harry went on in a quiet, yet firm tone. "We three also feel that it is critical to clear Professor Snape's name, especially from persecution for murdering Professor Dumbledore. Professor Snape was acting on Professor Dumbledore's orders, and he must not be held responsible for his actions. It was necessary, and it is one of the main reasons for my standing here today."

Professor McGonagall nodded her head in agreement. "My boy," she said, her voice choked, tears streaming down her face. Then, pulling herself together, she said, "My boy, of course, yes, we must clear poor Severus' name."

As Harry had been speaking to Professor McGonagall, Hermione quietly scanned the portraits of the former Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts. Professor Dumbledore was pretending to be asleep with a serene expression on his face, but Headmaster Black looked very alert and was paying keen interest to the exchange.

As the room fell silent, Phineas Nigellus spoke. "Finally, a Gryffindor with honour! Mr Potter, defeating Voldemort was one thing, but working to clear a Slytherin's name, now that is what I call honour."

"Yes, yes," said Professor McGonagall, as if realising how she herself had berated and tormented Severus. Then, changing the topic, she said, "Organising a press conference should not be difficult. I'll Floo Kingsley and see to it at once. I'm sure the Ministry must be holding one this morning, in any case."

"That's what we thought they would do," said Hermione. "That's why we want to speak to the press ourselves. The Ministry has never managed to get their facts straight, and even though Kingsley is the Interim Minister, he can't start by removing everyone that was working for Thicknesse. There are enough pure-blood extremists and Voldemort sympathisers in the Ministry to make saying our bit very important."

Professor McGonagall was utterly floored by Harry and Hermione's take-charge and mature reasoning. Looking from Harry to Hermione, and then towards Luna, who stood strong and silent beside him, she realised that these were no longer naïve teenagers. These, she realised sadly, were war veterans who were completely disillusioned with the bastions of power and were determined to make sure that their voices were heard. She swore to herself then that she would do her utmost to help them achieve their objectives.

Standing up, Professor McGonagall moved around the large desk and walked toward the great, marble fireplace. Taking a handful of Floo powder, she threw it into the fire and stooped down to call out, "Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic."

At Professor McGonagall's call, the head of a young woman wearing wire rimmed spectacles appeared in the fire. "Headmistress McGonagall," she acknowledged. "One moment, please. Minister Shacklebolt will be with you shortly."

As they waited for Kingsley to appear, Professor McGonagall turned to them and asked, "Would you like something to drink? I could call for some refreshments or a nice cup of tea."

"No, thank you," replied Hermione. "We've eaten recently."

Hermione was glad she and the others had stopped to change and eat. Their pulled-together appearance was in marked contrast to that of the dishevelled Transfiguration Professor. It allowed the trio to maintain the illusion of being other than her misbehaving students.

Hermione frowned. Some of her thoughts were decidedly unsettling.

Perturbed, she turned to look at Harry, who was looking at Professor Dumbledore's portrait with a strange, intense expression on his face. Meanwhile, Luna was quietly murmuring to the portrait of Headmistress Dilys Derwent. They seemed to be discussing her long, silver ringlets and Luna's up-swept hair.

As Hermione continued to glance around the Head's Office, Headmaster Black winked at her. Hermione couldn't help but send him a quick wink and smile back. There was just something interesting about the rude and sarcastic, but highly intelligent, Slytherin.

It didn't take long before Kingsley's head appeared in the fireplace. "Minerva," he acknowledged. "Is there a problem? My secretary said you wanted me."

"No problem, Kingsley. But, yes, I wanted to speak to you," said Professor McGonagall. "Harry and Hermione here would like to call a press conference. They feel it is vital that they get a chance to speak a few words and to answer any questions that require answering."

At this pronouncement, Kingsley looked intrigued. He then replied, "Yes, well, the Ministry was going to hold one at noon today; we could include them in it, I suppose."

At this, Hermione stepped forward. "Kingsley," she said, "Harry and I feel it would be best if we spoke from the Great Hall at Hogwarts. We would like it to be on our terms and not be related to whatever statement the Ministry is putting out."

Kingsley was starting to see the picture. In their place, he realised, he would do the same. Smiling at Hermione, Kingsley said, "Don't worry. I'll get my office to inform the press that the conference will take place at Hogwarts. The Ministry will speak and respond to questions after you and Harry have had your chance. Shall we say half past twelve this afternoon?"

Surprised and elated at this quick understanding, Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Kingsley. We just want to say our bit and thereby avoid as much as possible being mobbed by the press. Harry especially doesn't want Skeeter and her ilk dogging his steps constantly."

"Perfectly understandable," said Kingsley pleasantly. "Now, if you will excuse me," he added, looking at McGonagall, "if there is nothing else, I have much to do."

"Good luck," said Harry, speaking for the first time to Kingsley. "I'm glad you're Minister."

Smiling his big, warm smile, Kingsley pulled his head out of the fire and ended the connection.

After thanking Professor McGonagall, the trio made their way to the Great Hall. There, while Harry dozed tiredly at the Ravenclaw Table and Luna sat staring at the enchanted ceiling that was slowly re-knitting itself back to its former glory, Hermione busied herself organising the space for the press conference.

Hermione first approached a tiny, bright blue-eyed house-elf who was rearranging the Head Table. "Hello," said Hermione kindly. "Are you the elf in charge of the Great Hall?"

"No, missy," squeaked the elf. "I be Nippy. I is usually working in the kitchens. The Great Hall is run by Dilly. She be over there by the Great Doors."

'Thank you,' said Hermione. Leaving Nippy, Hermione made her way over to the formal double doors that led in directly from the Entrance Hall. Reaching the elf that was polishing the aged oak and brass-work of the imposing doors, she said, "Hello, Dilly, I'm Hermione. May I speak to you please?"

"I is knowing who you be," said the seemingly older elf, in a disapproving tone. "What be the leaver-of-hats wanting?"

Embarrassed at the reference to S.P.E.W., Hermione quickly apologised. "I'm sorry about the hats, Dilly. I didn't mean to upset the house-elves. I need help organising the Great Hall for a press conference that's going to take place here this afternoon."

At Dilly's puzzled expression, Hermione explained. "A press conference is a meeting of the press where Harry is going to answer questions about the battle."

Seeming to comprehend the direction of the conversation, Dilly asked, "How be Missy liking the hall arranged?" Then, more cautiously, as if not trusting Hermione, she added, "Is Professor McGonagall knowing this?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "We've just come from the Headmaster's Office." Then, turning to look at the hall objectively, Hermione said, "I think the Head Table is the perfect place for us to sit, but perhaps instead of four House Tables, we could have rows of chairs looking up towards the Head Table."

"Dilly is doing," said the elf before vanishing to appear near the other elves sweeping up the rubble near the staff entrance. Soon, all the elves were industriously cleaning and arranging the hall to Hermione's specifications.

Seeing that all would be well, Hermione walked over to Harry and Luna and sat down with a sigh. Pulling out her wand, she cast a quick charm to check the time and was amazed to see that it was only a quarter to ten in the morning. "We've got time for another, longer nap," she said.

Harry, who seemed to be nodding off on the spot, could only mumble before wearily getting to his feet.

The three made their way back to Ravenclaw Tower. The stairs once again seemed to be helping, and without much effort, they were at the entrance of the common room. Luna once again responded to the riddle with ease, merely saying, "I've heard that one in my fifth year," before leading the way into the common room.

Hermione turned to Harry as he made his way to the boys' dormitories. "I'll come wake you at eleven fifteen. We need to look presentable."

Harry just nodded and continued on his way.

Luna and Hermione returned to the room they had used and, without any conversation, took off their robes and shoes before collapsing once more onto the *bed's so amazing to lie on soft, sweetly smelling bedding*, thought Hermione. Yawning, she set an alarm on her wand for ten minutes past eleven before closing her eyes and falling into an exhausted sleep once more.

The insistent buzzing of her wand woke Hermione and Luna from their far too brief slumber. Silently but speedily getting back into their robes, the girls quickly repaired their hair and made their way down to the common room.

Luna turned to Hermione and asked, "Do you want me to go wake Harry?"

Hermione nodded. "Thanks, Luna. That would be great."

While Luna walked off, Hermione sat down at the round table by the window and pulled out her quill and notebook. As she'd been dressing, Hermione had decided that she would draft a prepared statement to make things easier for the press conference.

Harry soon emerged and, while Hermione continued to work, requested for Kreacher to bring a light lunch. Deep in concentration, Hermione failed to notice the activity until Harry pressed a Cornish pasty into her inactive hand.

"Oh," said Hermione before taking a bite of the still warm pasty. Enjoying the savoury flavour of steak, potato, parsnip and onion, Hermione ate enthusiastically while continuing to fill her parchment with her flowing cursive.

When she was done, Hermione passed the written statement along the table to Harry and finished her meal. Once Harry and then Luna had read the statement, they all went over it to perfect the wording.

Drinking deeply from her goblet of pumpkin juice, Hermione looked at Harry. He was reading and re-reading the statement, putting as much of it down to memory as possible. It amazed Hermione to realise how different Harry appeared suddenly. It looked like he'd undergone a metamorphosis over the course of the last night. *But then*, she mused, *it was to be expected. He'd survived the Killing Curse again and literary risen from the dead.*

Harry looked up as though he had felt her eyes on him. "Is it time?" he asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded. She felt so proud of him.

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As they were made their way down the marble staircase that led to the Entrance Hall, Hermione suggested, "Let's use the Staff Entrance."

Nodding, Harry turned and led the way to the side entrance the staff normally used to enter the Great Hall. As Harry was spotted by the waiting audience, light bulbs flashed, and cheering and clapping commenced. The Hall seemed to be filled with people.

Harry turned to glance quickly at Hermione. "Did you guess?" he asked, before turning grim-faced to look at the crowd.

Hermione shook her head. "Not really. I just didn't think we needed to make a grand entrance."

Harry frowned. Then, he walked purposefully up to Professor McGonagall and Kingsley, who had risen to greet the trio. Formally, Harry shook hands with them both. He then waited for Luna and Hermione to do the same.

The rest of the seats at the Head Table were filled with Dawlish, the new, but in Hermione's opinion, incompetent Head of the Aurors, Professor Flitwick, who waved merrily at Harry and the girls and the beaming, kindly Professor Sprout. There were three other foreign-looking wizards at the far end of the table, who turned out to be the Ministers for Magic for France, Russia and Egypt. Once the formal niceties were observed, they waited for someone to begin the proceedings. Soon enough, once a large number of photographs had been taken, everyone took their seats.

More photos were taken. Eventually, Kingsley stood up to address the gathering.

"We are here today to present to the world the conqueror of Tom Marvolo Riddle, the self-styled Head of the terrorist organisation known as the Death Eaters, referred to as the Dark Lord, known widely as Lord Voldemort. I give you Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry grimaced at the introduction, but at Hermione's nudge, he forced a smile onto his face instead. Then, standing up, he began to speak. "First, I would like to read out a statement that was prepared by me, Hermione Jean Granger and Luna Lovegood. We will then take your questions before handing over the proceedings to the Interim Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt."

Harry glanced quickly at Hermione, who smiled encouragingly at him. She saw him take a deep breath.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, acting Headmistress McGonagall, Interim Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt and other esteemed guests and dignitaries in attendance. Today is an important day in the annals of British, and indeed, world wizarding history. Today, I, Harry James Potter, the so-named Chosen One, with the help of my friends, the members of the Order of the Phoenix, members of the Hogwarts Defence Association also known as the D.A. or Dumbledore's Army, the brave house-elves of Hogwarts, some giants, centaurs and other beings, defeated the megalomaniac known as Voldemort."

Harry paused to let the audience cheer and clap at this pronouncement. Then, he grimaced, and continued, "This victory is the result of all our efforts. I would not have been successful if it were not for their help."

Harry paused again to look around at all the people. He then glared at Dawlish and continued, "However, the one man that has had the most difficult task in this long battle against the forces of evil, the one man who sacrificed the most for my eventual victory, is Headmaster Severus Snape. Without his aid from deep within the heart of the Death Eaters, I would not be here before you. Therefore, I would like to ask the temporary Minister for Magic and member of the Order of Phoenix for a permanent amnesty for all crimes committed in the name of victory against Voldemort for all the people mentioned above. We as a group have had to break the law in numerous ways. We've had to steal, hex, curse, torture, kill and stand by and watch others do the same to a great number of people. However, these actions were necessary for our ultimate victory. At times, it helped forward our protest against the rule of Voldemort through his minion, Thicknesse; at others, it helped us infiltrate and subvert groups and organisations that were in support of evil incarnate."

Harry once again paused. The Great Hall was silent. This was not what the waiting crowd had expected. Feeling slightly nervous, Harry looked at Kingsley and then Professor McGonagall. Harry's quick glance at Kingsley was met with an almost unnoticeable nod.

Spirits noticeably lifted, Harry went on. "The list of dead, who fought for the Light, is long and is unfortunately still incomplete. Many more names will be added as the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts is fully realised. Let us endeavour that their sacrifices are never forgotten. This evil sprang up soon after the horrors of Grindelwald. I hope that this time at least, peace can be found for a longer length of time." With a final pause, Harry concluded, "That is the end of our prepared statement. Hermione, Luna and I are now open for questions. Thank you for your patience."

With that, Harry bowed to the many faces in the audience, then turned and did the same to the rest of the Head Table before sitting down.

There was another moment of silence before the applause and cheering started again. This time it seemed even louder than before. There were raised arms and shouted questions. Pandemonium had literally broken out.

Into this chaos rose Professor McGonagall. With a stern glance at everyone, she raised her hands to the crowd. "Silence, please, silence," she said firmly. "I shall indicate when each of you will be allowed to speak. Please introduce yourselves and make it clear to whom you are addressing your question."

The first question came from a tiny Asian wizard wearing a bright green turban who was sitting in the front row. At Professor McGonagall's acknowledgement, he beamed with pride and spoke. "I am Harish Singh from *The Indian Prophet*. Mr Potter, is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named really gone? We were told this by the authorities the last time, and he rose again."

Harry stood up once more. "Yes," he said simply. "Tom Riddle is gone." He then scratched his head before speaking. "I'm not sure if I should really go into this, but I think I mentioned it during my confrontation with him, so people have heard about it. Riddle split his soul into eight fragments by creating Horcruxes. This is Darkest Magic, and the last Horcrux that he unknowingly created was me, when he murdered my parents in Godric's Hollow. As long as his Horcruxes existed, he could not be truly killed. This was what Hermione, Ron and I did during the past year. We found and destroyed his Horcruxes. We had been told by Professor Dumbledore that I could not kill Voldemort until all the Horcruxes were destroyed. Now they are. So yes, he's gone, and he's not coming back."

As Harry finished speaking, there was a frightened and shocked hush around the Hall. No one present had heard of Horcruxes or the possibility of soul splitting, and they seemed shocked at what Voldemort had done.

Finally, an attractive young witch with fashionable, bright blonde hair raised her hand. At Professor McGonagall's nod, she spoke. "I'm Maryse Estrid Swenson from *The New York Oracle*. You say you were a Horcrux. Do you still have a part of him in you?"

At her question, there were gasps and even a short scream.

Harry laughed.

That seemed to bring out a few smiles on the faces of the audience, but most still looked very anxious.

"I was a Horcrux. I am no longer because I allowed myself to be killed by Voldemort without fighting back. If I had attacked, it would not have been possible. But because I allowed him to kill me while I submitted willingly, he instead killed the part of himself that lived in me. I know it sounds confusing and bizarre, but it is true."

The audience still looked confused, so Harry continued, "Before I was born, it was prophesied by Professor Trelawney, Hogwarts' Divination teacher that, *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives....*"

When Harry paused for breath, the Great Hall was as silent as the grave. Hermione was sure she'd hear a pin drop. People leaned forward, captivated by the narration.

"Voldemort chose to come after me. He could have gone after my friend Neville Longbottom, a pure-blood, who was also born at the end of July, fulfilling the stipulations of the prophecy. But he chose me, another half-blood like himself. He marked me as his equal. It was destined that I would kill him, and to do so, I would have to do it without killing him directly."

There was still confusion in the crowd, but Professor McGonagall was keen to get the press conference moving. She gestured to an old wizard in a very elegant grey silk top hat, who was seated towards the back of the crowd. "Humphrey, do you have a question?" she asked.

*He must be a friend of Professor McGonagall's,* thought Hermione as the old wizard stood up and bowed first to Professor McGonagall and then to Harry. "I do," he said graciously. "I'm Humphrey DeForest Bogart, from *The California Wizarding News*. Mr Potter, you claim that Lord Voldemort was a half-blood. Didn't his manifesto rest on the need to eradicate impure and tainted blood from the wizarding world? Wasn't he the leader of the pure-blood supremacy movement?"

Harry nodded and said, "Perhaps my best friend, Hermione, can answer that question better."

Hermione was startled at the way Harry brought her into the spotlight. Grimacing at Harry, Hermione turned to smile at the audience and stood up.

"Hello. I am a Muggle-born," Hermione began. "Tom Marvolo Riddle's father was a Muggle named Tom Riddle. He was killed by the young Tom Riddle, the self-styled Voldemort when Riddle realised finally as a teenager that his father was not a pure-blood as he had always dreamt, but a Muggle. The pure-blood supremacy movement was nothing but Voldemort's effort to eradicate the shame and taint he felt at his true parentage. He hated his father for abandoning his pregnant mother, Merope Gaunt, a witch who had used magic, we believe love potions and spells, to bewitch and ensnare Riddle senior into marriage. From what we have since learned of Voldemort's past and character, we feel that Voldemort's hatred of Muggles and Muggle-borns stemmed from an inferiority complex. He had been abandoned by his father, and he thought that by killing or gaining control over Muggles and Muggle-borns, he would be able to boost his own self-worth. That the pure-blood witches and wizards were so gullible as to be taken in by a half-blood maniac clearly shows their desperation in the face of continuing Muggle-born innovation and change within the magical community."

Hermione's words were met with even more amazement. The Hall had been spell-bound by her clear explanation of Voldemort.

Rita Skeeter, who had always disliked Hermione, raised her hand next. At Professor McGonagall's sour-faced nod, Skeeter spoke up.

"Hello, Harry," she began, as if to show everyone how well she knew him. "I'm here for *The Daily Prophet*." She simpered sickeningly. "You claimed that Severus Snape, the known Death Eater and Headmaster of Hogwarts during the reign of Lord Thingy, the murderer of Dumbledore, was working for the Light. How can that be? You yourself claimed last year that he murdered Dumbledore. Did you lie?" She smiled maliciously as she finished speaking.

Harry, however, didn't look in the least bit perturbed.

Hermione was again surprised at the sudden change in Harry's personality. *Ginny would find the changed Harry most disconcerting,* she thought with an inward smile. *Ginny was so used to having Harry wrapped round her little finger. The coming weeks were sure to be interesting.* Pulling herself back from her musings, Hermione focused once more on Harry.

"Miss Skeeter," began Harry, making it clear that they were not on a first name basis. "When I claimed a year ago that Headmaster Snape murdered Professor Dumbledore, I was merely relaying what I had seen on the Astronomy Tower. At that time, I wasn't aware of the promise Headmaster Snape had made to Professor Dumbledore to kill him or the many reasons behind this brilliant piece of cunning. At that time, I spoke based on what I had seen. I spoke from the knowledge and the information that I was meant to have. At that time, I did not lie."

Harry sighed audibly before carrying on. "Now, however, I have learned the true events of that night. Severus Snape had been a spy for the Order of the Phoenix since the time my mother's life was at risk from Voldemort. He knew, despite his request to the Dark Lord to spare his beloved Lily's life, that it was unlikely to occur, so he turned to Professor Dumbledore and vowed to spy for the Order in return for Dumbledore's protection of Lily. Dumbledore failed, but Headmaster Snape did not ever truly return to his master. From the day my mother died, he swore to watch over me and to make sure that I would defeat the man who had killed his childhood friend, his beloved. Severus Snape loved Lily, and his continuing love for her made him the Light's strongest and most steadfast of soldiers. He did whatever was required to defeat Voldemort without fail. Dumbledore knew this, and he used this to ensure that Headmaster Snape's position was impregnable within the ranks of the Death Eaters. With one swoop, all who had questioned Headmaster Snape's loyalty to Voldemort were silenced, and his position to gather information to work towards my victory against Voldemort was assured. I know now that Dumbledore was dying. If you recall, at the start of my sixth year at Hogwarts, Dumbledore seemed frail, and his hand was cursed. That hand was cursed when Dumbledore retrieved one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, and it was only Headmaster Snape's brilliant skill at Potions and the Dark Arts that prevented the curse from spreading throughout the rest of Dumbledore's body. However, they could not eradicate the curse; they could only slow down its eventual outcome."

Harry looked down at the Head Table and paused for a moment in his speech. Then, he seemed to find a hidden reserve of strength and continued, "On the night of Dumbledore's death, I had gone with him to retrieve what we believed, then, to be another Horcrux. In the effort to retrieve that object, I forcibly made Dumbledore drink many goblets of poison, for that was one of the requirements for removing the object from its resting place. What Severus Snape did that night was merely follow orders, just as I had done. Will you arrest me for murdering Dumbledore by making him drink poison at his own insistence? Would you have charged Dumbledore for putting on a cursed object that leached out his life-force?"

The idea of arresting either Harry or Dumbledore himself was such a shocking pronouncement that it brought gasps from some of the listeners. But Harry had made his point. Shattered, exhausted, he continued, "Severus Snape is no more responsible for the death of Professor Dumbledore than I am. He was forced by Dumbledore's rule to be treated like an outcast, to be hated, mistrusted and despised. It is time it stopped. He is a hero. A real, unsung hero of this very long and exhausting struggle against the most evil wizard of our time. He was a soldier for the Light before my birth, and I, for one, am indebted to him for his courage, brilliance and honour."

Harry sighed. He then added, "Please direct your next questions to Hermione and Luna. They know as much, if not more, about most of the issues you will undoubtedly have questions about. Thank you."

As Harry wearily sat down, utter chaos broke out. There was yelling, shouting and loud gasps of shock and surprise. Kingsley and Professor McGonagall looked as alarmed at some of the things pouring out of Harry's mouth as the people in the audience. *This press conference,* thought Hermione, *was a very good idea indeed.*

Professor McGonagall once more arose and addressed the now utterly chaotic crowd. "Please sit down at once," she said sternly. "If you wish for this press conference to continue, I insist that you all behave in an orderly fashion." At her admonishment, most of the people sat down. She continued to glare furiously at the people still standing until they too took their seats. Finally, she called out, "Next question, please?"

A flurry of hands immediately shot up. Turning towards a dark wizard in brightly striped robes who was seated at the far left of the fifth row, Professor McGonagall invited him to speak.

Pleased, the tall man said, "My name is Nyennoh Kru, and I am the reporter for *The Wagadoogoo News*, the main newspaper for West Africa. My question is for Minister Shackbolt. Is the Ministry for Magic in Britain willing to grant amnesty from war crimes for the people mentioned by Mr Potter? Will he, especially, grant amnesty to Headmaster Severus Snape for his murder of the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore? Thank you." He then sat down.

More furious whispering began. Hermione and Harry looked at each other in glee. They couldn't have planned this if they had given the press the questions themselves. Luna, too, beamed at them both and then leaned over and squeezed Hermione's hand. The three felt especially close after this very public performance. Hermione felt that this morning had been instrumental in building her friendship with Luna. She'd never really had a real girlfriend before. Ginny and she had been forced into friendship through her relationship to Ron, as well as enforced contact and proximity. However, this was the first time that Hermione had had a girlfriend for her sake alone.

Kingsley Shackbolt stood up and addressed the crowd. "I don't like being put on the spot, Harry," he began, with a nod and a smile, "but for the Chosen One's first public

request, I can't very well refuse. Especially when the amnesty Harry so eloquently asks for also applies to me and my many clandestine activities during the war." Looking sharply towards Dawlish, and then Harry, he continued. "I will need a full list of D.A. and Order members of course, but yes, I, as the acting Interim Minister for Magic, do declare amnesty for all combatants in the name of the Light who fought against the rule of Lord Voldemort and his band of Death Eaters. And yes, before you can question me further that does include the long-time spy for the Order of the Phoenix, one Severus Tobias Snape."

This pronouncement was met with even more furious whispering and exclamations. The Great Hall was a seething mass of excitement. When the people had fallen silent, McGonagall acknowledged a portly witch in a bright red hat. Smiling broadly, the witch stated, "I'm Matilda Parish from *The Australian Voice*. My question is for the young lady, Luna. Did you fight in the battle? How are you connected to Mr Potter?"

Luna stood up and smiled in her own dreamy fashion. "I'm Luna Lovegood, and I was a sixth year student at Hogwarts before I was kidnapped by Death Eaters to force my father into printing lies and supporting Voldemort in his newspaper *The Quibbler*. I have been in the D.A. since its inception, and of course, I've fought beside Harry in battle. In fact, we've fought the Death Eaters on three separate occasions. The first time was at the skirmish in the Department of Mysteries, then, here at Hogwarts on the night Headmaster Dumbledore died. And then, last night. Friends must stand up and fight for their friends."

Luna continued in her sing song voice. "Why, Hermione, Ginny and I took on Bellatrix Lestrange together before she was finally killed in a duel with Ginny's mother, Mrs. Weasley." Turning to Hermione, she went on lightly, "Did you hear Mrs. Weasley calling Bellatrix a bitch when she tried to kill Ginny? That was funny. I wish my mother had been alive to see it."

Hermione smiled at the blonde. Hermione couldn't help but think that that last remark was typical of Luna. No one else would think to make a comment like that at a moment like this, but it was what was needed to turn the press conference towards a lighter-hearted tone.

Indeed, the next set of questions were directed towards the Ministry. Eventually, Kingsley made his statement from the Ministry, reiterating the amnesty he had promised Harry before concluding the press conference. More photographs were taken, and many of the crowd immediately dispersed to allow their reports to make it to the front page of their newspapers.

As the trio stood up to depart, Professor McGonagall stopped them. "Where's Mr. Weasley?" she asked kindly. It was Hermione who replied since Harry was still watching the departing crowd. "Ron went home with his family. We didn't want to disturb them in their time of grief. Fred..." She paused. Yet again, Hermione was not sure how to approach the topic of Fred's demise.

Professor McGonagall seemed to understand. "Of course, my dear. A wise choice to leave them to grieve on their own." Then, drawing Harry and Luna closer together by putting her hands on their shoulders, she said, "The three of you have done a very fine thing this afternoon. No one else could have asked for and received this amnesty for the combatants for the Light. There would have undoubtedly been some kind of backlash. Harry, I'm especially proud of you for declaring Severus a hero. He deserved it, and I am sorry to say, until you told us what was happening at the final confrontation with Voldemort, that I, too, had been blind to Severus' true loyalty. He needed to be vindicated. We will start holding memorial services at Hogwarts for the fallen in the coming days, and I'll make sure that he is given a special send off fitting his long years of service."

This was the moment that the three had been waiting for. Harry looked searchingly at Professor McGonagall and asked quietly, "What gave you the impression that Snape was dead?"

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Six: At Malfoy Manor

*Chapter 6 of 40*

The Malfoys slither. Severus learns of his amnesty and hero status.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I just play with them because they are so fabulous.

(ii) Thank you most sincerely to everyone who left such kind reviews. I am so touched and encouraged. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.

(iii) A big hug of thanks to Queen\_of\_Stars, my lovely beta.

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Narcissa, Lucius, Draco and the comatose Severus appeared on the plush carpeted floor of the morning room of Malfoy Manor. Immediately upon their arrival, Lucius called out to his head-elf. 'Flitty, fetch Healer Lestrange from St. Irene Chrysovalantou's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Tell her it is a personal emergency and do not delay.'

'Yes, master,' said Flitty, and he was gone in an instant.

In the meantime, Narcissa had directed two other house-elves to gently carry Severus to the south facing summer guest room. It was away from the front of the house and faced the rose gardens that were toward the far right of the house. At Lucius' pointed glance toward Narcissa at the sight of Severus being carried away by house-elves, Narcissa explained. 'I don't want to use more magic than is immediately necessary. I do not know the nature of his coma.'

Lucius nodded and said, 'I should prepare the defences of the house, and make sure that most, if not all, signs of the Dark Lord's presence are removed from the Manor.'

'Yes, and quickly, too,' said Narcissa. Then, thoughtfully, she added, 'We must remove all traces of Bella. For Merlin's sake, Lucius, make sure the dungeons are cleaned out. We need to dispose of all the bodies and make sure nothing can be held against us.'

Turning to a still shocked-looking Draco, she said. 'This is not the time to fall apart, Draco. Pull yourself together and fetch all of the potions, even the secret potions that are hidden in my boudoir. You know,' she added softly, 'the ones that have been made to look like my exotic perfume collection.'

'Yes, Mother,' said Draco, who seemed glad of being given a specific task to complete.

As Draco was making his way up the stairs, Narcissa added, 'Take the potions to the summer guest room, and make sure that the elves clean Severus and make him as comfortable as they can for now. I shall be up momentarily.'

Then, turning to Lucius, she said, 'We both need to get out of these clothes and dispose of all our Death Eater paraphernalia. We've helped Harry Potter and that Granger girl, and now caring for Severus should spare us the worst of the backlash, but we must ensure they can't pin anything on us.'

Lucius agreed, and they both took the stairs to their respective dressing rooms to wash and change.

Narcissa hurried through her toilette for one of the few times in her life. Showering at high speed, she cast a drying charm on her hair and then pulled on becoming pale blue robes of cool linen and satin before making her way hurriedly to Severus' side. As she approached him, she saw that the house-elves had indeed cleaned him and changed him out of the bloodied and torn robes into one of Lucius' soft white lawn nightshirts. The change in attire and the cleaning of blood and dirt had done much to make Severus appear more human. No longer did he look like a ripped and discarded rag doll.

Draco was still hovering by the window, looking out into the rose garden. 'Go and change into something clean and have breakfast,' instructed Narcissa. 'I will take over.'

Once Draco had cast a last, sombre glance at the still pale and unmoving body of Severus, he quietly walked out of the room.

Once again, Narcissa pulled out her wand and cast a series of complex diagnostic spells. She was most surprised to discover that not only was Severus resting more comfortably but his pulse was stronger and his blood count better. Amazed at the resilience of the Potions master, she opened her jewelled case of potions and quickly tipped a vial of Blood-Replenishing Potion into his mouth. Then, she gently massaged his throat to help him swallow. This could have been done magically, but given the state of the raw wound that was still seeping blood...though not as copiously as before...Narcissa was loath to do so. The Blood-Replenishing Potion seemed to have done its task, for some of his deathly pallor vanished almost instantly. She pulled out a second vial of the potion and paused, afraid of administering too much of it, before tipping it into his mouth as well.

The second vial seemed to do the trick, for the sickly gray pastiness of his skin receded to be replaced by his usual alabaster complexion. Hoping desperately that Nagini's antivenin potion that Severus had prepared would not react negatively with the Blood-Replenishing Potion, Narcissa carefully unstopped the tiny, blood red vial containing the precious liquid brewed with such secrecy and placed three carefully measured out drops onto his tongue. There was nothing else that Narcissa could do. Lucius, Severus and she had been prepared for this eventuality. The Dark Lord's preference in recent months for using Nagini as his favourite mode of killing had resulted in the careful milking of her venom, and Severus had painstakingly created the antivenin she'd used. Now, all they could do was wait.

Lucius entered shortly thereafter, followed by Healer Tisiphone Lestrangle. Healer Lestrangle was an attractive woman in what appeared to be her early fifties, with an intelligent face and severely tied dark hair. She was the second cousin of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle, and the Malfoys had maintained a close friendship with her since their childhood days. Tisiphone had never been a Death Eater and, during peaceful times when her cousins had been incarcerated at Azkaban, had often stated that being a Healer meant being above things like blood purity and other bigotry. Yet in spite of her outspoken views, she was one of the few people the Malfoys felt they could trust, not only to be discreet but also to not seek revenge on Severus.

Without wasting time with greetings and pleasantries, Healer Lestrangle immediately addressed Narcissa. 'What happened? What have you done?'

Narcissa did not seem surprised by this brisk address. Instead, she replied in an equally businesslike tone. 'He was attacked by Nagini and was in a deep, possibly magically induced, coma when we came across him. Since coming to the Manor, his vital signs have significantly improved, and I've given him two doses of Blood-Replenishing Potion and three drops of antivenin, specifically designed to counter Nagini's venom by Severus himself. The last I checked, he appeared to be resting and had returned to stable condition.'

While Narcissa had been speaking, Tisiphone herself had pulled out her wand as well as a strange turquoise glass sphere and was performing a series of diagnostic spells.

Nodding her head and murmuring to herself, she finally finished her evaluation. Turning to the waiting pair, she said, 'You're right; he does seem to be stabilising. The antivenin seems to be doing its job. You got to him just in time, Narcissa, even half an hour longer, and we would be faced with serious nerve damage, possibly even blindness.'

'Thank Merlin!' exclaimed Lucius. 'The world could not have dealt with a blind and furious Severus.'

Narcissa and Tisiphone both laughed. They both knew the disgruntled and cantankerous Potions master and knew that unless he was active and productively employed, he nearly impossible to live with.

Turning once more to look at Severus, Tisiphone said, 'We heard in Greece that the war was over. There were reports coming in constantly since before daybreak on the Wizarding Wireless Network, and just before I left, we were told that the Ministry was planning to hold a press conference this afternoon.'

'Yes,' sighed Lucius. 'The Dark Lord has been destroyed, and we can all finally be free.' Then looking at Tisiphone's wide-eyed expression, he said, 'Oh, don't look so shocked, woman, his second rising was no picnic for any of us. He destroyed our reputation, nearly emptied our coffers with demands for money for his ridiculous schemes, endangered Draco's life and had by the end turned into a tyrant. I'm sure all but the most blood-thirsty and the insane will be glad to see his demise. I know you feel that I enjoyed throwing my weight around, and I will admit that it was fun to wield power and intimidate the minions, but really, I don't need the Dark Lord for that. The Malfoy name, our vast wealth and influence was usually more than enough. Now, I will be beggared by the Ministry's demands for compensation, and what with paying out money to worm my way into the new administration and struggling to make sure that there are no obvious repercussions to the holdings of Malfoy Industries, even the power and the prestige of the Malfoy name is gone.'

'Indeed,' said Tisiphone carefully. Then, turning once more to Narcissa, she said, 'Severus needs to have complete bed rest, of course, for as long as it takes for him to wake up naturally from the coma. Make sure he is given plenty of liquids and nutrition; he is extremely underfed and run down. The blood should start clotting within the hour, and I think a dressing with Essence of Dittany should help with scarring. You've done well, Narcissa; there's not much else I can say or do. If he has any trouble with motion or movement, coordination or balance, contact me immediately and I shall send a nerve restorative. I don't think he'll need it, really. Otherwise, that's about it.'

Extremely relieved, Narcissa clasped Tisiphone's hand in hers. In a show of emotion she said, 'Thank you. We were all so worried. Draco was especially anxious. Severus has saved his life on more than one occasion, and he has been the strongest of allies, the truest of friends through these perilous times.'

Then, smiling at Lucius, she said, 'Shall we all have some breakfast? I, for one, am feeling rather peckish.'

Tisiphone did not disagree. She herself was just finishing a long night shift and was looking forward to some food and some much needed rest.

They all made their way to the piazza overlooking the rose garden not far from Severus' chamber. Soon, the industrious house-elves had a fine continental breakfast laid out. The scent of roses competed with that of the coffee as they took their seats in the warm morning sunlight. There was a delicate silver urn of rich Javan coffee and an accompanying pot of hot chocolate. This was surrounded by a variety of brioche and croissants. There was a selection of elf-made jams, fresh cream and ice-cold pitchers of white grape, apple and pomegranate juice. Sliced cold cuts of salami, honey-roast ham and duck, along with a selection of cereal, fresh strawberries, cubes of honey-dew melon, black pitted olives stuffed with almonds, green pitted olives stuffed with garlic and cheese completed the feast.

Narcissa enquired from a passing house-elf if Draco had eaten and, on hearing he was still completing his toilette, told her to inform Draco to join them for breakfast. Not long after, Draco joined the company. On seeing Tisiphone relaxed and eating, some of his tension abated. Pulling up a chair, he sat down. After pouring himself a cup of hot chocolate and his first fortifying sip, he smiled at Tisiphone and asked, 'Is Severus going to be alright?'

Tisiphone nodded and replied. 'Yes, your mother did a fine job in caring for him. I merely checked to verify that his condition was stable and left instructions for his continuing care. I suspect that, by the time we finish breakfast, the antivenin will have taken effect, and he may even be rousing from his coma.'

Extremely relieved, Draco began eating with gusto. It was, to him, the first proper meal he'd had since he'd been forced to take on the task of doing away with Dumbledore.

The last two years had been extremely trying for Draco, and although the young man had not grown out of his arrogant and petulant ways, he had learned the error of trying to emulate his idolised father and his beloved aunt. The bitter defeat had further disillusioned him on the so-called power of the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. He realised as he ate that power and respect could not be demanded, they had to be earned. Severus, his godfather, had earned both Draco's respect and undying devotion. Never would Draco doubt Severus' capacity to care for him. Draco had realised, as Potter had explained the events surrounding the mastery of the Elder wand, that if Severus had not stepped in and killed Dumbledore in his stead, it would have been Draco who would have been exterminated like so much vermin at the hands of the Dark Lord. Draco also realised that, if he had by some miracle managed to survive the confrontation with Voldemort, he would now be facing the prospect of a Dementor's Kiss.

Once the meal was done, Lucius excused himself to attend to the urgent matter of clearing the house of Dark paraphernalia. Draco followed his father, saying that he, too, would help. Narcissa and Tisiphone lingered for a short while longer over their final cups of rich, dark coffee before going back inside to attend to Severus.

Just as Tisiphone had predicted, the angry wound on Severus' neck had stopped bleeding, and the Healer efficiently applied Dittany and bandaged the now nearly healed injury. Casting another diagnostic spell, she declared, 'He's healing better than I could have imagined. It's a true miracle. He should be awake by this afternoon, if not much sooner.'

Then, turning to her Healer's bag, which was sitting on the table closest to the bed, she extracted an emerald green vial of potion and carefully tipped the whole of it into Severus' mouth. She, too, massaged his throat to help him swallow and explained her actions to the watching Narcissa. 'I'm just giving him a very strong nutritive solution. It should help with his prolonged lack of square meals. I'll leave a few of these behind. If he refuses to take it, add it to his tea or juice. Just make sure he gets three of these a day, for at least two days. It is tasteless and odourless, so it shouldn't affect flavour. It is, however, a distinct amber colour, so if you are camouflaging it in his drink, you'll need to exercise some cunning.'

Narcissa agreed and walked Tisiphone to the drawing room fireplace, so that she could Floo home. Instructing Topsy, Narcissa's personal elf, to inform her if there was any change in Severus' condition, Narcissa headed toward her sister Bellatrix's chambers in the east wing. She knew there was much there that needed destroying and concealing.

There, while attending to her self-appointed task and remembering Tisiphone's comments of the constant information being relayed on the wireless network, Narcissa tuned in to find out what was happening. Soon enough, Bella's bedroom was swept clean of all its Dark artefacts, most of which were carefully moved into the secret spaces that adjoined her own and Lucius' bedchambers. Yet others were carefully neutralised and destroyed. Narcissa knew instantaneously that the Dark Lord's particular Muggle-baiting and interrogation facilitating devices had no more purpose in their present world. Next, Narcissa ensured that Bella's clothes and other possessions were neatly packed and sent to reside in the vast attics. Bellatrix's Death Eater mask, robe and other insignia-bearing artefacts were carefully bundled in a dark silk dressing gown and given to a helping house-elf to burn outside. These items could not be destroyed by wizarding magic, but burning them in an elf-made fire would neutralise and destroy the items safely. Moving next to the bathroom, she found a large number of potions, beauty products and hair accessories scattered around the countertops and hidden within the recesses of the cupboards. Looking for a safe container for the potions and finding none, Narcissa Transfigured a tortoise-shell clasp into a large box to hold the many questionable vials of lust potion and the distinctly magenta hued vials containing Beautification Potion. 'Oh, Bella,' said Narcissa sadly before adding to the box a large collection of the clear crystal bottles that held the purple Sleeping Potion. Narcissa had, over the past few months, grown to hate her sister, but as she packed up and sorted out Bellatrix's things, she once again remembered the vivacious and pleasure seeking teenager and childhood confidant. Narcissa dejectedly reflected on the crazed woman who had died as Voldemort's most fanatic supporter. Narcissa was filled with unexpected grief. As children and youngsters, they had been close, in truth, much closer than they had ever been to their sibling, Andromeda.

Suddenly, the wireless' announcement of a press conference at Hogwarts caught Narcissa's attention. The witch reading out the news stated that Harry Potter would be speaking to the world and would answer questions put forward by the world's media. 'How very attention-seeking,' thought Narcissa, even as she realised that the Dark Lord would have done very much the same if he had been the one to emerge victorious. On hearing that the Minister for Magic would then conclude the press conference, Narcissa sent a message to Lucius via house-elf to keep him abreast of the news.

Soon enough, the task of cleaning out Bellatrix's quarters was complete. With one final sweep of her wand to check if there were any Dark objects left unaccounted for, Narcissa ordered a house-elf to completely clean and rearrange the chambers. On leaving Bellatrix's former chambers, Narcissa made her now weary way towards the main guest wing in the north of the Manor. This had been the Dark Lord's sometime residence, with rooms adjoining it for his deceased lap-dog Pettigrew, as well as special arrangements for Nagini. With a shudder, Narcissa recalled the horror of having to open her beautiful home to that disgusting presence. Narcissa knew Lucius and Draco would be busy eradicating all evidence of the presence of the Dark Lord from this part of the house.

When she entered the north wing, she found Lucius doing much the same as she had done in Bellatrix's chambers. All the Dark objects had been collected into a large pile in the middle of the bed, and the rest of the room had been stripped of all of the Dark Lord's and Pettigrew's possessions. Books had been piled in another corner of the bedroom to be sorted and placed or hidden as the case might be.

'He didn't have much, the rat,' said Lucius, as way of introduction.

In response, Narcissa relayed what she had accomplished in Bella's chambers. Gesturing to the clearly visible Death Eater mask and robe, she said, 'All of that could join the bonfire too.'

'Yes,' said Lucius, 'my bits and pieces must go the same route too. Will you continue while I attend to it?' On seeing Narcissa's nod of agreement, he purposefully strode out of the room.

Sorting through the rest of the Dark objects, Narcissa laughed at the vanity of the little man. Most of the objects were those most suitable for the enthrallment or torture of hapless Muggles. Consigning all of them to be destroyed, again by elf-fire, she moved on to the Dark Lord's chambers. There, she drew back the large curtains that prevented light from entering the area, and Vanished the nest that had been created for Nagini. A quick sweep of her wand revealed no Dark magic, so once all evidence of Nagini's meals and presence was eradicated, she took a deep breath before breaching the Dark Lord's lair.

While Narcissa was busy putting the Dark Lord's quarters to rights, Lucius had been accosted by the portrait of his father, Abraxas Malfoy. Without preamble, Abraxas stated, 'Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black has been frantically trying to get in touch with you all. Where in Hades have you been?'

'I'm sorry, Father,' said Lucius. 'We've been busy removing traces of the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters from the Manor.'

'Indeed,' responded his father, 'but make your way down to the ballroom immediately. He's got important news, and you must speak with him directly.'

With a quick nod, Lucius strode down to the ballroom. There, he bowed low before Headmaster Black and his wife, Ursula. 'You wanted me, sir?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Phineas Nigellus. 'I've important news with regards to your latest house guest.'

At that, Lucius stopped short. Of all the news he was to hear, he had not thought that it would pertain to Severus. 'Please go on,' said Lucius, struggling to be calm. He hoped desperately that the Granger girl had not revealed their removing Severus' body from the Shrieking Shack. It would be difficult to find a secure place to move him to or hide him in while he was recovering.

'I have been speaking to Potter, Granger and that Lovegood chit. They are going to ask the Minister for an amnesty for war crimes for all those who worked for the Light. They are also working to clear Severus' name. They were concerned that you would need fair warning if things did not work out.'

Surprised but relieved at this turn of events, Lucius clarified, 'Potter, you say? Agreeing to work with the Malfoys? Clearing Severus' name? How very Gryffindor of them,' he remarked.

'Indeed,' said Phineas Nigellus, 'but they are quite serious, and I think they will make good allies in the days ahead. They are keen to put the past behind them and ensure that nothing and no one like the Dark Lord rises again for a good time yet. Granger is especially smart; you would do well, Lucius, to use her and Potter at this juncture.'

Lucius laughed. 'If they can be used, I'll flatter them in true Malfoy fashion. Never fear, Headmaster. I know the benefits of changing with the new order.'

'Quite,' said Phineas Nigellus with a twinkle. 'You will be surprised to find you actually like them now, too. They have learned to reason for themselves and are no longer the blind pawns of the old fool Dumbledore.'

Meanwhile, Narcissa, on entering the Dark Lord's bedroom and ascertaining the lack of Dark objects and hexes, blasted the throne-like gilded chair and footstool that took pride of place in front of the cold hearth with much enjoyment. As she was blasting the remnants of the furniture, Lucius entered.

'I was looking forward to doing that,' intoned Lucius as he made his way into the room. 'I see you've been busy,' he added, seeing the open drapes and the bared wardrobes and tabletops.

Then, drawing Narcissa to sit on one of the cushioned window seats, he said, 'I've just had an enlightening chat with Headmaster Black. The press conference at Hogwarts is going to be illuminating. We may all be spared a lot of persecution, Cissy.' Lucius' voice was still tinged with amazement. 'Headmaster Black also advised that we use Potter, Granger and Lovegood to ensure our place in society.'

Sighing, Lucius continued. 'I can't understand why they would help us, though. We saw Granger tortured in our drawing room for Merlin's sake. Lovegood was held in our dungeon for weeks. How can Potter and his little friends be willing to let things lie? What game are they playing?'

'Perhaps there isn't a game?' suggested Narcissa gently. 'They've been through the war, just as we have. Perhaps they just want to move on. The real criminals have been captured or will be captured soon. They know we didn't fight at the very end. I did lie to the Dark Lord and help save Potter. They must realise that our real allegiance has always been towards the Malfoy name and family.'

'I think that's what Headmaster Black was trying to say,' agreed Lucius. 'He seemed to imply that the Mudblood, especially, would make a good ally.'

'We must make use of every avenue open to us now, Lucius,' said Narcissa decisively. 'This is no time for pride. We must actively court them. The old excuse of you being Imperiused will not wash this time. We will have to change.'

Lucius sighed and nodded his agreement. 'I do realise this, my dear. It is just a bitter pill to swallow.'

With that, he pulled himself together and stood up. Together, the husband and wife swept the room clean of all remaining traces of Dark magic. They were now both exhausted and looked it too. Lucius, who had been rundown and haggard by the enforced imprisonment at Azkaban and Malfoy Manor, looked old and pale. His hair was no longer a long swath of silk, but an almost ragged mockery of its former glory. Narcissa, for all of her cool beauty, looked pinched and downtrodden. Their morning's high expenditure of magical energy was also of no help.

Glancing towards the ornate antique French clock on the mantelpiece, they were both startled to realise it was almost noon.

As they were making their way back to the drawing-room, Narcissa could not help but be grateful for the many house-elves that now resided at Malfoy Manor. Before the second rising of the Dark Lord, they had only had Dobby. However, with the Dark Lord's departure and his second rise to power, Lucius had done his best to acquire as many house-elves as possible from the numerous supporters of Voldemort. His insistence that a large number of elves were required to ensure the total comfort of the Dark Lord had met almost obscene alacrity. The subsequent breeding of elves, which Narcissa had encouraged, meant that they now had over two dozen elves, all of whom had been of vital assistance for the major clean-up of Malfoy Manor this morning.

Near the top of the white marble staircase, Narcissa and Lucius were met by a tired but pleased looking Draco. 'I've got the entire dungeon and cellar area cleared,' he announced proudly. 'I Vanished all traces of the prisoners, Scourgified the floors, walls and ceilings, and even Vanished all the chains and manacles. It looks clean enough to live in now.'

'Well done,' said Narcissa. 'We were just going down to have a little sit-down, and a spot of lunch.' Then, turning toward Lucius, she added, 'I think I'll go check on Severus' condition before settling down to listen to Potter's press conference.'

'Potter,' said Draco, with disgust. He was immediately pulled up by Lucius. 'You would do well, boy, to realise that the nature of things has changed. Potter is now the most important person in wizarding Britain. You must learn to court the powers that be.'

'Yes, Father,' said Draco sullenly.

As he watched his mother make her way towards Severus' chamber, he turned to his father and said, 'I think I'll go look in on Severus too.'

'I'll come with you,' stated Lucius before adding, 'In any case, he should be waking up shortly.'

As Lucius and Draco entered Severus' room, they found Narcissa performing her diagnostic spell once more. Looking pleased, she said, 'Severus should be awake soon. Let's have lunch while we wait. I don't want to be too far away when he regains consciousness.'

As soon as Narcissa completed her sentence, the ever-ready house-elves brought a tray laden with bowls of rich chicken soup, lasagne, green salad and garlic bread. The smell of food seemed to rouse Severus, for with a soft groan, he began to stir. Swiftly, Narcissa moved to his side, and gently stroked his hand.

Severus was surprised to find himself on what felt to be a comfortable bed. The last he remembered, he'd been on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Trying to identify his position by smell and the sense of touch alone, he realised that he was not in a hospital. For one, the bed was too comfortable, and for another, there was a distinct lack of the institutional odour. He realised someone was stroking his hand, and a deep breath confirmed to him the fragrance of Narcissa's signature ylang-ylang perfume. A careful sweep of his unoccupied hand confirmed rich silk sheets. Malfoy Manor, then, he guessed before slowly attempting to open his eyes.

At first, the sunlight was blinding, and Severus quickly closed his eyes again. He heard Narcissa ask Draco to draw the curtains, and after a moment, he tried again. This time, the relative gloom allowed him to open his eyes fully and see the smirking face of Lucius looming over him. A very satisfied looking Narcissa stood next to him. A careful turn of his head confirmed that Draco was not standing far away and had an anxious expression. Severus was aware that Draco had been resentful of his prominence within the ranks of the Death Eaters, especially due to Lucius' more precarious position. Draco's anxiety, Severus surmised, was based on whether his presence by the bedside would be welcome.

'Welcome back,' said Lucius snidely. Then more seriously, he added, 'You gave us quite the scare.'

Severus swallowed and was pleased to note that there was no pain in the action. This prompted him to attempt speech, which thankfully did not cause any irritation either. 'Indeed,' he responded softly. Then, turning slightly to Narcissa, he added, 'Water.'

'Of course,' said Narcissa before quickly conjuring a glass and filling it with water.

Drinking deeply, Severus was glad to notice that she had filled the tumbler with an ever-fill charm. Finally quenching his thirst, he asked. 'What happened?'

Lucius was the one to respond. 'The Dark Lord is dead. Potter, of course, is holding a press conference,' Lucius glanced at the filigree clock on the bedside table before continuing, 'in about ten minutes.'

That prompted Narcissa to open and tune the wireless to the appropriate channel. Then, as the broadcaster spoke to the dignitaries present about the state of the destruction of Hogwarts and the speed of the reconstruction efforts, Narcissa declared, 'Lunch.'

Soon, Severus had a tray of nutritious chicken soup, into which Narcissa had quietly added a nutritive solution, carefully placed across his knees. The others then sat down



to eat while listening to the broadcast. There was silence in the room as everyone was intent on analysing the myriad meanings behind the proceedings.

As Potter began to speak, Severus noted, 'That speech is typical know-it-all Granger. I expect she wrote it all for him.' This was subsequently followed by much snorting, and the exclamation, 'Typical Gryffindors!'

Lucius and Narcissa looked across to Severus with amusement. They knew he would dislike being publicly praised by a Potter. When Potter requested for an amnesty against crimes, however, Severus' eyes widened. This he had not anticipated. In all honesty, Severus had expected to die. His miraculous survival due to the magic of the Dark Veela had been unexpected, but despite his mother's reassurances, he had thought he would be forced into the life of a fugitive. He had not expected Potter to get sentimental and turn him into the unsung hero of the war against Voldemort. However, the part of him that was unwilling to take anything for granted did not believe that his crimes would be pardoned. *Surely, Severus thought, they'll make an exception for the murderer of Dumbledore.*

As pandemonium broke out on the airwaves, and the broadcaster began his own analysis of the prepared statement, Narcissa spoke. 'Sweet Nimue. Those children are brilliant. I didn't expect them to be so gracious in victory.'

Severus could only murmur, 'Granger, damn know-it-all.'

Lucius did nothing to mask his emotions, and his face underwent a series of revealing expressions. First there was shock, then amazement, finally followed by a look that Severus could best describe as predatory. Severus smirked to himself. He could well imagine Lucius planning to have Severus use his new hero status to clear the Malfoy name of any wrongdoing.

As the questioning began, however, everyone again listened with total concentration, the only sound through Potter's response being Narcissa's gasp when Horcruxes were mentioned. Lucius looked extremely uncomfortable, and Severus looked like missing pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place.

However, when Potter stated that Voldemort was a half-blood, Draco exclaimed in anger. 'How dare he lie, Father?' When Lucius failed to respond, he turned in shock to his mother.

'We suspected,' said Narcissa delicately. 'He disliked genealogy and would be furious if people talked of their ancestry. Bella, of course, never believed me when I brought the subject up.'

Draco felt as if more and more of his world was crumbling around him. Everything he had ever been taught, everything he had ever believed, was being turned on its head.

However, it was when Granger began to speak that Lucius seemed to be overcome with feeling. As Granger finished her explanation into their assumptions behind Voldemort's actions and the Pureblood position, Lucius murmured 'Well played, Miss Granger.' Then seeing his son's astonished expression, he clarified. 'They've given the Purebloods a safe way out of the predicament they are in. This is the olive branch we must all use to save ourselves.'

Severus was extremely thoughtful. He had always seen Granger as an annoying show-off. She had seemed to him to be the epitome of brash and bold Gryffindor, desperate to show off her knowledge. But this subtle yet brilliant piece of politics... this made him see her in a whole new light. Even though Potter had asked for an amnesty, Severus had not let himself believe that he would be spared. When Kingsley Shacklebolt announced Severus' pardon, however, Severus was forced to realise that he now had an opportunity to lead a real life. For as long as he could remember, Severus had been controlled by the will of others; first by his bully of a father, then the senior boys at Hogwarts. Finally, in his foolish teenage bid for power, he had been controlled by the Dark Lord and eventually Dumbledore. Now, he acknowledged silently, *I am free. Free of my twin masters to make a life for myself.*

Hearing Lovegood speak once again brought a flurry of reactions: first, a snort followed by a chuckle from Severus. Then, a thoughtful Narcissa's murmured comment, 'I'd not thought of Lovegood's parentage. The Lovegoods never made use of their connections, but the girl now mentioning her mother will have all the Pureblood sympathisers the world over on her side.'

At Draco's perplexed appearance, Narcissa continued. 'Her deceased mother was the eldest and only magical child of the Princess Sibylla, Baroness Silfverschiöld. Sibylla was, of course, a younger sister of His Majesty King Carl Gustav of Sweden. You do know who he is, I hope?' Narcissa was disappointed in Draco's lack of comprehension. His inability to grasp the nuances and meanings behind the victory statement and subsequent interviews made her realise how very spoilt and ignorant her son was. These children who were addressing the world and doing it so masterfully were Draco's contemporaries, yet her son could not even unravel the hidden messages.

Severus felt sorry for the whelp. Draco had been coddled and protected by both his parents, and he had grown up with an inflated sense of his own importance and power. In his best lecturing tone, Severus said, 'Miss Lovegood is a descendant of Pureblood royalty. Her claim that the Death Eaters kidnapped her will have anyone who was even a little distant, completely back away from ever supporting any revivalist movement. She has, by merely mentioning her mother, completely taken care of the danger of the remaining Death Eaters finding any political support outside Britain.'

Draco was utterly shocked. 'Loony Lovegood's got royal blood? Why did no one ever tell me this?'

Narcissa looked haughtily at Draco. 'Were you not told to study the Pureblood genealogies before starting Hogwarts? Were we not insistent that you thereafter study all of the new students, so that you could make the right friends?'

At that, Draco shut up. He knew he was at fault, for it was he who had not bothered to look up anyone who was not in Slytherin. He realised that his world had indeed changed in more ways than he could hope to yet understand.

## Chapter Seven: Repercussions

*Chapter 7 of 40*

The wizarding world learns of Severus' survival.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I just play with them because they are so fabulous.

(ii) Thank you most sincerely to everyone who left such kind reviews. I am so touched and encouraged. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.

(iii) A big thank you to Queen\_of\_Stars, my lovely beta. Your help has been much appreciated.

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Minerva McGonagall was flabbergasted. She could do nothing but look at Harry in amazed silence for a long moment. Then, as if coming to her senses, she whispered furiously, 'Not dead? You mean Severus is alive. Why didn't any of you say something before this?'

Not waiting for their response, McGonagall turned to Kingsley, who was still speaking with the visiting Ministers for Magic, and said, 'Excuse me, Minister, but Harry has some important news that he neglected to mention before this press conference.'

Kingsley looked startled. McGonagall's voice had been unusually harsh; it was almost as if she was trying desperately to hang on to her composure. Excusing himself from the other Ministers, who were now looking on with blatant interest, Kingsley joined the group standing before the Headmistress. Looking intently at Harry, Kingsley asked, 'More information, Harry? What have you been keeping from us now?'

Before Harry could speak, however, Minerva replied in an urgent whisper. 'Severus Snape is alive.'

'What?' exclaimed Kingsley. Then, turning to look searchingly at Harry, Luna and Hermione, he continued. 'Alive you say. Hmm...' Kingsley seemed lost in thought for a moment, but finally he said with a broad smile, 'Well played. I must say that getting a pardon for a believed-to-be-dead Severus Snape was much easier to achieve than a pardon for a live, universally disliked former Death Eater.'

Kingsley turned to look searchingly at Hermione, who he strongly suspected of orchestrating the ruse. Nodding to Minerva, he said, 'Shall we adjourn to the Headmistress' Office?' Then, realising his error, he added, 'I mean, of course, the Headmaster's Office.'

After excusing himself from the visiting dignitaries, Kingsley offered his arm to Hermione. Then, glancing pointedly at Harry, Kingsley escorted Hermione out of the Great Hall. At the entrance, they were once again mobbed by the press. As more photographs were taken, Hermione tried her best to smile brightly at the cameras while holding on to Kingsley's strong arm. Luna, who was being escorted by a clearly tired Harry, looked very serene. The two couples were followed out by an extremely uncomfortable Professor McGonagall.

'The press are going to have a field-day,' said Hermione conversationally as they walked up the stairs. Then, as she realised how the wizarding world would perceive them, she added, 'the photos of Harry and Luna are going to drive Ginny round the bend. She's always been jealous and insecure.'

Kingsley chuckled darkly. 'Don't forget the rumours that are bound to circulate about us, Hermione; we, the brains of the golden trio and the Interim Minister for Magic. Skeeter, especially, is going to enjoy dragging us both through the mud for this. I haven't forgotten the delightful things she wrote about you during the Triwizard Tournament.' Still chuckling, Kingsley added, 'There's sure to be a so-called in-depth article written in the next issue of *Witch Weekly* discussing our vast age difference and the impropriety of me dallying with a teenager.'

'Oh, dear,' Hermione said. 'Ron's going to be worse than Ginny. He'll think we deliberately failed to include him in the press conference.'

'People are going to think all kinds of things in the coming weeks, my dear,' said Kingsley kindly. He patted her hand gently before continuing. 'It is inevitable. You and Harry will both have to grin and bear it. The press conference was a brilliant move politically, but personally, well, that's an entirely different matter.'

'I know,' said Hermione with a sigh. 'I couldn't let the moment pass. It was essential that Harry speak, and the sooner it was done, the less likely it was that he would back away from the limelight.' After a moment's silence, she added, 'I felt that us addressing the world, instead of waiting for them to come up with outlandish suppositions, would help Harry put all of this behind him and do something for the Order at the same time.'

Kingsley chuckled once more. He had always thought highly of Hermione, and this morning's interaction had merely emphasised her sterling qualities.

Once they were all seated round the low coffee-table in the Headmaster's Office, Kingsley spoke. 'The three of you have been wonderfully strategic. Every aspect of the press conference was well planned and well executed. I do hope that you will all work with me and the Ministry. Harry, you especially have a large role to play in ensuring that peace is established and maintained. Hermione, you are going to be the face of the Muggle-borns around the world. Miss Lovegood, you, of course, are the new face of the Purebloods.'

'Of course,' said Harry while nodding his head, 'but only if I agree with what the Ministry is saying and doing.'

Luna and Hermione nodded their agreement.

'Fair enough,' said Kingsley affably. Then, looking very serious, he fired a series of questions at the trio. 'Severus is alive? Are you sure? How do you know? Where is he, and is he safe there?'

Hermione looked at Harry. At his nod, she responded. 'He was alive when I went to retrieve his body from the Shrieking Shack. He is now in a secure location. We don't know how severe his injuries are, but we did see him lose a lot of blood. We need to speak to our collaborators before we reveal anything further.'

Dumbledore had been feigning sleep in his portrait, but had stopped the act once hearing of Severus' survival. Unable to mask his surprise, he interrupted. 'Severus is alive? How extraordinary. I did not expect him to see the end of this war,' he murmured absentmindedly.

Dumbledore seemed oblivious to the growing anger on the faces of both Harry and Hermione. If he had, he would not have carried on speaking. As it was, he continued in what clearly sounded like a tone of dismay. 'Severus always was a slippery chap. Bloody difficult to do away with, in fact. I can't imagine what he has to live for. I thought he would be grateful for the reward of death.'

Hermione was shocked and disgusted to hear the note of dismay in Dumbledore's voice. Unable to control herself, she exclaimed, 'What? How dare you? How can death be seen as a reward when he's never had any chance of a life yet?'

Harry was even more incensed. Hearing Dumbledore speak had brought out all of Harry's anger and resentment of his handling of the war to the surface.

Turning to look directly at Dumbledore's portrait, Harry spoke. 'I have been your man through and through, just as Snape has been. I've not been completely blind to your manipulations, your lies, and your totally despicable behaviour. I followed you because I knew you'd probably help us win the war. You, with your false pretence of being a caring old man, when in reality all you were, all you have ever been, is a ruthless bastard.'

Standing up, Harry continued. 'You threw away Sirius' life like yesterday's old news when there was no reason to do so. You trapped him in that house and allowed him to die. You admitted it yourself, so don't you dare deny it. You did it again with Professor Snape; you used him, and then, when you felt he was no longer useful, you sent him off to die without doing anything to ensure his safety or to even ensure that his name would be cleared at the end of the war. Now you sit there like a sanctimonious old saint and wonder what Snape has to live for? What right have you got to say something like that? He has his whole life ahead of him and is finally free to be his own man, as I am. You gambled with my life, and you did nothing to help us speed up the search for the Horcruxes or the Deathly Hallows. Because of you, there are more deaths than there should have been; there are more orphans, widows and grieving families. You disgust me, you smug bastard. Your hands have as much blood, if not more, than Voldemort. At least he didn't pretend to be anything other than a blood-thirsty, power-hungry megalomaniac.'

Harry paused, since he was nearly panting by this part. Looking towards Hermione, who nodded her encouragement, he continued more calmly. 'I have nothing more to say to you. I have lost all regard for you as a human being. I respect you as a brilliant general, but that is all. I am not your boy, and I am not your pawn any longer.' Then, turning to Kingsley, he asked, 'Can we please go? I think it's safe to assume that I have nothing more to add.'

Hermione was pleased but slightly perturbed at Harry's insightful denouncement of Dumbledore. She couldn't understand where this new Harry was coming from. But as she thought about it further, she realised that having a part of Voldemort had probably coloured much of Harry's earlier behaviour. He had been rash, impulsive; this more mature, more thoughtful and more insightful Harry was perhaps the real Harry finally coming to the forefront. It was another issue that she would have to look into, thought Hermione. Her mental list of things to understand and decipher was starting to fill up again.

Kingsley nodded in understanding, for though a loyal member of the Order, Kingsley had not always agreed with Dumbledore either. With a nod to the speechless McGonagall, Kingsley said, 'I'll walk you out.'

Luna waved serenely at Headmistress Dilys Derwent before following the others out.

As the others left the office, Minerva McGonagall realised that she had some serious thinking to do. Listening to Harry speak had brought her up short. She had always thought that Dumbledore was loved and respected by everyone. She herself had believed in Dumbledore and had thought of him as infallible. Hearing Harry's scathing remarks and seeing Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood, and above all Kingsley's acceptance of Harry's denouncement of the Headmaster, had made her question her understanding of the war and Dumbledore's actions.

She realised that there had been no need to completely isolate Severus throughout his harrowing ordeal as a persecuted murderer and Death Eater. She realised that Severus had done his best to protect the students of Hogwarts, as well the staff during the past year. She realised that the Death Eaters had not taken Miss Lovegood away from the school because they knew that Severus would not allow a student to be harmed. Miss Lovegood had been abducted from the Hogwarts Express as it was about to depart from Hogsmeade Station.

Minerva realised that she owed Severus her apologies on more fronts than she had previously suspected. She vowed to herself that she would not be as blind as she had been. She was ashamed of her reaction on learning of his survival. Harry, Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood had been remarkably perceptive in doing their utmost to acknowledge Severus' enormous sacrifices. Minerva could not, and would not, be any less gracious or grateful. No, Minerva promised to herself, she would beg forgiveness and grovel if need be, but she would make things right between herself and Severus. She had failed in her duty as a friend, and she would not fail again. Severus would not forgive her easily, she knew him well enough to realise that, but was she not the Head of Gryffindor? The challenge of repairing their odd friendship and of ensuring that the difficult Slytherin ultimately accepted her heartfelt apologies, was something that would motivate her future actions and decisions.

Meanwhile, the others made their way down the spiral staircase. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Luna said quietly, 'I think we should tell Kingsley about Headmaster Black.' Looking closely at Kingsley, she stated dreamily, 'You're different; I think we'll be friends.'

Kingsley looked extremely amused. A quick glance at Hermione confirmed that she was also smiling fondly at Luna. Harry, however, seemed dead on his feet. Kingsley rested his hand on his shoulder and said, 'You look done in, Harry.'

Harry nodded. 'I feel like I've fought at least three battles since this morning. Can we go back to Ravenclaw Tower and finish all of this? I just want to go to bed.'

Kingsley looked confused at the mention of Ravenclaw Tower. 'I thought you were Gryffindors?' he questioned needlessly.

'Yes,' said Hermione. 'We are Gryffindors, but Ravenclaw Tower is more secure, and it lacks the excess of portraits.' After a pause, she added, 'Besides, no one would think to look for us there.'

Kingsley smiled. He liked their simple, rather sensible way of thinking. Realising that he had found people with a similar bent of mind, Kingsley suddenly felt much better. He had grown especially close to Remus and Tonks over the past year, and their deaths, along with the earlier death of his superior, Mad-Eye, had left the tall man feeling almost bereft of people he could trust and rely upon. These three youngsters, in their different ways, were like a balm on his fractured soul.

Once more ensconced in Ravenclaw Tower with a pot of tea, Hermione pulled out the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. 'Headmaster Black,' said Hermione politely. 'Have you any news?'

Phineas Nigellus looked round at expectant faces. 'I've spoken to Lucius. He is aware of our plans.'

At the mention of the elder Malfoy's name, Kingsley's face registered his surprise.

Phineas Nigellus smirked. He loved baiting the live ones. 'Abraxas has assured me that Severus is awake. From what I gather, Narcissa was just in time to prevent long-term nerve damage. They have, of course, been listening to the press conference on the wireless.' Phineas Nigellus carefully stroked the end of his nose. He was trying to decide how much information to divulge. Then, resolving to lay all the facts he had collected before the waiting quartet, he continued. 'I heard from the portrait network at Malfoy Manor that all signs of the Dark Lord's stay have been removed. Suspicious objects and Dark artefacts that could incriminate them have been destroyed. From what I've gathered, it seems Lucius and Narcissa are fully prepared to fit in to the new mood of Britain.'

Kingsley seemed to be taking the news of the Malfoys involvement in stride. Turning to Harry, he asked curiously, 'Who approached the Malfoys for aid?'

Hermione responded. 'I did.'

At that, Kingsley laughed out loud. 'Circe and her powers. If you've already got the Malfoys on your side, you've got the pureblood contingent well and truly beat. The others will follow the Malfoys' example. We should have no problems with a revivalist movement. That was our biggest fear, and the main reason why the other Ministers for Magic made it a point to be present this afternoon. They have a fair number of Voldemort sympathisers in their countries as well. The Aurors can now focus on rounding up the extremists, especially if Severus and Lucius are willing to collaborate.' Turning his attention to Phineas Nigellus, he asked, 'Do you think they will work with the Ministry?'

Phineas Nigellus responded. 'Yes, indeed. It seems certain that the Malfoys will be eager to prove that they support the changing of the guard at the Ministry.'

Extremely pleased, Kingsley thanked Phineas Nigellus for his support. The others joined in.

Phineas Nigellus nodded graciously. Then, he added to Hermione, 'Miss Granger, please see to it that I am returned to the house of my ancestors. I have been mobile long enough.'

Hermione agreed and moved to put the portrait into her bag. However, she was stopped by Phineas Nigellus, who seemed to have more to say.

'One last thing, may I suggest that you leave me out for the present? If I hear any more information, it will be much easier to pass it across.'

It was Kingsley who responded with a gracious, 'That would be much appreciated, Headmaster. Thank you.'

## Chapter Eight: Confessions and Desires

*Chapter 8 of 40*

Severus begins to plot. Confessions are made.

## Chapter Eight: Confessions and Desires

Severus begins to plot. Confessions are made.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I just amuse myself with them.

(ii) Thank you everyone for the reviews. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.

(iii) And last, but not least, a big thank you to my beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Severus Snape was rarely surprised or caught off guard. If questioned, and it was unlikely that anyone would ever attempt such a blatantly self-destructive manoeuvre, Severus could count the occasions he had been taken by surprise on the fingers of one hand with digits to spare.

The first had been when he'd been saved by James Potter from a transforming Lupin. He had thought that he was going to die that night; being saved at the last minute had come as a shock. Dumbledore's behaviour towards the murder attempt had not been a revelation, for he had already known that rules did not apply to the golden ones, and he would always be seen as the one at fault.

The second time he'd been surprised was when the Potter brat had survived. He had not thought it possible for anyone, much less a child, to survive the Dark Lord's killing curse. That Dumbledore would fail had been an easy assumption to make; even as he pledged to turn spy for the Order, he had known that the chances of anything he cared about, even distantly, to survive the poison of his affection was unlikely.

Today, however, had been filled with one surprise after another. For one thing, he was alive. He had not even in his wildest dreams expected to make it through the final confrontation. He had felt that death was imminent, and although he had not wanted it, he had accepted it as his due for a life lived in misery. His mother's words, his second chance at life, and knowledge of the Dark Veela curse had hit him with as much shock as a Bludger to the stomach. Now came the knowledge that he was free, that he was being lauded as a hero and that he was officially pardoned for the murder of Dumbledore.

*I have a life, thought Severus. I have a life to live as I see fit!*

As he lay in the comfort of the Malfoys' summer guest-room, Severus decided that from that day forward he would do whatever was necessary to ensure his happiness. He would heed the words of his mother. He would attempt to find true love, and if that was not possible, he would at least make sure that he carried on the Snape name. He was a war hero, and if that could not get him a willing wife, then he didn't know what would.

Deep in his heart, Severus still believed that it was unlikely that he would ever find true love. This belief stemmed from the fear that he was incapable of love. The only woman Severus had ever loved was Lily, and she was dead. Severus knew that Lily, his so-called love, had never really loved him in return.

An heir, however, now that dream was attainable. Severus realised that he now had a real position of power and the prestige to make that goal a reality. As a Headmaster of Hogwarts, who had been accepted by the castle, Severus was confident that he could find a woman willing to marry him and bear his offspring. He smirked to himself. He would take advantage of the public gratitude of Potter and Granger and make the most of being the dark hero and dashing spy. He was Slytherin enough to make use of all the weapons that were now in his arsenal. After successfully fooling the Dark Lord for many years, getting the Order, the Boy-Who-Lived and his little circle of friends to ensure his scheme would play out successfully would be a pleasant walk in the park. They owed him, and he was not above making sure that they delivered. Feeling much more content now that he had come to some kind of decision, Severus succumbed to his much needed rest.

When Severus woke up, it was to see Lucius peering over him. As Severus' eyes slowly opened, Lucius smirked in what for him was a friendly manner.

'Ah,' Lucius said needlessly. 'I am glad you're awake. Cissy has been keen to feed you and has been planning something special to tempt your appetite.'

Severus grunted in response. He was rather famished. The soup he had had this afternoon had been filling, but proper food would not go amiss. Looking around, he tried to ascertain the time. Failing, he asked, 'What's the time?'

'You've been asleep for hours,' replied Lucius smugly. 'It's just gone eight in the evening.'

Sitting up, Severus enquired, 'Any news following the press conference?'

'None directly, but apparently Potter has informed McGonagall and Shackbolt of your survival. If Headmaster Black is to be believed, Potter has taken Dumbledore to task in an extremely satisfying manner.' Lucius smirked before continuing, 'Headmaster Black is waiting to speak to you, if you're up to making the walk to the ballroom.'

Severus nodded. He felt quite strong, considering the fact that he'd been revived from death less than twenty-four hours previously. 'Perhaps I could have something to eat,' suggested Severus. Glancing down at the nightshirt he had on, he added, 'Something more suitable to wear wouldn't be amiss either.'

'Of course,' said Lucius graciously. 'I'll have the house-elves bring you something.'

Soon, Severus was dressed in what was clearly one of Lucius' dark green and silver silk dressing gowns. Smirking in amusement at the obviously Slytherin colours, Severus joined Lucius, who was waiting for him on the landing. As they made their way down the stairs, they met a just awakened Draco.

'Godfather, it's good to see you up and walking,' greeted the boy haltingly.

'It's good to be up,' said Severus. His second chance at life seemed to have mellowed his all encompassing anger; Severus no longer felt infuriated at the boy's obvious lack of ease given the nature of their long and complicated relationship.

As they reached the ground floor, they were soon joined by Narcissa, who had been waiting for them in the drawing-room. Together, the four made their way to the adjoining dining-room. To Severus' perceptive eye, the room itself looked very different from his last visit to the Manor during the Dark Lord's stay. Amazed at how quickly the Malfoys had managed to alter the room's décor, Severus smirked inwardly and complimented Narcissa. 'The room looks wonderful, Narcissa. It's such a dramatic change within mere hours if I'm not mistaken.'

'You are not,' said Narcissa. Smiling wickedly, she added, 'I thought white would be a suitable colour, given our acceptance of all things Light.'

Severus chuckled. 'Quite so.' He made it a point to note the changes. He realised that if his mission to secure a wife and heir were to succeed, then Spinner's End would have to be similarly transformed from the home of an obviously Dark and single wizard into one that was more suitable for the opposite sex. The room's dark wood panelling had been replaced by a pale-gold pine finish. The walls, which had previously been hung with rich, green silk, were now covered in a warm off-white cloth. The drapes had been altered to take on a rich cream and gold design. All in all, the space had been transformed from a dark, opulent chamber into a light and sumptuous area.

'You were always good at Transfiguration,' continued Severus once he had finished taking note of the changes to the room.

Narcissa blushed becomingly at his compliment. 'I've only been good at the most superficial of transfigurations, Severus. I've never managed to get the human or animal ones perfected.'

'Don't sell yourself short, my dear,' interjected Lucius.

'Indeed,' agreed Severus. 'It takes both skill and an excellent eye for detail to transform something like this in the short space of time that you had.'

Turning to Lucius while the house-elves brought their dinner, he asked, 'What are your plans?'

Lucius Malfoy seemed taken aback at Severus' direct address. Then, as if realising the futility of evading the issue, and realising that Severus was the one person who could help him the most, he said, 'I'm not sure. From what I've heard so far, the public has done nothing but celebrate all day. Tomorrow, once trading commences, I will know how the defeat has affected Malfoy Industries and Holdings.' Regaining his usual smug manner, Lucius continued. 'Our elf-made wines and meads have been selling well. I suppose every cloud does have a silver lining.'

Severus smirked before nodding in agreement. There really wasn't anything to say at this stage.

Dinner was, as usual, up to the Malfoys' excellent standards. The starter of freshwater prawns in a creamy garlic sauce was delicious. Severus had always enjoyed dining at the Manor. Narcissa was always a wonderful hostess, and her taste in food was both exotic and excellent. Next came an aromatic baked chicken and rice dish. At Severus' appreciative murmur, Narcissa explained that it was a Spanish treat that they had enjoyed while holidaying in Costa del Sol a few years ago. The finale was a simple but suitably delicious indulgence of Cinnamon Chocolate Pudding.

Once dinner was concluded and Draco had been excused, Severus and his hosts made their way into the ballroom. They were informed by Phineas Nigellus that the children were still asleep at Hogwarts, but that Potter had indicated that he was keen to return to Grimmauld Place with Miss Granger. Miss Lovegood was planning on finding her father, who had been released from Azkaban. Severus was fully informed of Potter's verbal attack and denouncement of Dumbledore, as well as of Lovegood and Granger's stringent support. The most important bit of news to Severus was that Kingsley had been made aware that he was residing at Malfoy Manor.

Thanking the former Headmaster, who had expressed his pleasure at the Slytherin's role in the victory, they retired once more to the drawing room where the trio passed a contented evening.

The next few days seemed to pass by in a blur. Severus spent much of the time resting, planning and trying to come to grips with the vision of his mother and the task that lay before him. Meanwhile, Lucius and Narcissa continued to redecorate and ensure their place in wizarding society. This caused Severus much amusement, but he realised the importance of outward as well as inward demonstrations of their changed attitudes.

One morning, nearly a week after the final battle, Severus was just returning from an invigorating morning walk in the Malfoy gardens. The day was already proving to be hot and sunny. On entering the grand orangery, Severus was invited by Lucius to partake of a cup of coffee. This in itself was not uncommon, for Lucius made it a habit to come across Severus most mornings to share a conversation or piece of news. However, Lucius' formal invitation to join him in refreshment immediately alerted Severus that something was amiss.

Once Severus was seated, Lucius silently handed him a heavy parchment envelope. Raising his eyebrow in enquiry, Severus opened it to reveal an official Ministry communiqué. Reading the missive, he informed a waiting Lucius, 'The Ministry is holding a Victory Ball on Saturday, on the twenty-third of May. All three of you are invited as my hosts.'

'Indeed,' replied Lucius, who seemed gratified at the Malfoys' inclusion.

'I suspect that Kingsley has had a hand in the guest list,' said Severus. 'He would not miss the opportunity to ensure that the public is made aware of your capitulation.'

Lucius laughed bitterly before he continued gravely, 'I would be foolish if I were to refuse. In truth, I am glad I was too busy worrying about Draco to participate in the battle. Enough people saw me rushing around with Cissy in desperation, looking for him, to realise we didn't fight.'

Then, after a short pause, he continued, 'The news from our brethren is not good. Of those who survived and managed to escape Hogwarts after the Dark Lord's demise, Rabastan and Rodolphus have been killed. They were surrounded by Aurors on the outskirts of Kirkcaldy three days ago. Yaxley, Travers and Thorfinn Rowle are in Azkaban, awaiting trial. Dolohov, the Carrows, Avery and Jugson were killed by Belgian Aurors when they tried to cross over to Belgium. Goyle and his son are at St. Mungo's, awaiting transfer to Azkaban. Crabbe is at St. Dymphna, and from what I have been able to gather, he is unlikely to recover to the point where he will be able to stand trial. His wife, Edwina, has abandoned Crabbe Manor and moved in with her unmarried sister in Koblenz, Germany. McNair, Mulciber, Nott Senior, Rosier and Selwyn are currently entrenched in Nott Castle in Inverness. The Aurors are confident that they cannot hold out for much longer. Rookwood is the only one unaccounted for. I suspect he has managed to make it to France, but I doubt he will be able to evade the Aurors for much longer if he is using magic. The Death Eaters are truly no more; it is the ending of an era.'

'Then we are free from reprisals and retaliations,' said Severus thoughtfully. 'I am safe to return to Spinner's End.'

'If you had wanted to leave, the Ministry would have given you enough protection to make it possible, but is it not simpler and more convenient to stay here? You know Narcissa and I are glad to have you. We owe you much more than our simple hospitality.'

'Thank you, old friend,' said Severus, 'but I would like to return home to my books, my potions and my solitude; they are waiting for me.'

'At least let Cissy and the elves help you resettle if you are insistent on returning. And please, do make it a point to come round for meals as often as you can. Narcissa has been given strict instructions to feed you and help you regain your strength. Healer LeStrange was most adamant about you needing plenty of nutrition.'

Severus agreed to do so. He knew that Lucius was genuinely keen to do what he could to repay the debts the Malfoys owed him. The two men lapsed into silence. Severus thought about the end of his so-called associates and the things that needed to be done to make his old home more habitable.

The silence was broken by Lucius' sigh. Then, as if coming to a decision, he began, 'I have a favour to ask of you, old friend.'

This direct approach was a glaringly unSlytherin tactic, but the last few days had seen a change in their dealings. Both men had begun to speak more openly. Their general penchant for subterfuge and deception seemed to have been abandoned for the time being.

Rubbing his temples as though warding off an imminent headache, Lucius continued speaking. 'Yesterday, Cissy went to London to do some shopping. She returned in tears because Madam Genevieve of Luxury and Lace snubbed her, saying she had nothing new for traitors. Apparently, Madam Genevieve stated she was busy designing custom-made tokens for the real heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts. I suspect the Ministry may have leaked its plans to hold a Victory Ball, and the couturiers are desperately trying to have their designs worn by the now famous and fashionable.'

'Hypocrites, the lot of them,' said Severus darkly. 'If the Dark Lord had been victorious, the general public would have continued to kiss Narcissa's boots in order to curry favour with the favourites.' Stroking his pursed lips with his long and slender index finger, Severus thought of how he could assist the Malfoys. Coming to a decision that seemed to satisfy him, Severus spoke, 'As a glorified hero of the final battle, I think it would be useful if I were to do some shopping in London tomorrow. Perhaps Narcissa could be persuaded to help me choose fitting robes for the Victory Ball? It might be interesting to see if I can find something other than the usual black I always wear.'

Lucius smirked. 'I knew I could count on you, old chap,' said Lucius gratefully. 'Cissy has been after you for years to introduce a bit of colour into your wardrobe; this is sure to cheer her up.'

Severus smirked. 'Indeed,' he said. 'I will confess that it seems unlikely that I will settle for anything other than black, but I'm sure the challenge will be beneficial to the task ahead.'

Lucius laughed, and Severus joined him with a deep chuckle. Their shared amusement drew the attention of Narcissa, who was busy making lists and drawing up plans for menus in the morning room.

Seeing the men lingering over coffee, Narcissa joined them.

Thinking it would be a good moment to discuss his own quest, Severus casually observed, 'We've been invited to the Victory Ball at the Ministry on the twenty-third. I'm quite pleased I've not been asked to bring along a partner.'

Narcissa's eyes lit up at the mention of a ball, but then, as if remembering the day before, she said more soberly, 'I'll have to go to Paris to buy something to wear; I've not really kept up with this season's ballroom fashions.'

'Perhaps you could help me find something in London before you head off to Paris,' said Severus. 'I feel the need to deviate from my dark and gloomy dungeon-dweller attire.'

'Oh, Severus,' laughed Narcissa. 'You know you cut a striking figure, but a change, perhaps some colour, would really make a difference.'

Lucius had begun to smirk with Severus' introduction of the ball, and he was almost grinning with glee after hearing Narcissa's laughter. Severus had never really paid much attention to how little he had to do to please his old friends, for friends they had indeed proved to be. Though he had used the words previously, he had used them cynically in an attempt to flatter and gain favour. Now, however, Severus realised that he had been actively working to distance them from him. *Perhaps*, he mused, *I have been pushing other people away too*. However, now that he was aware of the curse, its impact on his behaviour and immediate responses to people could be monitored and curbed.

'A striking figure,' said Severus in disbelief. 'You jest, my dear. Have you not heard? My career at Hogwarts has seen me dubbed the greasy git, the bat of the dungeons, the'

Narcissa interrupted him, 'I'm not speaking about children, or even malicious and jealous men. I'm speaking about women, Severus. If you tried, you could really be quite attractive in a dark and dangerous kind of way.'

'Dark and dangerous? What on earth are you on about? I've been dark and dangerous since the day I arrived in Hogwarts, and the look has never been attractive. Have you not paid attention to my permanently single status?'

Lucius barked in amusement. 'You've always been completely oblivious to the curious and fearful glances of women, Severus.'

Narcissa nodded. 'Yes, all fear is not a sign of your unattractiveness, but a sign of you arousing their darker, deeper and baser curiosity.'

'Baser curiosity, hmm...,' said Severus in astonishment. 'Really, Narcissa, you women are strange creatures indeed.' After a moment's pause, Severus continued, 'I think I shall have to ask you both for some solid advice about women. Since we are being so frank, I must confess that now that the war is over, and I am able to live my own life, the thought of a family and the companionship you both enjoy has started to grow upon me.'

'Oh Severus!' said Narcissa in rapture. 'I am so pleased. It will give me the greatest pleasure to help with finding you the perfect wife. We'll have such fun. All the balls that are sure to come up in response to the end of the war will provide you with the ideal opportunity to cast your net.' Turning to Lucius, she said, 'Once things settle down a little, we could even have one here in Malfoy Manor. We could invite loads of eligible young ladies, and...'

'Let's not be too hasty,' said Severus, slightly taken aback at Narcissa's enthusiasm.

Lucius seemed to understand Severus' reluctance, for he laid a gentle arm on Narcissa before speaking. 'No worries, old chap. We won't throw you to the wolves. We are both just pleased you're thinking about finding someone, and we'll be more than happy to help screen potential possibilities.'

'Indeed,' said Severus. 'The first order of business, of course, is for me to get settled into Hogwarts again and make sure the school is up and running. Only then can I think about looking for a suitable partner.'

'Of course,' said Lucius. He glanced sharply at Narcissa, who looked keen to disagree, and added, 'you can help bring respectability back to the Malfoy name, and Narcissa and I can guide you're progress in finding a suitable wife. I think that's a satisfactory arrangement.'

'Indeed it is,' said Severus. He had begun to think that the new world he found himself in had put old Slytherin relationships off kilter. This settling of arrangements helped ease his conscience. Seeing their friendship and their partnership of mutual usefulness regained, Severus felt reassured. Lucius seemed much more content as well.

## Chapter Nine: Reactions

### Chapter 9 of 40

The Weasleys react to the press conference and the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts.

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- (ii) Thank you, everyone, for the reviews. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.
- (iii) And last, but not least, a big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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While Harry, Hermione and Luna were busy planning and plotting, the Weasleys returned to the Burrow. There, they attempted to eat a sorrowful breakfast and come to terms with Fred's death. George seemed unable to accept that his twin was gone. He seemed as if he was waiting for Fred to pop back in at any moment to announce that it had all just been an elaborate ruse. Percy seemed stunned. He had just regained Fred and the rest of his family and could not cope with having lost his brother once more. Molly was unable to part with any of her children and could do nothing other than hold them all in turn and kiss them repeatedly.

However, Arthur and Bill were both aware that much needed to be done. Bill collected a frantic Fleur from Shell Cottage, and once she had been calmed, reassured and safely ensconced within the bosom of the Weasleys, he departed for Gringotts. The bank and the Goblins were still busy dealing with the aftermath of the break-in and the escaped dragon, not to mention the destruction to their building.

After a brief rest, Arthur prepared to depart for the Ministry as well. Realising that brooding was detrimental to the mental health of his family, he coaxed a conscientious Percy to accompany him, saying, 'Come along, Percy, it is time to go. The Ministry desperately needs all the good men it can get right now.'

Calling on his sense of duty seemed to work, for Percy straightened his shoulders and joined his father in Flooing to the Ministry.

Arthur, with his long years of service to the Ministry, realised that there was much work ahead of them. There, he and Percy attempted with their colleagues to deal with Ministerial matters and the release of prisoners from Azkaban even as Death Eaters were arrested and incarcerated. More directly, Arthur worked on curbing the enthusiasm of the wizarding public that was indiscriminately celebrating the demise of the Dark Lord. Arthur was rushed off his feet, working to make sure that the Muggles were not made aware of the magical world. Flocks of owls could be explained away as an unusual migration, but fireworks, spontaneous parties, drunken brawls and public rejoicing in the street, however heartfelt and joyful, needed to be contained with Muggles Obliviated.

Percy found solace in working. He spent most of the day behind his desk and sorting through piles of release papers for prisoners, ensuring they were sent to St Mungo's for treatment and making sure that family members were sent owls with news and information. The work seemed to help him cope, and he was grateful his father had brought him in to work.

Buried in his work, Percy did not pay attention to the gossip circulating about the press conference, but while rushing around at the Ministry, Arthur did. He sent his weasel Patronus to the Burrow to make sure the family was listening in. Then, at noon, Arthur collected his son and, like the other employees of the Ministry, stopped to listen to the press conference.

The reactions to the press conference at the Ministry were mixed. Many of the Aurors were angry that the Minister had pardoned hardened war criminals, especially Snape. Others were glad that the purebloods were given a way out, a chance to throw off the mantle of evil that had been placed upon them. Still others, who had worked willingly with Voldemort's regime, were furious at their Dark Lord being portrayed as a half-blood megalomaniac. From long experience, Arthur made it a point to note who was saying what; he knew the Order's task of suppressing evil had not ended merely because Voldemort had been defeated.

Later that evening, as the long day was winding to a close, Arthur was called in for an important meeting with Kingsley. There, as one of the few remaining members of the Order, he was informed of the repercussions of Harry's speech and of Severus' survival. Arthur listened with glowing pride to hear Kingsley's praise of the way the teenagers had handled the aftermath of the battle. He was proud, for he thought of Harry and Hermione as his own. Arthur had noticed how Ron seemed to have forgotten about Hermione after the battle. He had tried to persuade Harry to return to the Burrow with the Weasleys, but had relented when Harry had said he would wait for Hermione. He now realised that Hermione had probably been doing her part to recover Severus.

When Arthur and Percy returned to the Burrow, they met a very weary Bill. He too had had a long day working on securing the bank property and working on reconstruction. At the Burrow, things had not been much better. Molly seemed drained and looked like she was still dealing very badly with the loss of Fred. Arthur realised that for his wife, the loss of their son was still new, still personal. He, on the other hand, had been so involved with the loss of all the fallen that Fred's demise had been put into a kind of rational perspective. He did, of course, grieve the death of his son, but his grief was tempered with the knowledge that they were the lucky ones. With so many of his family so closely associated with the resistance, their losses could have been far greater.

Molly had spent the day trying to get the children to rest. George had finally been sent to bed with a dreamless sleep potion, and Ginny, who had refused to leave the side of her mother, had fallen into a restless slumber on the sitting-room sofa. Ron had merely spent the day eating, as if food would take away the sense of loss and pain he was feeling. Fleur was the one who seemed to be holding the family together while Molly prepared the evening meal. Dinner was a sober affair. However, hunger had finally settled in, and it was not only Ron who ate well. Although still numb, Percy, who had missed his mother's cooking, found in the strangely quiet family meal the comfort and strength he needed to cope with the death and destruction he had witnessed.

After dinner, everyone continued to sit around the table. Everyone was quiet and lost in their own thoughts; no one seemed ready to disturb the sense of peace and comfort being together provided. After a while into the silence, Arthur brought up the topic of the press conference. 'Did you all hear what Harry and the girls had to say?' he asked.

Bill replied. 'Yes. The Goblins aren't happy. Now they won't be able to persecute Harry for the destruction of Gringotts. If the Ministry has officially pardoned Harry, there will be no compensation. Brilliant move that though. They covered their bases immediately.'

'That speech sounded like Hermione's work,' said Ron. His tone of voice was not filled with pride at the achievement of his friends; Arthur found that it was resentful. 'I can't believe they would have a press conference without me. How could Harry introduce Hermione as his best friend? What am I, chopped frog's liver? And Loony Lovegood? What were they thinking? Why did they get her to speak? I did much more than Loony Lovegood.'

Arthur tried to placate Ron. 'Well, you did come home and leave them at Hogwarts. Luna had no where else to go; her father was only released from Azkaban sometime this afternoon. He's still being treated at St Mungo's.'

Ron could only grunt in reply.

Ginny spoke up next. 'I thought Luna was my friend. The presenter was talking about how she shone on Harry's arm as they left the Great Hall. Why was she holding on to him? I don't understand. I thought he didn't like her. I know he took her to Slughorn's Christmas party once, but really, Luna? Did you hear the comments about her charming robes? When did Luna ever wear anything remotely fashionable?'

Arthur looked thoughtfully at his children. They didn't seem to understand that Harry, Hermione and Luna had done what they could at a difficult time. Finally, he said, 'Wait until you speak to them. I'm sure it will all be explained. I think they got Luna involved just because we all came home.'

'Well,' said Molly defensively, 'they could have told the children about the press conference. They could have gone back.'

'Yes, but perhaps they didn't want to intrude on our grief,' said Arthur sharply. 'You were the one who insisted this morning that we all come back to the Burrow and that it was a time for family. They were simply abiding by your wishes.'

'Well, I didn't know they were going to address the public and leave my children from their rightfully earned spotlight, did I?' replied Molly. She seemed extremely hurt and resentful that her children had been denied their moment of glory.

'I think Luna spoke very well,' said Fleur into the awkward silence. 'She is after all connected to wizarding royalty, and it does not hurt to remind the public that Harry has friends like that. Hermione, too, was very good in the way she replied. She made sure the purebloods would have a way out if they want to work with the Ministry.'

'Yeah,' said Ron. 'That was the other thing, the woman on the wireless kept talking about how mature Hermione looked and how well she seemed to get on with the Minister. What's Hermione doing sucking up to Kingsley? From what they said, she seemed to be clinging onto his arm and smiling at him.'

'I've never liked to tell you, Ronald,' said Molly, 'but this isn't the first time she's made a play for someone in a position of prestige and power. Remember her romance with Krum?' Molly's words fanned the flames of Ron's anger and resentment until he was almost completely red in the face.

Arthur was very disturbed by this turn of affairs. 'Really, Molly,' he said sharply. 'Wait until you speak to the children and know what's really going on before saying things like this. You know what the press are like. They love scandal. You do a disservice to Hermione.'

Molly sniffed. 'You can say what you like Arthur; all I'm saying is that that girl is too smart to not try to climb up the social ladder. Where was she when my Ronald needed her this morning? She wasn't there, and that's why Harry had to wait for her. If she was interested in Ron, then she should have stayed with him. You mark my words, something is brewing, and it isn't something that will work in favour of our Ron.'

Arthur was too tired to argue, but he was disappointed in Molly, Ron and Ginny's attitudes. He only sighed and said, 'Well, when the children come to visit, we'll know what's really going on.'

Then, he bid goodnight to the family and went to bed.

# Chapter Ten: Profitable Excursions

Chapter 10 of 40

Severus returns to Hogwarts and the public eye. Hermione meets Severus and Narcissa in London.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you for the kind reviews. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.
- (iii) A big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.
- (iv) This chapter partly fulfils the requirements of *The Petulant Poetess*' The Free of THAT Challenge. In it, ladyinthecloak said, 'The word 'that' is the most overused word in fiction. Write a one-shot between 500 and 5000 words about how Snape survived Nagini's bite without *that* word.'

This is neither a one-shot, nor is it about how Snape survived Nagini's attack. However, the chapter does not contain the word 'that.'

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A week after the Dark Lord's fall, Severus Snape was given a clean bill of health. Truth be told, Severus felt better than he had in years, much better than he had felt before the Dark Lord's second rise to power.

Healer Tisiphone Lestrange, who had come to visit the previous evening, had said as much, declaring she found his complete recovery remarkable. Severus did not enlighten her of the healing powers of the Dark Veela. Instead, he merely acknowledged the fine care he had received from Tisiphone and the Malfoys.

Thus, Saturday morning saw Severus depart for Hogwarts. He was keen to retake his position as Headmaster and see the repairs being undertaken. He had owled Minerva to inform her of his impending visit.

However, in spite of sending word of his arrival, he had not really expected to meet anyone. Therefore, to be met at the gates by a pacing Minerva was unexpected. Her tears and warm, shy hug were soon followed by the reason for her vigil. She wanted to apologise.

'Oh, Severus,' Minerva said remorsefully. 'Can you forgive me? I am very sorry for my behaviour. When I think of all I did, all I said, I feel like the hind-end of a donkey. I could really kick Albus for leaving you out in the cold.'

'Yes, well, you were meant to believe the worst of me,' said Severus magnanimously. He had decided he was going to bite his tongue and do his best to control the influence of the curse. Finding true love he had deemed virtually impossible, but finding a wife would require him to woo not only some unsuspecting woman but also the public which would undoubtedly influence her opinion about him. Thus, the scathing attack on Minerva's intelligence, which was poised and ready to roll of his tongue, was ruthlessly curtailed. Instead, he asked, 'How are you holding up?'

Perhaps it was Severus' gentleness and graciousness in dealing with her apology, or perhaps it was just Minerva's new-found understanding of what Severus had sacrificed, but his seeming forgiveness and brushing off of her apology acted to strengthen her resolve to give the stern man her loyalty.

'I'm holding up as well as can be expected,' replied Minerva. 'The castle has been almost rebuilt. The magic is very resilient, but the wards need to be recast. Only you can do the required casting, of course.'

Severus nodded. The wards protecting the school could only be applied and strengthened by the true Head of Hogwarts. 'How is the staff?' asked Severus next. He was curious about what had been discussed following his last hasty departure.

'Everyone has been recalled to welcome you back,' said Minerva. 'When you enter, you will see for yourself.'

This was not what Severus had expected, but then he realised they would give him a hero's welcome, if only in an attempt to heal the wounds of the last miserable year.

When Severus and Minerva reached the great doors, they were opened by the oldest and most influential of the Hogwarts' house-elves, Lala.

'Welcome, Headmaster sir,' said the elf before bowing so low her long pointed nose touched the flagstones. 'We is proud and happy to belong to such a fine master.'

Severus nodded graciously. 'Thank you, Lala,' he said. 'It is a pleasure to be able to return.'

Minerva murmured into his ear, 'The house-elves led by Kreacher fought very bravely. There were some injuries, but thankfully no losses other than for Dobby.'

Severus had not heard this. He had not really paid much attention to Potter's claims of the bravery of Hogwarts' house-elves.

'Please thank all the elves for their selfless service to the school and the children,' said Severus. 'Tell them I and the Deputy Headmistress will come to the kitchens later to thank them all personally.'

'Headmaster sir be very gracious,' said Lala before silently popping out of sight.

'Where to next?' asked Severus. 'I suppose it is best to get the meeting with the staff out of the way before we get down to business.'

'That would be best,' replied Minerva. 'They are waiting for you in the staff-room.'

The walk down the corridors allowed Severus to see first hand how much of the castle had been repaired. The new stones looked alien against the older, more weathered sections of the castle.

'It is hard to imagine the damage,' said Minerva. 'There is still much to be done. I've not even begun to attend to the statues and the paintings, much less the tapestries and the enchantments. However, Filius has been working on the charms for the Great Hall's ceiling, and it is back to form.'

'Excellent,' said Severus shortly. He was surprised at how easy it was to be pleasant, but he did feel like a fraud for pandering to Minerva in a way reminiscent of his behaviour among the Death Eaters.

As they made their way to the long, panelled room with mismatched, dark wooden chairs, Severus began plotting his future in greater detail. If the rest of the staff were as



willing to kowtow to his demands, then ensuring his successful return as Headmaster would be a given. This caused Severus to smirk inwardly. As long as he played his cards right, he could, indeed, have it all.

*Besides, mused Severus, if I could spend twenty years pretending to agree with murderers and sycophants, I can easily spend the next however many months and years acquiring a brand new reputation and find myself a willing wife. After all, I am a consummate actor; I could pretend to turn over a new leaf and project a new personality, claiming the old, much harsher me was a result of my role as double agent and the enormous strain I had to constantly live under.*

Yes, thought Severus, *I can pretend and lure the right kind of woman to be the mother of my children* As he thought about the kind of woman he wanted, he realised the first criteria would be to find a female who was intelligent enough to ensure he didn't have moronic offspring. *Definitely no bleeding heart Gryffindors or mousey Hufflepuffs,* he decided. *A Slytherin would be too difficult to manipulate effectively. Perhaps a Ravenclaw,* was Severus' next thought. *A Ravenclaw who will produce smart children and let me concentrate on my books and potions sounds like the ideal partner. The marriage bed can easily be taken care of with surreptitious use of lust potions if she is unable to find me suitably attractive.*

Feeling quite smug with his train of thought, Severus was prepared to be magnanimous with the rest of the staff who were awaiting his presence in the staff-room. As he entered, the staff all broke into a round of applause. In one corner of the room, Filius (Severus had enough experience to realise only Filius would charm something of such saccharine sentiment) had charmed a green and silver banner to welcome him, 'the silent hero,' back.

Trying to smile, and ending up with a half-smirk, half-grimace, Severus shook hands and accepted everyone's apologies. Hagrid cried, wiping his tears with a large, pink spotted handkerchief more suitable for a children's nursery tablecloth. The most shocking behaviour was from Sybil, who threw herself against him and tried to cover his face with kisses, claiming she had always known he was a knight in tarnished armour. Disgusted, Severus firmly put her aside and met Minerva's amused glance. However much Severus tried to deny it, the past year had been horrendous, not least because he had lost the easy camaraderie and pleasurable exchange of insults which had gone on between himself and the Head of Gryffindor.

*It is good,* thought Severus, *to see Minerva's willingness to give our odd friendship another go. I will need her help if I'm to secure myself a suitable wife.*

Accepting a cup of tea from the gushing Pomona, Severus made his way to Minerva. Dispelling with small-talk, Severus got straight to the point. 'What of the Order? I've been recovering at the Malfoys' and have not heard anything since the press-conference.'

Minerva seemed glad Severus was his usual brisk self. 'Everyone is doing as well as can be expected. There were, of course, a number of deaths, which I'm sure you've read about in the *Prophet*,' responded Minerva. Then, making sure she was not overheard, she continued, 'Harry is the one I'm most concerned about; he's practically barricaded himself in Grimmauld Place with Miss Granger, and he refuses to go out. He says he only wants to eat and sleep. Molly is being very difficult. She feels Miss Granger has bewitched Harry and is trying to cause a break-up between him and his true-love, Ginny.'

Severus chuckled darkly. 'Miss Granger may be a little know-it-all, but she's got enough sense to not fall for the Boy Wonder. Besides, I thought she was pining after the ginger-haired menace.'

'Really, Severus,' Minerva admonished before giving in to her own laughter. 'You take too much pleasure in giving the children monikers.'

Severus smirked at her. Then, he asked quietly, 'Who is acting as the current Head of the Order? It is you or Kingsley? I think it would be a good idea if a meeting was called of all the members. There is debriefing to be done and procedures to be followed so there can be sufficient documentation of all activities of the last year. I have a number of reports to fill in. Perhaps this time we can include the golden trio, so we know what they did in their last year.'

'Always the practical one,' remarked Minerva. 'Kingsley is the current Head, but the last time I spoke to him, he said he just can't handle the responsibility now since he's taken over as Minister. He said he felt there were grave conflicts of interest as well as problems with information gathering, but I'll speak to him and call an Order meeting for early next week.'

Severus nodded before excusing himself to make his way to the Headmaster's Office. He was keen to get started on the piles of paperwork and administration duties awaiting him. Severus was very aware of the need to amend what had been done at Hogwarts in the past year. The syllabus needed to be overhauled, exam schedules needed to be altered and allowances needed to be made for students returning after their year in hiatus.

The weekend passed swiftly for Severus. He and Minerva worked hard to set the castle wards in place and attend to other important matters of business. Severus found the long hours of candid discussions with Minerva as they worked a significant aid to the renewal and strengthening of their previous friendship. Severus observed with interest how Dumbledore's disapproval of his return to Hogwarts only helped cement Minerva's determination to stand by her younger friend and colleague. Severus smirked as he realised Dumbledore's behaviour was working in his favour. The castle, and indeed the other Headmasters and Headmistresses, was coming to support Severus the more Dumbledore attempted to ignore and discredit him.

In keeping with his promise to Narcissa and Lucius, Monday afternoon saw Severus visiting Wizarding London's Parkside Lane. This was the much more exclusive section, which lay just off Diagon Alley. Accompanied by an eager Narcissa, who had insisted at the start of their outing it was high time Severus stopped being so very formal with her and called her Cissy as befitting someone who was part of the family, he was led first to Antonio's for the finest in wizarding footwear.

'Severus, you really need to wear something besides your dragon-hide boots, especially if you're going to be invited to numerous balls, which are sure to occur in all of the well-to-do homes,' insisted Narcissa.

'My dragon-hide boots are both practical and smart,' said Severus, but he eventually conceded in letting her chose a pair of very elegant black evening shoes made from the finest of dragon-hide with smart silver buckles. *They were,* thought Severus, *something only a woman could admire, for they seemed far too impractical for duelling.* When Severus quietly murmured this to her, Narcissa laughed.

'I hope there won't be any duelling at the balls, Severus,' said Narcissa. 'Lucius always shops here and their shoes are very strong and well made. Besides, Antonio can have a number of useful charms applied if you've any concerns when he makes the final adjustments to ensure a perfect fit.'

This appeased Severus, and before they departed, he had agreed with the charming Antonio to have a number of protective and defensive charms sewn into the shoes so they would be more suitable to his cautious frame of mind.

Next, Narcissa led them to Luxury and Lace, the couturier for the most elegant of London fashion. There, as the proprietress rushed to greet him, Severus stated rather obviously, 'Cissy dear, I need new robes for the Victory Ball and the Order of Merlin Award presentation ceremony.'

Narcissa responded rather loudly, 'Severus, Madam Genevieve unfortunately informed me last week she has no time for new custom. Perhaps we could try Madam Malkin's or even Twilfit and Tattings'? I've always been well served there no matter the rumours spread by ignorant rags.'

Severus nodded and said, 'It's a pity; I had thought Madam Genevieve was the best, especially for elegant formal wear.'

'She used to be,' said Narcissa in a carrying tone of voice, 'but her taste has changed. I find she now looks for obvious patterns instead of noticing the more subtle designs, which have always been the hallmark of true taste and power.'

'Indeed,' said Severus. He offered his arm courteously to Narcissa before making his way to the door.

Madam Genevieve's customers had, of course, all heard this exchange, and a few even changed their minds about their selections and started to move towards the door. Madam Genevieve was greatly agitated and approached the departing pair.

However, Severus pretended to not notice. Instead, he inquired in an equally carrying tone, 'When are you heading off to Paris for your own shopping expedition?'

Madam Genevieve, leaving all dignity aside, ran out after them and begged them to come back. She stated, 'I realise I am a foolish woman, but my fashion sense has remained unaltered.'

Severus bowed. 'Thank you, Madam, for your attention, but I have always been satisfied with Madam Malkin's. I do not think it is right for a gentleman to snub a good working relationship merely with the change of ignorant public opinion.'

With one final bow, Severus escorted Narcissa further down the street. Narcissa was delighted with Severus and said, 'Oh, Severus, you handled her even better than Lucius could have done. You know what Lucius is like; he always gets annoyed and loses his temper at the minions.'

Severus smirked and patted Narcissa's hand, which lay on his arm.

They were just approaching the entrance to Diagon Alley when they spotted Hermione Granger coming out of the Silver Parchment, a rare bookshop. Narcissa and Severus both nodded in greeting to the tentative smile Hermione bestowed upon them in acknowledgement.

Passersby watched avidly as Hermione crossed the street to speak with Narcissa Malfoy and the supposed spy Severus Snape. Hermione did her best to ignore her audience, much as she had done throughout the time she had spent browsing for books and purchasing necessities. Smiling politely, she said, 'Hello, Professor. Mrs. Malfoy.' Then, turning to look directly at Severus, she said, 'It is lovely it is to see you well enough to visit London, sir.'

Severus nodded in response.

His lack of sneer or open hostility seemed to release the flood-gates, and Hermione immediately rushed into an apology. 'I'm so sorry, sir, for doing nothing to help. I know it was stupid of me to not cast a diagnostic spell when I saw you bleeding on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.' Then, more softly, she went on, 'I can't believe I didn't see the truth. Everyone says I'm so clever, but I missed your deception completely. I always trusted you, and I still didn't see beyond the ruse and consider there might have been a deeper meaning behind your behaviour.'

Severus was unsure of how to proceed. He had been informed of Hermione's efforts to return for what she had thought was his body by Lucius. To learn she had trusted him, and to hear her berate herself, left him feeling uncomfortable and mildly confused.

Narcissa realised this was a good opportunity to make nice with the Gryffindor Princess and suggested, 'This is not a conversation for the pavement. Perhaps, Miss Granger, you would like to accompany us for a spot of tea at Serendipity?'

Hermione was, in turn, made uncomfortable and did not respond.

Narcissa realised she was about to lose her prey. Reaching out, she took hold of Hermione's arm and moved forward explaining conversationally, 'I suppose you've never heard of Serendipity?'

At Hermione's still slightly surprised shake of the head, Narcissa explained. 'You'll find it adorable; it is the loveliest of clubs. Very exclusive, of course, but is the stomping ground of the rich and powerful. Their cakes and pastries are divine. Everyone who is anyone is a member. The Malfoys have been members for over two hundred years.'

Severus chuckled darkly. 'By exclusive, Cissy, you mean only the right people are allowed to even apply for membership. I don't think they've ever had a Muggle-born patron since its inception.'

Narcissa laughed and patted Hermione's hand. 'Don't worry, my dear, we purebloods don't bite.'

Severus smirked wickedly. 'No, they only bite if you ask very politely.'

'Oh, shame on you, Severus,' said Narcissa with a surprisingly girlish giggle.

Hermione felt as if she was in another universe. She was listening to Mrs. Malfoy and Professor Snape banter, and she was being invited to *tedWell*, she thought, *it was obvious they were old friends*. Hermione was really unsure how to respond. Upon entering the club, however, she was so overwhelmed at looking at all of the wondrous ornaments and decorations, the statues of ancient Greek and Egyptian gods and goddesses, she forgot her discomfort as her curiosity was aroused.

What then occurred was a rather surreal afternoon for Hermione. She watched as Mrs. Malfoy was led by an elegant house-elf draped in a silk cushion cover to what was apparently Narcissa's favourite corner. A pretty wood nymph sang as tea and an array of exotic cakes and pastries were served. Over tea, Narcissa said, 'Now since we have both worked together,' she inclined her head pleasantly at Severus, 'I must insist you call me Cissy.'

Hermione began to feel extremely uncomfortable again. Not too long ago, she was being tortured in the Malfoys' drawing-room, and now Mrs. Malfoy was asking her to refer to her by what was clearly a pet name. *Has the whole world gone mad?* thought Hermione. *The Weasleys think I'm sleeping with Harry, Harry is clinging to me like I'm his long-lost mother, and now this.* However, remembering her manners, Hermione tried to appear collected and said, 'Of course, and you must call me Hermione. I'm sorry, but I find the shortening of my name extremely annoying.'

Narcissa tittered. Leaning closer to Hermione, she confided, 'That's perfectly understandable. My Lucius is the same.' Then, after taking a sip of her tea, she said, 'We are all adults here. Let us finally bury the past since the Dark Lord is dead. This is the dawn of a new era, so let us embrace it.'

Hermione nodded. 'Of course, Mrs. Malfoy, I mean, Cissy.'

'Excellent,' said Narcissa and patted Hermione's hand once more.

Hermione was a smart girl from a solid upper-middle class family, but she was definitely out of her element in such elegant surroundings. However, Cissy worked hard to make her feel comfortable, and Professor Snape, who had been generally quiet, was very polite.

As other patrons stared and called attention to the odd trio, and more importantly the presence of Potter's Muggleborn in the premises, Hermione started to colour up in embarrassment.

Coming immediately to the rescue, Severus said, 'Don't let the old imbeciles upset you. They are just curious. No one will have the audacity to question Cissy on her choice of guests. Besides, you're a heroine now; you must get used to this kind of attention.'

Then, realising the need to engage Hermione's attention away from the whispers, Severus brought up a different topic. 'Miss Granger, your speech at the press-conference was very well thought out. Have you been researching the reasons behind the pureblood stance to take up wands in support of Voldemort?'

'No,' admitted Hermione. 'I just said it because I felt it made the most sense. Normal people don't hanker for an opportunity to commit murder and other atrocities.'

'Quite so,' said Narcissa. 'The truth of the matter is, over the last hundred years, many, many old traditions have been forsaken. The older families are just afraid the old ways will vanish. Families like the Weasleys are called Blood Traitors for taking on new ways and new ideas while refusing to preserve the old.'

Severus nodded. 'You know, of course, I am a half-blood, but it has never mattered. I still grew up as a part of pureblood society. Slytherin is especially keen to teach the older ways to its students. This is why many Slytherins are so formal, why they mock the other houses for their lack of manners, deportment and understanding of the responsibilities and duties of a witch or wizard.'

Hermione was fascinated. She had always loved to hear Professor Snape lecture in class, and now she listened in captivated silence to his velvet-like voice explaining Wizarding society.

Severus continued, 'There is an extremely long history of strife between purebloods and Muggle-borns. It begins before the creation of institutions like Hogwarts. It stems from the horrors and destruction caused by untrained Muggle-borns who used their magic to terrorise and dominate, to gain power and control over Muggle clans and royal houses, forcing purebloods who had long been connected to such institutions to suspect and hate all witches and wizards of Muggle birth.'

Hermione could only nod as she listened attentively. She had read some of this history, but hearing it explained from what was obviously a pureblood perspective was fascinating.

'Think, Miss Granger, how purebloods who, in the ancient past, were the most powerful in society reacted to usurpers. The purebloods were, as you would imagine, desperate to weed out all forms of revolt. Then, the Founders created Hogwarts, and Godric Gryffindor insisted on admitting Muggle-borns. In theory, Salazar Slytherin did not oppose this idea, he was after all an educator too, but he did insist on the Muggle-borns swearing allegiance to the pureblood creed in return for education. Godric refused to see reason and said true allegiance could not be forcibly taken. This was the real reason for the split and why Salazar left in the end. He saw how the students he had trained went out and caused havoc because they had no allegiance to the magical world, an allegiance all purebloods had because of familial ties built upon a shared understanding of duty, honour, loyalty and fidelity.'

Hermione was speechless. When she could finally find her voice, she asked, 'Why are we not taught any of this? Why have I not read any of this at Hogwarts?'

'Really, Miss Granger,' said Severus snidely. 'The history books are written by the victors, and Godric won. He removed his greatest opponent and ensured only his version of events was written down. Of course, the Slytherins have their own records, but you were taught by do-gooders like Dumbledore to disregard anything presented from an alternative source. You were told all Slytherins were dark, evil and prejudiced, so you didn't bother accepting any account made by them, saying their version was biased and tainted. Did I not insist on the importance of not parroting out information? Did I not implore you to think, to reason, to give me something other than what was found in the text books?'

Hermione nodded slowly and grudgingly. It was true; Professor Snape had often called her out on her ability to quote passages directly from prescribed texts. Back then, she had not realised the reason for him insisting she think. She had thought he was finding fault with her, insulting her intelligence and belittling her for being a Gryffindor. How foolish Hermione now felt. She realised her bias. Hindsight was not pleasant, but she promised herself to learn to think for herself. She would strive to use her intelligence to interrogate ideas and sources and learn to examine commonly held beliefs more objectively. If texts were revealed to originate from a Slytherin source, she had not read their version of history. Even as she had devoured the books in the Black library in Grimmauld Place, she had ignored the books on Slytherin lore and Slytherin history, not because she wasn't curious, but because she had felt it a waste of her time.

Severus was now in full professor mode and continued to lecture. 'The witch-burnings of the so-called Dark Ages were a Muggle-born instigation. Christianity was on the rise in Europe, and many Muggle-borns thought their magic was a gift of God. The purebloods continued to follow the old traditions. They saw in Christ a mere imitation of older deities, and as witches and wizards follow no common pantheon or deity, the Muggle-borns branded them the children of the Devil. You must have learned of how pureblood witches and wizards mostly escaped, but what is not commonly known is the number of untrained Muggle-borns, Squibs and half-blood children who perished. It was a time of great pain in the magical community. Finally, the purebloods gathered together and ensured a treaty was signed. The older magical families, the purebloods, promised in return for the cessation of hostilities, they would stop taking an active role in the Muggle world.'

Severus stopped. Narcissa handed him another cup of tea, which he gladly drank. He had said far more than he had intended to. As he pondered his sudden verbosity, Narcissa took up the tale. 'Miss Granger, Hermione, the purebloods today mourn the loss of the old values, traditions, celebrations. In the past, children with magical ability, no matter their heritage, used to be welcomed, named and presented to the magical community before their first year was through. It was an important rite of passage, an official introduction to the magical world if you will. This custom is no longer in operation because purebloods no longer have their own counties and large estates. Being presented as an infant is an important rite for both the child as well as the community. It allows both parties to navigate the position the new addition will occupy. If a magical child is born to Muggles, they are no longer the responsibility or wards of the pureblood Barons. Instead, they fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry, which does nothing. There is no way of teaching children the fundamentals of magical behaviour until they enter Hogwarts at eleven, which purebloods feel is far too late. We start teaching our children their place in society, their duties and responsibilities at a much younger age.'

She paused and looked off into the distance. After a moment, she seemed to pull her thoughts back to the present and smiled at Hermione who was still listening very attentively.

'When I was a little girl,' said Narcissa, 'we used to have the most amazing festivals and celebrations in all the best family homes. People would gather, and there would be feasts and dancing. In midsummer, there used to be rites for fertility. It was on such an occasion when I was but seventeen where Lucius proposed. All these festivals have totally been removed from the Hogwarts curriculum.' Narcissa grew more playful. 'Why, I remember Bella approaching a fifteen-year-old Severus to take his virginity on the occasion of a fertility rite. Severus was so red; I thought he was going to burst in horror at being approached by an older woman.' Narcissa laughed wickedly.

Severus, on the other hand, was not amused. 'Really, Cissy,' he said. 'Must you tell my student salacious stories about me?'

'Oh, Severus,' Narcissa replied with a smile. 'Hermione is an adult, and I'm sure she does not imagine you as a sexless being.'

Up to this point, Hermione had indeed not thought of Professor Snape in connection to his sexuality. She had learned, of course, of his love for Lily Evans, but Mrs. Malfoy's, no Cissy's, teasing made her acknowledge Professor Snape as a man.

Narcissa continued to speak as if coming to a realisation, 'You know, I think your turning down Bella's offer was one of the reasons why Bella never really trusted you. She couldn't understand a man who refused free, no-strings attached sex.'

'Quite,' said Severus stiffly.

'I'm sorry, old friend,' said Narcissa, 'I know how private a person you are.'

Hermione watched the two with wide eyes. Wanting to break the tension, which had suddenly descended on the table, she said earnestly, 'Perhaps if books are written for a newer, younger audience, more of this will be widely known.'

Narcissa smiled and patted Hermione's hand gently. 'My dear girl, there are plenty of books out there.'

Severus who was feeling quite put out said rather snidely, 'If you, Miss Granger, had seen such books in the past, you would have assumed they were filled with Dark magic or bigotry and would have passed them by.'

Hermione was ashamed. She blushed at her arrogance and was forced to agree.

## Chapter Eleven: The Meeting of the Order of the

# Phoenix

Chapter 11 of 40

GINNY, RON AND MOLLY BEHAVE BADLY. INFORMATION IS EXCHANGED, AND SEVERUS IS FORCED TO DEFEND HERMIONE'S HONOUR IN HIS OWN UNIQUE WAY.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.

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Having spent all of her time following her surreal afternoon in Wizarding London ensconced in Grimmauld Place, Hermione had been especially pleased when Kingsley had flooded in on Tuesday evening to arrange the Order of the Phoenix's meeting for Thursday. Hermione thought it would be good for Harry to see people. She was starting to worry that the depression he had slipped into was becoming dangerous. Hermione had tried on countless occasions to encourage Harry to go play Quidditch at the Burrow or visit Hogwarts, but Harry would always refuse, saying he was extremely tired. It was as though the energy he had expended during and immediately after the battle had drained him completely. He hardly spoke to anyone but her and clung to her as if he would perish without her. This had not pleased Ginny and Ron, who found the suddenly altered Harry difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend.

That night, in a quiet consultation with a worried Minerva and Kingsley, Hermione had confided her fears concerning Harry, suggesting that he was perhaps suffering from the loss of Voldemort's soul fragment, which had been lodged within his psyche for so long. Minerva promised to speak to Severus about it privately. After all, he was the Order's premier expert on the Dark Arts.

There was another, more private and poignant reason for Hermione's pleasure at the thought of a gathering on that warm summer evening. Thursday, the fourteenth, was her mother's forty-fifth birthday. Hermione missed her parents greatly, and she didn't want to be alone to dwell on their separation. For although she had spent so many months apart from them while she had been a student at Hogwarts, their weekly correspondence had kept her feeling connected to her parents. This past year, knowing that they were not even aware of her existence, had been incredibly hard to bear.

The first people to arrive were, unsurprisingly, Kingsley and Minerva, who were the current acting heads of the Order. They were soon followed by Severus Snape, who, upon entering the large kitchen, nodded a greeting at the trio sitting 'round the table before taking his customary place near the back door facing the room and the only other entrance. After a year on the run, Hermione understood his need to always be aware of the people surrounding him, as well as the need to have a ready escape route. Kingsley immediately informed Severus of Hermione's concerns about Harry, and as she watched, she saw Severus' face change.

Quietly, he said, "Potter has been touched by the Dark. Now that the euphoria of victory has passed, he may be struggling with the influx of Dark magic. He will need to be trained in handling his changing energy. His aura has probably undergone a transformation too, and if he has been using magic," Severus turned to look at Hermione, "the patterns and the residue of his spell casting would have darkened, deepened and matured. He is probably feeling very sluggish and disturbed. Has he been having nightmares?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "When I ask him what's wrong, he never tells me; he just shrugs it off, but when he nods off without casting a Silencing Charm, I hear him calling out and mumbling incoherently." Then, after a slight pause in which Minerva, Kingsley and Severus shared concerned glances, Hermione confided worriedly, "My magic has changed as well. I've always had a bright blue flame for my blue-bell fire, but when I tried it yesterday, it was closer to a navy blue. It was still bright, but much, much darker and more intense."

Severus nodded. "Kingsley, I doubt Potter will take direction from me, but you he may pay attention to. He must be trained, and Miss Granger as well, if she is feeling any sort of ill effects."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I'm not really feeling too bad. I've got aches and pains, a lot of stiffness and soreness, but that has more to do with the Cruciatus curse that Bellatrix used on me. Mentally though, I feel fairly alright. I miss my parents and feel dreadful about Fred and the others, but otherwise, I guess I'm doing fairly well, considering all that has happened. I don't think killing the bit of soul in the Horcrux affected me too much. I wasn't alone when I did it, and I was focused on the battle immediately afterwards."

She paused again and hugged herself tightly. "I must confess that I feel incredibly alone all the time. I long for company, but find physical contact extremely trying, especially the more intimate kind. The last time Ron came to visit, he tried to kiss me, and I felt like I wanted to throw up. He didn't find it very amusing." She blushed furiously, and then she looked pointedly at Kingsley. "Ron thought it had something to do with you; he was extremely upset over the comments made by the media following our press conference."

Kingsley merely shrugged. There was nothing to say, for he had already warned Hermione of the possible outcomes of their very public performance.

"Hmm..." said Severus thoughtfully. "Well, keep an eye on the alterations and your reactions, and if it worsens in any way, do get help. The changing and maturing of magic happens to everyone gradually, but you have all been exposed to Dark magic extremely rapidly. It can have unforeseen repercussions. As for your reactions to Mr. Weasley, it could merely be your magic rejecting his. Do you feel pressured in any way to respond to his affections?"

At Hermione's deepening blush, Severus scoffed. "Really, Miss Granger, I'm only asking because if your magic feels that he is trying to take advantage of you, it will react to remove you from such a situation. Have you felt any adverse reaction with any other person?"

"No," said Hermione. "Some people help me feel better. Being around Professor McGonagall is really calming and Kingsley makes me feel all warm inside. With Harry, I feel almost maternal. I feel differently with almost everyone I meet. Somehow, being with Cissy and yourself made me feel almost secure, which I found really strange at first, given the fact that I was tortured at Malfoy Manor. I just put it down to your presence. You've always looked after us and protected us, and I thought it was just me realising that on a subconscious level."

Severus considered Hermione thoughtfully. However, he could not find any subterfuge in her honest gaze and was forced to concede that the girl was telling the truth. "Narcissa means you no harm. She might use the fact that you are now supposedly friends to her social advantage, but her agenda is not in any other way malicious. As for me, I owe you my life. I would no more harm you than I would myself. All I can advise at this point is to listen to your magic, and if you find that the Dark is encroaching upon you in any shape or form, speak to one of us immediately. The longer you delay in learning to cope with the Darkness within you, the longer you allow the Dark Arts to worm its way into your psyche. The Dark Arts feed on our personal weaknesses. A vain woman will go to extremes to ensure her beauty is always maintained; a power-hungry person becomes, as in the case of the Dark Lord, a megalomaniac."

Hermione nodded in agreement. She was not a fool and would not take unnecessary chances. She had come to realise, to her immense disgust, her folly in not trusting Professor Snape, and she had promised herself to take his lessons to heart.

Unbeknown to Hermione, Minerva and Severus exchanged significant glances. They both wondered what the Dark had done to Ronald Weasley for Miss Granger to react so very strongly to his physical presence. The situation would bear close scrutiny indeed. Severus quickly glanced at Kingsley; he too looked thoughtful. All three knew that

a hitherto unexpected development in unanticipated proportions had occurred.

As the conversation around the table drifted on to Ministry matters, Hermione excused herself to fetch Harry, who was, yet again, asleep upstairs.

Soon after Harry joined them, the Weasleys and other Order members arrived. The kitchen was nearly bursting at its seams, as all the living members of the Order had turned up for this very important meeting. There was Aberforth Dumbledore, who looked closely at Hermione and Harry before taking a seat not far from Severus'; Arabella Figg, who on arrival wept while hugging Harry; Mundungus Fletcher, who looked ill at ease being back in Sirius' house; and the kindly Dedalus Diggle, who bowed and shook Harry's hand repeatedly before trying to do the same to Severus. Severus sighed heavily, but submitted to the adoration. Elphias Doge, Andromeda Black and Hagrid had also attended the gathering. Hagrid's presence really did fill the Black kitchen, and he was forced to sit outside in the hallway while the others did their best to fit around the magically extended table.

Kreacher was in his element. He served everyone tea and pumpkin juice and kept bringing out platter after platter of chicken and mayonnaise sandwiches, sausage rolls, scrumptious chocolate cake that Harry particularly liked, ginger biscuits and dainty bite sized pieces of fruit and ham arranged on cocktail sticks.

Once everyone was comfortably supplied with food and drink, Kingsley began the proceedings. He stood up and asked Minerva if she would be good enough to make detailed notes of all that was said. Once that was established, he started his speech by thanking the Order for their hard work in helping bring down Voldemort. He then thanked Harry and Hermione for acting quickly to ensure that a general pardon was granted for all war crimes committed by Order members. Kingsley's words were met with heartfelt applause, which caused Harry to squirm and Hermione to blush furiously.

Ron and Ginny, however, did not join in the general round of acknowledgement. In fact, while Kingsley spoke of the new challenges that awaited the Order and the fate of the Death Eaters, Ginny, Molly and Ron did nothing other than glare furiously at Hermione, who had unfortunately taken a seat between Kingsley and Harry.

Severus noted this from his corner, and his lip curled in derision at the three Weasleys' childish pique of jealousy.

Once Kingsley had finished speaking, he turned the floor over to Severus, who proceeded to not only explain Dumbledore's crafty plan, but also the former Headmaster's extreme ill-health during the last year of his life. Severus spoke of Dumbledore's advancing curse-damaged condition and his own desperate attempts to hold off the effects for as long as possible. Finally, Severus related the events from his point of view of that fateful night on the Astronomy Tower, as well as his terrible year spent with the Death Eaters. Severus had an enthralled audience. As an extremely effective orator, Severus held his listeners captivated with his dramatic and horrifying tale. Although Severus was debriefing, the nature of his account brought forth gasps, as well as quickly hushed giggles and shared glances as dots were joined and connections made. When his tale was done, Severus gave a mocking bow to his audience and retook his seat.

Next, Harry was asked to speak of his year on the run. Harry, who was not really in the right frame of mind to narrate such a lengthy account, turned to Hermione immediately and asked, "Hermione, will you tell them what happened, please? You know and understand what was going on better than anyone else, and you're better at public speaking too."

Hermione nodded. She did, indeed, know what had happened. The last week spent almost entirely ensconced at Grimmauld Place had allowed the pair the opportunity to talk about everything Harry had witnessed both in the Penseive and when he had used the Deathly Hallows, as well as his strange encounter with Dumbledore at Kings' Cross Station.

Looking around and meeting the fiercely interested gaze of Severus, Hermione began to speak. Unconsciously, she tried to match his mastery of narration. She began with explaining Dumbledore's preparation of Harry, of how the Headmaster had taught Harry about the Horcruxes and how Hermione had surprisingly been able, on their last day at Hogwarts, to call the books through the open window, as if they had been prepared and left waiting for such a summons. Then, she narrated their summer of preparation, of sending her parents to Australia with modified memories and finally their lonely, desperate and, at times, almost hopeless year on the run. There was much shock when Hermione's quiet voice narrated how truly wretched she and Harry had felt when Ron had left them and how he had eventually returned. She described how Severus had given them the sword of Gryffindor and how they had managed to kill the Horcruxes one by one until Harry was able to take on Voldemort. She spoke in detail of their search to understand the meaning of the Deathly Hallows, of their visit to the Lovegood home, and their plan to break the taboo so they could enter Malfoy Manor. Her voice broke, and she had to take a moment to pull herself together before she narrated her torture at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange, of Dobby's bravery and their escape.

The almost unbelievable occurrences of the night of the Battle of Hogwarts brought tears to many an eye, and Hagrid sobbed and said, "Yer parents would be so proud, so proud," before being quickly shushed by Mrs. Figg so Hermione could go on with the debriefing.

At last, Hermione spoke of how she had gone back for Professor Snape's body, how the Malfoys had discovered his survival and had taken him away and how she, Luna and Harry had decided that it was the least they could do to ensure that Professor Snape's name was cleared.

When Hermione finished her long narration, she looked into Severus' glittering eyes once more. When their eyes met, he gave her a small nod of his head in acknowledgement of her deeds and her aptitude in relating the events of the last year. Tremendously pleased, Hermione smiled brightly at him.

Ginny, who had been listening to Hermione speak, was almost wild with jealousy. The thought of Hermione all alone with her precious Harry was too much for the youngest Weasley to bear. Ginny kept thinking that it was she who deserved the limelight, she who deserved to be lauded as the brains behind Harry's success. In Ginny's jealous eyes, Hermione looked like a bushy-headed irritant that was using her intellect to usurp a position on Harry's side that did not belong to her. Ginny did not realise that Hermione had stood by Harry when no one else would, that she had defended him and sacrificed her family for him.

As Hermione's narrative ended and the others began discussing all the information that had been shared, Ginny's eyes narrowed with barely contained rage. Turning pointedly to her mother, Ginny said in a carrying tone of voice, "No respectable girl would ever admit to living in a tent with a boy for so long. You would think she would have the decency to gloss over the time Ron was away."

Molly, who was equally furious at the prominent position given to Hermione, said, "It is her culture, Ginny dear; Muggles are famous for their loose morality. One wonders how many men Hermione has slept with. Besides, admitting to sharing a tent with two boys for almost a year isn't really better, Ginny dear; in fact, it sounds much worse. No man from a decent family will touch her now."

Hermione, who had been seated across the table from Molly, could not fail to hear what was said. Mother and daughter had deliberately spoken in voices loud enough for most of those paying attention to hear their discussion quite clearly.

Severus had heard and seen the malicious intent behind the women's conversation and watched Hermione's struggle to contain her tears.

Molly and Ginny waited for Hermione to respond. They wanted an opportunity to really vent their anger at the person they thought had infringed on Ginny's and Ron's rightful positions.

Hermione was so hurt that she was unable to respond. Desperately, she looked pointedly at Ron, who she hoped would come to her rescue.

Instead, Ron said bitterly, "The Horcrux in the locket showed me a vision of Harry and Hermione entwined, mocking me for being foolish and bothering to return when I was obviously nothing but an unwanted third in the perfect little world of so-called best friends."

Next, Hermione turned her needy eyes towards Harry. Harry, however, had been pulled aside by Kingsley, who was speaking to him earnestly about Auror training and having Harry come in to the Ministry to start working on strengthening and controlling his maturing magic. Alone and friendless before the vindictive and malicious persecution of the three Weasleys, Hermione looked completely defeated.

Something in Severus arose at this deplorable treatment of a true heroine. He understood on a conscious level that the three Weasleys' behaviour was a result of their exposure to the Dark, which leached onto all insecurities, but to take out their lack of self-confidence on Miss Granger, who had proved her worth by her numerous deeds,

was unbearable for him. Miss Granger's behaviour towards him had been exemplary, and her willingness to accept the friendship of Narcissa at face value, given their difficult past, was something that he found almost unimaginable. She had faced her tormentors willingly to ask for their help in retrieving his supposedly dead body. This was not a woman to be cut down by the jealous remarks of sanctimonious and insecure individuals.

Looking directly at Molly, Severus said, "For a woman who is so quick to speak of the lack of morality in a brilliant young lady, Molly, I must ask you to first consider that I have caught both your son and daughter in less than savoury positions in various nooks and alcoves at Hogwarts. This is not to mention your older offspring, who are now out of Hogwarts."

At Ginny's gasp, Severus turned his stern gaze towards her. "I would advise you, since you seem so concerned about youthful promiscuity, to question Miss Weasley about the number of lovers she has already taken. Miss Granger may have broken countless rules and lost innumerable house points, but I never found her rutting in some deserted corridor at the dead of night."

Next, turning his eyes to rest upon Ron, he said, "Mr. Weasley, have I not found you in just as many trysts with hapless dimwits lured into your sloppy embrace? Really, boy, if you must cast stones on a lady's virtue, do make sure your audience has not caught you out on the very same offence on more than one occasion."

Molly was incensed. She had not expected Severus to come to Hermione's defence. "Really, Severus," said Molly, "my children would never be promiscuous. I'm sure you are mistaken."

"Mistaken," said Severus with a smirk. "I could start naming names and the number of points I took off at each offence, if you feel that would be helpful. There are records of all points lost in the staff-room at Hogwarts, and Minerva will happily assert that I speak the truth. She always did make it her self-appointed task to double check every point I deducted from her precious little Gryffindors, especially when they were removed in significant quantities."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twelve: Touched by the Dark

Chapter 12 of 40

The Weasleys learn about the change to their magic.

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Severus was not the only person who had heard the appalling way in which Ginny, Ron and Molly had turned on Hermione. Minerva McGonagall, who had mentioned the Weasleys' behaviour towards Hermione to Severus earlier, now watched as the trio headed toward the dark, murky waters of complete irrationality. Having listened to Severus explain to Hermione the true dangers of being submersed in the Dark Arts, Minerva strongly suspected that the three Weasleys were experiencing something along similar lines. She wondered if the Dark picked up on hidden grievances and negative attitudes and multiplied them until they were completely illogical. It would go a long way in explaining Molly's almost palpable dislike and fervent assumption that Hermione was a promiscuous girl, just as it would explain Miss Weasley's jealousy of Hermione's close friendship with Harry. Young Mr. Weasley's bout of jealousy following the Krum debacle was so well discussed in the staff room that Minerva did not have to look far to realise the reasons behind the attitude he was exhibiting.

*Well, thought Minerva, we've just got through one situation, and we're already facing another. I wonder how many of those who fought in the Battle will be experiencing similar changes to their magic?*

Arthur had listened in pained silence to his wife and children's attack on Hermione as well. He had always liked the girl immensely, and he had admired both her patience in dealing with his many questions on Muggle artefacts and her level-headedness in dealing with his younger children and their boisterousness. Although Arthur had not been brave enough to take on his wife in public, he now realised that he would have to take charge of his family. They were turning into something he did not recognise. As his eyes rested on the pursed lips and thoughtful frown on Minerva's face, he came to understand that Molly, Ron and Ginny's reactions had been observed and had become a cause for concern for more than one person.

After the meeting, Bill, Fleur and a few others drifted off toward the library in small clusters while others like Aberforth and 'Dung departed, claiming the need for a bracing drink of Firewhisky. However, as Arthur attempted to leave, he was stopped by Minerva. "Arthur, could I have a word with you and your family please?"

Arthur did not look surprised. Instead, he nodded and replied, "Of course, Minerva."

"Excellent," said Minerva, before turning to Kingsley. "Kingsley, I think we need to sit the Weasleys down and have a little chat." She then looked at Severus, "Please, Severus, would you be as kind as to stay too?"

Severus was usually one of the earliest to depart from meetings, despising the thought of socialising. On this occasion, however, he had stood quietly in a corner, observing the action. He, too, had suspected that Minerva would call for a special, private meeting.

As Minerva ushered out everyone but the Weasleys from the kitchen and recalled Bill and Fleur to join the discussion, Kingsley and Severus took their seats once more.

Kingsley looked at the family before him and said, "I am now addressing you as the Head of the Order. Due to your actions during the Battle of Hogwarts, you have all been tainted by the Dark. We don't know how all of you will be affected yet. Sometimes it is obvious; sometimes it takes a while for the symptoms to manifest. This is a warning so that you all know to watch out for the signs in each other. Now, since Severus is our resident expert on the Dark Arts, I shall let him explain what the three of us see before us."

Severus glared forcefully at the waiting Weasleys. Then, in a quiet, almost hypnotic tone, he said, "The Dark Arts affect everyone differently, feeding on insecurities,

hidden grievances and prejudices. After listening to Molly, Miss Weasley and the youngest Mr. Weasley this evening, I can best pin-point the changes I see in them. Let me assure you that you have all been touched deeply by the Dark since you all had sinister intent behind your recent spell casting."

There were shocked and angry murmurs, and Molly shook her head as if to deny that she was touched by the Dark.

Severus prevented the Weasleys from speaking by carrying on. "Molly, you used an Unforgiveable Curse to kill Bellatrix Lestrange. You, who have never murdered before, now have blood on your hands, and as you had never really been prepared for the taking of a life, the Dark has found in you an easy home. Your irrational feelings of resentment towards Miss Granger and your need and desire for fame are bound to this. These have been your hidden weaknesses, and they are now coming to light."

Molly gasped. "Rubbish," she said vehemently.

Arthur laid an arm on his wife to calm her and nodded to Severus to continue.

Severus sighed before going on with his lecture. "Miss Weasley, you fought Bellatrix and other Death Eaters; the intent behind your magic was to harm, to hurt and to destroy. You housed a part of Voldemort's soul at the tender age of eleven. Despite your efforts to overcome that obstacle, this recent reintroduction to the Dark Arts has coloured your aura, and the Dark is now feeding on your darker emotions such as your jealousy and your desire for the spotlight. These emotions have been strengthened by the Dark. They are no longer simple goals or aspirations; they are now ruthless pursuits."

It was now Ginny's turn to glare at Snape. "You're so wrong," she said. "I'm not jealous. Why on earth would I be jealous of that ugly cow?"

"Of course," said Severus with a smirk. "That remark is, obviously, completely devoid of all jealousy and irrationality."

Then, he glared at the ginger-haired menace with absolute loathing. "The same is true for you, Weasley. You wore a part of the Dark Lord's soul for the better part of a year. Later, you battled and destroyed that very soul fragment, a fragment that was so tainted that it learned of your strengths and weaknesses and used them against you to try to influence your decisions. This is very Dark Magic. Your act of murder, of soul destruction, has tapped into your inner Darkness. I can see clearly that you are no longer content to be a member of the golden trio; you want to be recognised as a hero with all the trappings that entails."

Ron shook his head and glared angrily at Snape. How he hated the git.

Severus ignored the anger and hatred radiating off his audience. Instead, he continued, "The Dark feeds on negative emotions, and the stronger they are, the more the Darkness will latch on to them. I have learned to control my Darkness, feeding it in manageable doses using anger, bitterness and sarcasm to control the beast that dwells within me. Aurors do the same; Moody for many years used methods almost as Dark as those of the Death Eaters to feed his hunger and finally succumbed into irrational suspicion and vigilantism."

An angry, hostile silence descended at the end of Severus' lengthy explanation.

Then, Molly broke the silence with a furious tirade. "Been touched by the Dark have I? Just because my children and I are able to call a spade a spade, we've been touched by the Dark. What nonsense. Hermione Granger is a shameless trollop. She went off for a year to camp out in Merlin knows where with two teenage boys, and you sit there and tell me I'm touched by the bloody Dark because I called her out on her shameless behaviour."

Arthur shook his head sadly. Severus' explanation had helped him understand the altered behaviour of his family. George was no longer filled with mirth and laughter; instead, he sat quietly, as if the loss of Fred had taken all the joy from his existence. Percy worked; his whole being seemed to focus on doing his duty to the Ministry. Arthur did not fault Severus' perceptive take on Molly, Ginny and Ron, for he agreed with Severus' harsh but just pronouncement.

Placing a gentling arm on Molly, Arthur said, "Molly, dear, please be reasonable. If Severus has noticed these things and if Kingsley and Minerva agree, then we must accept that we have all been changed. I think Bill and I have handled it the best because our training and experience has stood us in good stead. However, the rest of you have no experience in the Dark; your magic is unable to cope."

Then, he looked at Severus, Kingsley and Minerva. "I agree. Percy is buried in his work; George is in a deeply entrenched depression. I myself found it very hard to cope after I was bitten by Nagini all those years ago, but I worked through it with Remus and was able to better control my temper and irritation. Tell us what to do. Is there some kind of counselling?"

Minerva shook her head sadly. "There is no real counselling, although we are all here to talk to you, to guide you, if need be. However, we can only offer you training in learning to control your magic. You must learn to feel the irrationality rising within you so that you can then curtail it or redirect it in some other shape or form. Ultimately, there is only forewarning and learning to control one's Darker, baser impulses. Once you are touched by the Dark, there is no way back. You will just have to learn to live with it."

Molly continued to shake her head. "I don't believe you," she said shrilly. "You're all delusional. There's nothing wrong with any of us; if anyone has been touched by the Dark, it is all of you. Pointing fingers and trying to destroy our family honour. We are not your bloody Malfoys. They are the ones with Darkness pouring out of them; go preach to them and leave my family, my children, alone."

Molly stood up and turned to glare menacingly at Arthur. "You, as always, have to believe what they tell you. How could you agree that we've been infested with Darkness? I'm ashamed of you, Arthur."

Arthur did not respond. He did not want to get into a disagreement with his wife in the presence of an audience. Instead, he merely said mildly, "Perhaps it is time for us all to go home."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirteen: The Victory Ball

*Chapter 13 of 40*

Severus flirts and dances while the Malfoys plot.

(ii) Thank you once again for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.

(iii) A big hug of gratitude to my smashingly lovely beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Following the Order meeting, Ron had tried very hard to spend time with Hermione. The Greasy Git's pronouncement that he and his family were touched by the Dark had hit a sore note indeed. Ron wanted to prove that he was not jealous of Harry and Hermione's moment of fame.

Ron felt that since Hermione had kissed him in the heat of the final battle, he was now entitled to certain benefits. He had read and heard enough about Muggle porn to feel that Hermione as a Muggle-born would be frisky and therefore quite willing to sleep with him. Before, they had been on the search for Horcruxes, and there was a crazed Dark Lord on their trail, but now, things were good. *Surely*, thought Ron, *Hermione will soon be in my bed*.

Ron, Ginny and Molly were looking forward to the Victory Ball with almost irrational anticipation. Ginny had bought herself a daring dress in gold satin that made her look incredibly sexy. She wanted to be the one photographed on Harry's arm. She wanted to be the belle of the ball.

Ron had made an extra special effort with his appearance, as well. His navy blue robes were very dashing, and he felt that tonight, with the attention of the world's media upon them, Hermione would not be able to push him aside. He was determined that tonight was the night that Hermione would stop acting like a frigid ice queen and sleep with him.

The Weasleys had all arrived at Grimmauld Place with the intention of leaving for the ball with Harry and Hermione. Molly and Ginny had decided that it would be most fitting if they arrived at the Ministry Ballroom en masse. Harry had been pleased when he had heard of their company, for he had been dreading having to appear in public and deal with the media attention alone.

Hermione was not particularly looking forward to the ball, but she realised that it would do Harry a lot of good to get out and about. She was, however, dreading Ron and his now un-wanted attentions.

As they were about to Floo to the Ministry, Ron slid his arm around her waist and whispered in what he thought was a seductive tone. "You look very pretty 'Mione; I can't wait to get you out of your dress."

Hermione was both embarrassed and furious. She knew that Molly had heard her son's remark. Realising that not causing a scene was impossible, she pulled herself out of his grip and said, "Ronald, you're a total cad and an idiot. You and I are through. You've called me a tart and a scarlet woman in front of almost everyone of the Order, and if you now think that I am going to sleep with you or be your girlfriend, you've got another thing coming."

Hermione's attack took almost everyone aback.

Harry was extremely uncomfortable because he did not know what Hermione was speaking of.

Ginny stared furiously at Hermione and whispered, "Frigid bitch. My brother can do so much better than you."

Arthur Weasley was the most embarrassed. Trying desperately for a jovial tone of voice, he quickly ushered everyone into the Floo and to the Ministry Ballroom.

When they arrived at the Ministry Ballroom, Ron immediately marched off. It took Hermione a moment to realise who, or what, he had spotted on arrival. Following the direction of Ron's swagger, she found Lavender Brown in an extremely low-cut, provocative dress of almost see-through scarlet lace. Ron had not wasted a moment in asking the very pleased young woman for a dance.

The other Weasleys, seeing Ron's seeming oblivion to Hermione's rejection, soon scattered, leaving her still standing forlornly by the fireplaces.

Harry tried to stay with Hermione, since he wanted to know what was going on, but Ginny's glare had Hermione shooing him off with a false smile. She did not want to cause a scene in front of the gathered crowd even though she wanted nothing more than to howl and scream inside. "Don't worry about me, Harry, I'm fine. I just want to sit down and have a moment to myself. Go dance with Ginny."

As Harry was led away by a victorious Ginny, Hermione looked around in hopes of finding a friendly face in the crowd. Not finding one, she made her way to the tables after glancing at the seating plan. As she was walking through the crowd towards the distant tables, Hermione was stopped by Narcissa.

With a knowing look, the older witch asked, "Is there trouble in paradise?"

Hermione pretended to smile. "No, everything is fine." It was obvious that Narcissa's comments were based on the ridiculous piece in *The Daily Prophet*. The ludicrous piece, of course, was the horridly personal article written by none other than Rita Skeeter. After Harry and Hermione's refusal to speak to the media following the press conference, Skeeter had approached Ron. Ron, who had been keen to get into the action and have his own moment of fame, had given an *in-depth interview* and had told her everything about their year on the run. Skeeter, who had never liked Hermione, had asked Ron if Hermione was seeing Kingsley, but Ron had spluttered and said no, that she was his girl. Thus, the sight of Ronald Weasley now snogging Lavender Brown rather publicly was hard to miss.

At Narcissa's raised eyebrow, Hermione once again attempted to smile brightly. "Really," she said with false cheer. "Everything is just perfect."

Narcissa gently patted Hermione's arm and guided her to one of the darker alcoves and insisted, "My dear, I've been around long enough to realise that you are unhappy. Come now, if it is Mr. Weasley, then perhaps I can be of help?"

Hermione nodded mutely and tried to stop the tears that were now threatening to fall. She had not expected gentle understanding from Narcissa Malfoy, no matter their previous seemingly friendly conversation in town.

Narcissa was ever the opportunist. In a calculated move, the witch asked, "Do you know, my dear, that Severus is alone tonight as well?"

Hermione blinked and looked questioningly at the older woman. She found the sudden change of topic rather confusing.

Narcissa smirked. "I suggest that perhaps if you sit with Severus, his *very social personality* will ensure that you'll be left free of the tender mercies of the wondrous Mr. Weasley."

Hermione was initially appalled at Cissy's suggestion, but almost immediately saw the benefit of such a position. Smiling brightly through the tears that were swimming in her eyes, she said, "I do agree, Cissy; I just think Professor Snape would not be amused."

"I'll handle Severus," said Narcissa confidently.

Hermione smiled again. Speaking to Narcissa had helped Hermione focus on something other than the sight of Ron trying to stick his tongue down Lavender's throat.

"I was dreading dinner, actually," confided Hermione. "I saw that I was placed next to Ron at the main table, and it would have been excruciating after our recent break-up. I just ended it before we arrived actually. Professor Snape is also at the head table though, so doing a bit of place shifting would not be too difficult if he is agreeable with altering the seating arrangements."

Narcissa smirked wickedly. "What the men don't know won't hurt them," said the Slytherin confidently. "I'll just make a tiny alteration to the seating plan, and all will be well."



Hermione grinned and forced her tears away. She had not even considered doing anything like that.

Seeing Hermione smile, Narcissa smirked again. Then, the older woman helped Hermione repair her face and guided her towards the Slytherin group where Lucius and Draco were talking to Severus.

As they approached the party, Hermione saw Lucius and froze. "Cissy," she said desperately, "I don't think I can."

Narcissa noted the abject terror on Hermione's face and hugged the girl briefly. "My dear, let me apologise once more for our previous behaviour. I assure you that you won't be harmed. Lucius is many things, but he isn't a fool. He was only a Death Eater because he knew to refuse the Dark Lord would result in immediate and painful death."

Hermione was still skittish. This was the man who had threatened her, terrified her. How could she approach him for anything less than sheer necessity?

Narcissa sighed. "Please, Hermione," pleaded the older woman. "Don't let the others see your fear. Don't cause a scene. I promise you that the only true loyalty a Malfoy can ever have is to his or her family. As Draco's godfather, Severus is family. You saved his life; we are indebted to you. You have nothing to fear."

Hermione nodded. She was still not really convinced, but she had grown to like Narcissa Malfoy, and she trusted Professor Snape completely. "Okay, Cissy," she said softly. "I'll do this for you."

Harry and Ginny bumped into people on the dance floor as they watched in bemusement the sight of Hermione being led to the Malfoys and Snape by Narcissa.

As Hermione joined the waiting men, there was furious whispering around the ballroom. Severus could not help his amusement and raised a sardonic eyebrow at Narcissa. "What in Circe's name are you up to, woman?"

This caused Lucius to laugh out loud, which attracted even more attention from their attentive audience. Chuckling darkly, Lucius replied, "Severus, you know my brilliant wife; she's match-making."

Draco nearly choked on his drink in shock. Then, seeing the utterly gobsmacked expression on his godfather's face, the younger man joined his father in uproarious laughter.

Hermione had expected coldness and aloofness at her introduction into the exclusively Slytherin group. She had not expected her presence to cause laughter and amusement at Professor Snape's expense. Unable to find a suitable way of responding, the young woman could only blush furiously and smile.

Narcissa huffed in affront. "I'm doing nothing of the sort," she said, before changing her mind to admit, "so what if I am?"

This was all too much for Draco. Bowing to his mother and Hermione, he said, "This has been very pleasant, but I think it is time I left to ask Daphne Greengrass to dance."

As Draco strolled off with a slightly amused smirk on his face, Lucius smiled like a predator shark at his wife and said, "Cissy, my dear, I think it is time for us to take a turn about the room." Smirking evilly at Severus and Hermione, Lucius led Narcissa away.

This, of course, left an extremely embarrassed and uncomfortable Hermione standing alone with Severus with the eyes of curious observers trained upon them.

Hermione was very unsettled. She wasn't usually this awkward, but she did not know how to behave. All Hermione could do was try to look relaxed while blushing furiously.

Seeing Miss Granger's reaction at being left alone with him in the ballroom, Severus sighed. "Please stop blushing, Miss Granger," he said tiredly. "If you continue to colour up so charmingly in my presence, you will make our attentive audience think that I'm flirting with you or being suggestive."

This statement only made Hermione blush even more.

"Merlin's pants, woman," said Severus gruffly, before taking her hand and leading the now utterly astonished Hermione onto the dance floor.

As they danced, Severus asked her, "Am I correct in my assumption that Cissy was rescuing you from Mr. Weasley's offensive behaviour?"

Hermione nodded and said softly, "I broke it off as we were leaving for the ball. I didn't think he would be so insensitive as to snog Lavender as soon as he got here, as if nothing had ever gone on between us."

Severus sighed once more and said, "Then you were the only one."

Hermione was startled by the response. She looked up at Severus in confusion.

"Really, Miss Granger," Severus said in irritation. "Why do you think I disapproved so vehemently of your friendship? They used you from the very first. You lied for them, you worked for them and they gave you the crumbs of their friendship."

Hermione spluttered, "But, but... isn't that what friends do?"

Severus sighed. *Bloody Gryffindors*. "Think carefully before you speak, Miss Granger. Analyse not from your eyes but from the eyes of an objective outsider how it always appeared to be them against you. Think back to how Weasley walked out on you and Potter in the hour of your greatest need."

Hermione was quiet for a while and then said gently, "But he came back."

"Yes," said Severus, "but think about why he came back. Did he come back because he realised his mistake, or did he come back because he was ashamed and guilty? If it was shame and guilt that brought him back, what was he ashamed and guilty of? And then, consider objectively what he gave up for the year on the run and what you have given up in terms of your family, your respectability and your place in society."

Hermione looked at Severus in confusion and consternation.

Severus merely continued to speak as he twirled Hermione around the dance floor. "Miss Granger, you're supposedly an intelligent woman; consider, are you going to be able to retrieve your parents from Australia? Has anyone even asked you about them, or how you're going to go there and un-modify their memories? Has anyone even discussed with you the possibility of being able to give them back their memories completely without them trusting you? Or indeed, if they will be able to ever forgive you for what you have done?"

Hermione did not respond. What was there to say? No one, not even Harry, had asked any of the questions that kept her up at night with inexpressible worry.

Severus continued to speak. "You are a young woman who did what you had to do in a difficult situation, but you must realise that British Magical society is Victorian in its attitude. Molly and Miss Weasley are not the only ones who are dragging your name through the mud over your supposed loose morality. Young ladies do not go traipsing off into the wilderness with two hormonal teenage boys, even if they are supposedly her best friends. It is simply not done. The fact that Mr. Weasley is now rejecting you will be taken as a sign that you have been deemed unsuitable as a marriage partner by his family. They are, as a family, destroying your reputation and any chance you may have of marrying into Magical society."

Hermione was appalled. "But nothing happened," she said miserably. "I've never slept with anyone."

"I know that," said Severus with a sardonic smirk. "To me it is obvious. You do not look at men with that calculating gleam in your eye, but to others, especially people who

are waiting to see the fall of the *Gryffindor Princess*, this is a dream come true."

Hermione's face was now red with embarrassment. She had not expected to have a discussion of her sexuality with Professor Snape, of all people.

However, Severus was still not done. "I would suggest that you stay close to Narcissa. If the Malfoys appear to befriend you, you will be redeemed. Whatever their position, they are still the leaders of pureblood society. If they court you, if they are seen to associate with you, then you will be forgiven all."

Hermione nodded. She was so confused. "I have never..." began Hermione, only to be interrupted by Severus.

"I realise your Gryffindor sensibilities abhor the concept of making use of your friends, but remember that the Malfoys are Slytherin. They will use you, so use them in turn, and all will be well. Just because there is an advantage in association does not mean there is any lack or falsehood in the friendship. Lucius and I have used each other since our days at Hogwarts. That does not mean our friendship is any less worthy or true."

Hermione nodded. She was no fool. She understood what Professor Snape was trying to tell her. Tentatively, she met his dark gaze. "Will you be my friend, sir?" she asked.

Severus smiled. It was not a happy smile, but that of a predator gazing upon its prey. "Indeed I shall, Miss Granger," he said.

His tone of voice made Hermione realise she'd just asked the Devil for a favour. *What will he require in exchange?* wondered Hermione worriedly.

Severus saw that Hermione had come to the realisation that she would now have to be of use to him. Dipping his head close to her ear, he whispered seductively, "In return, Miss Granger, I shall have your very soul."

Hermione's head jerked up in fear, but when she saw his smirk, she realised that he was not being completely serious.

Severus chuckled darkly. "I see you realise that I do not completely jest, Miss Granger. Like for like is usually the way these things are done in Slytherin circles." Severus hadn't really thought about what he was going to demand of Miss Granger; in truth, he already felt indebted. He didn't really owe her a life debt, since it was the Dark Veela who had cured him, but he did owe her for her efforts in clearing his name. However, Severus did enjoy baiting Gryffindors. Watching the young woman's confusion and panic was very amusing. Deciding to play a little, he pulled her closer into his embrace as he neared the end of the dance.

Hermione was not too sure she understood everything that was going on. On one level, she realised that Professor Snape was toying with her. She also realised that he had indeed flirted with her in an indirect, sardonic way. However, she also trusted him to protect her and knew instinctively that he would never hurt her or abuse her physically. Words were his weapons of choice. Deciding that Professor Snape was testing her confidence and trust in him, she smiled at him. "I trust you, sir," she said softly. "Whatever you demand from me in exchange will never be something that causes me pain."

Severus was floored. Although he did not show it, he was touched by this blatant display of trust. No one had ever trusted him so explicitly. "Gryffindor, indeed," he murmured before smirking at the smiling young woman.

Meanwhile, on another part of the dance floor, Lucius asked Narcissa, "Cissy, what in Merlin's name are you doing with the Granger girl?"

Narcissa smirked at her husband and replied, "Really, Lucius, you can be so blind. We discussed this last week, and you said you wanted the Malfoy name to be cleared as soon as possible, for it was starting to affect business. Now, think about who put in the most effort to clear Severus' name. Besides, if being seen publicly with Severus is good for our name, then being seen to be on friendly terms with one of the Golden Trio is sure to flummox all the gossips."

Lucius smirked in amusement as he listened to his wife's explanation.

Narcissa continued, "You did say after our chat with Severus that he was looking for a wife. You know there is hardly anyone who would marry him. No one from the pureblood circles will have him; he is too difficult, opinionated and unfortunately poor, so it must be a half-blood or a Mudblood. Hermione is quite brilliant even Draco admits that and a foolish woman would be completely unsuitable for him. She's been through the war, understands his role and thinks he's a hero. It's perfect; we get to steal the Gryffindor Princess and annoy the do-gooders while simultaneously ensuring that Severus has an intellectually suitable, politically well-placed wife who is young, easily manipulated and will be tireless in her efforts to help us if she feels we are true to our word of wanting to turn over a new leaf. Nimue knows I never really bought into all of that Death Eater nonsense. I just did what you wanted and what I felt would be the best thing for the Malfoy name. We need to do as much as we can to distance ourselves from that past, and befriending a Mudblood...no... I must stop using that word... a Muggle-born...would help matters greatly."

As Narcissa finished her speech, Lucius stared at his beautiful, brilliant wife in wonder. Finally, he said plainly, "I'm a very lucky man. You're perfect, brilliant, beautiful and thoroughly Slytherin! But Cissy, a Gryffindor for Severus? They'll drive each other mad!"

Narcissa angled her head towards the dancing couple and observed drolly, "I think not. I think they will provide the perfect counterpoint to each other."

Lucius smirked whilst watching Severus dance. Finally, he murmured into Narcissa's ear while drawing her closer to his chest, "You may be right, my dear, you may be right."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Fourteen: More Slytherin Plotting

Chapter 14 of 40

Narcissa does her best to court Hermione. Severus overhears Lucius and Narcissa discussing Hermione as the ideal partner for himself. A Slytherin plot is hatched.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you once again for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.
- (iii) A big hug of gratitude to my smashing lovely beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Once the dancing was concluded, the guests at the Ministry Ball moved to the dining area. A number of lengthy speeches were made over a magnificent dinner, and toasts were drunk in dizzying succession. Hermione was more than grateful for Cissy's intervention with the seating arrangement, for having Professor Snape by her side ensured that she was spared the worst of Ron's wrath. He could only glare impotently at her and snub her presence. Ginny was too busy being photographed to irritate and belittle Hermione, which was, in her mind, a very good thing indeed.

Professor Snape continued his provocative and perplexing behaviour, but he was extremely witty and sarcastic with his snide comments to the outpourings of the international guest speakers. This helped keep Hermione in mirth throughout the proceedings, for which she was very pleased. She knew that without his presence by her side, dinner and the evening could have been extremely uncomfortable. Professor Snape seemed to have taken his promise of being her friend seriously, for he was by her side until the very end of the ball.

Hermione knew that Harry was watching the two of them with a curious expression on his face, but Professor McGonagall and Kingsley seemed to find their united front completely ordinary, which helped keep their side of the table filled with pleasant and intelligent conversation, as well as banter. As the many goblets of excellent wine and mead relaxed Hermione, her initial fears concerning her discomfort and inability to converse with Professor Snape's looming presence were completely removed. Instead, she found herself enjoying her evening of stimulating conversation. She even responded to Professor Snape's sardonic flirting with what she thought was adequate aplomb.

Severus found Miss Granger a pleasant diversion on what could have proved to be a tedious evening. Minerva and Kingsley were pleasant dinner companions, but a young woman who blushed and giggled while still managing to respond with intelligent and pithy comments to his more sarcastic outpourings was a rare find. He realised that Cissy had once again stepped in and done him a delightful favour, for having Miss Granger by his side was definitely preferable to his original seating beside the pedestrian company of Molly Weasley. Moreover, his new seating and companionship allowed Severus to thoroughly enjoy riling up the emotions of Molly and the idiotic ginger-haired menace who glared at Severus for his audacity in flirting outrageously with Miss Granger. Thus, as the meal progressed, Severus began to casually drape his arm over the back of Hermione's chair as he leaned in to whisper in her ear. "Don't react to what I am going to do, Miss Granger," said Severus quietly. "People are watching. Just play along and all will be explained."

Hermione nodded in agreement before casually looking up at Professor Snape to follow the direction of his sardonic gaze. Meeting Ron's angry stare, she smiled sweetly and leaned even closer to Professor Snape's shoulder. "All right, Professor," she said into his ear, "but I've never really been good at acting."

He smirked at her and said, "And here I thought you were well versed in the art, after having lured Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest."

Hermione blushed. "Will I never live that down?" she asked in embarrassment. "I had to do something, and I couldn't think of anything else."

Severus chuckled and used his long fingered hand to casually push a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I merely brought up the subject to help you realise the need for subterfuge."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, Professor. Lead on."

Thus, when the final cheese and fruit courses were served, Severus took pleasure in introducing her to the more exotic options, going as far as to feed her delectable bites off his fork.

At the end of the Ball, Severus courteously walked Hermione to the Floo. There, she was bid a cordial goodnight by Lucius, who kissed her hand with a flourish, and Narcissa, who pecked her on the cheek. Kingsley, too, was not slow in hugging the young woman goodbye, and Minerva patted her arm in farewell. Severus followed Lucius' example. He bowed low over her hand in a surprisingly gentlemanly fashion before kissing it in adieu. Hermione realised that the very over-the-top farewells had been done to mitigate the gossip over her obvious breach with the Weasleys, for it had been very noticeable that Hermione had not spent any time with Harry or Ron throughout the entire evening's proceedings.

Once Hermione arrived at Grimmauld Place, however, the tension was thick and uncomfortable. An extremely disgruntled Ron glared at her, and Ginny spitefully whispered, "And here is the Slytherin whore. I see now why you wore a green dress to the ball. Did you enjoy flirting with the Greasy Git?"

Hermione did not respond. She did not want to ruin the wonderful mood she was in. Instead, she did her best to smile brightly at Mr. Weasley and Harry. "I think I shall go to bed now, Harry," she said with false cheer. "Goodnight, everyone," she called out before making her way speedily up the stairs.

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The morning of Sunday, the twenty-fourth of May, dawned bright and beautiful. However, for Hermione, the morning brought nothing but discomfort, for she knew that the Weasleys would be down below, waiting to further upset her with hateful comments. Hermione was generally an early riser. But knowing what awaited her caused her to dither and debate going down for a fair length of time. Finally, after a nice, long shower, she convinced herself that she was strong enough to pretend she could not hear the horrible comments and remarks. She dressed in her comfortable, if slightly tattered, blue jeans and button-down Oxford shirt and went down for breakfast.

However, Hermione was met with total silence. No one else was present in the kitchen, not even the usually bustling Molly. This surprised Hermione, but she was not one to rue her good fortune. She quickly made herself a pile of toast with butter and marmalade, and filling herself a mug of tea, she retired to the library.

It was there that Narcissa's elegant, short-eared owl found her. It lifted its foot daintily to offer its missive.

*Dear Hermione,*

*I hope this note finds you well.*

*I could not help but suspect, given the unfortunate circumstances of last night, that you might enjoy being away from your currently delightful abode. If this is so, please accept my sincere invitation to a picnic this afternoon. We, I mean Lucius, Draco and I, are going to Stonehenge. Astoria Greengrass and Severus will be with us too, and I thought, given our previous discussions, that you would enjoy seeing a Magical monument through pureblood eyes.*

*If you are agreeable, please take hold of this missive at half past eleven. It will deposit you to our chosen picnic spot on Stonehenge.*

*Warm wishes,*

*Cissy*

Hermione felt tears threaten. Someone understood how she felt.

She had visited Stonehenge with her parents when she was twelve, but she had never really seen it through magical eyes. Cissy's perfectly timed invitation filled Hermione with delight. Looking at the time, she realised it was already a quarter to eleven. Dashing back up to her room, she brushed her teeth and tried to figure out what to wear to a picnic with the Malfoys. She knew that they were using her to prove their altered political inclinations, but she did realise that Cissy was also trying to be a friend. In spite of Professor Snape's slightly disturbing remarks, Hermione had understood that she had nothing to fear from the Malfoys. They meant her no harm.

Hermione first looked at her robes before discarding them in favour of her Muggle attire. None of her summer frocks seemed suitable. Finally, Hermione decided that they would just have to accept her as she was. The best she could do was change her rather battered pair of pale blue jeans for a smarter pair of cord trousers in a warm honey brown which she teamed with a smart, ivory t-shirt and matching cardigan. A good brush of her hair, plenty of Muggle leave-on conditioner and silicon serum to tame her hair into submission, and she was done. She debated wearing make-up before settling for a lick of mascara and a coloured lip-gloss. Hermione had never been one to doll

up; she was not about to change her style.

Once her preparations were done, Hermione looked at the time again. She was a little surprised to find that it was already five past eleven. Quickly, she put on her comfortable hiking boots, packed her essentials in her beaded bag, which she tucked into her jacket pocket, and returned to the library. There, she penned a note to Harry, in case he worried. Then, she waited for her Port-key to activate.

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After the ball, Severus returned with the Malfoys to the manor. There, the four Slytherins enjoyed a final nightcap of excellent Malfoy brandy while discussing and analysing everything that they had seen and heard. It was a long-standing tradition, for Lucius and Severus had always thus torn apart the gatherings they had attended together. Severus had, at first, encouraged such discussions with his spying in mind, for Lucius was more likely to divulge useful information late in the evening over what was, in his mind, a private tête-à-tête. Later on, once the Dark Lord had been vanquished for the first time, Narcissa had joined their little late night sessions, and Severus had come to appreciate the woman's brilliant insights and observations. She was excellent at seeing and hearing things discussed by the wives of Death Eaters, and she was an invaluable source of information for Severus.

Tonight's post-mortem started off with the behaviour of the youngest Mr. Weasley and his rather public display of affection for Miss Brown. Draco sniggered as the topic was brought up. "Brown's been with nearly every boy in school," he said with a smirk. "Weasley's got appalling taste if he's dallying with her so openly."

"I think she was just a convenient way to show up Hermione," said Narcissa. "The poor girl was distraught when she saw them at the ball."

Severus nodded with a smirk. "Yes, I realised that was why you brought her over to us. The best way to rescue a Gryffindor from Gryffindor harassment is to embroil her in Slytherin manipulation. Though I must thank you for the seating rearrangements. I must admit I found the alterations much more to my liking."

Lucius laughed and said, "Yes, I saw your rather striking flirtation with the delectable Miss Granger."

When Severus heard Lucius refer to Miss Granger with the title of "delectable Miss Granger," he nearly choked on his brandy. It was only his long experience in maintaining a calm and stony façade that prevented him from showing his surprise and amusement at the pronouncement.

Draco, unfortunately, lacked the experience and choked rather spectacularly. "Really, Father," said Draco in horror. "Granger, delectable?"

Lucius laughed. "Your mother, my brilliant wife, has changed my perception of the Mudblood. I had never really observed her at length, never having cause or opportunity. But tonight, I could not help but notice her graceful carriage and her rather fetching smile. I especially enjoyed watching Severus' flirtation. What was that with the feeding of fruit towards the end of the evening, old boy? I thought Potter's ginger side-kick was going to burst a blood vessel, so hard did he glare at the two of you."

Severus chuckled darkly. "I found it rather amusing to rile up the insolent pup. Gryffindors are so easy to aggravate and manipulate."

"Yes," said Lucius with a smirk. "I thought that had to be one of the reasons behind the display."

"Ah, Lucius," said Severus jovially. "You know me too well, if you suspect there was another reason."

It was now Narcissa's turn to giggle. She had had far too much to drink and was in rather high spirits. "I think you make a beautiful couple," she said with a surprisingly youthful grin. "The dashing spy and the brains of the golden trio; I can just see the headlines in the newspapers now. They'll be speculating over the length of your relationship and other juicy details."

Severus barked with laughter. "Oh, that will make things exciting when school reopens. How I'd love to be a fly on the wall when the Weasley matriarch and the ginger-haired menace read that bit of supposition."

Lucius smirked. He had brought up the topic of Severus' flirtation to tease his old friend. He had not expected Severus to join in the fun quite so readily or find humour in his own behaviour. The old Severus would have glared stonily at Lucius and possibly gone to bed in a huff. This new Severus, the one who laughed and joined in the banter so convivially, was both a surprise as well as a pleasure. Lucius realised that the end of the war had altered his old, cautious friend significantly.

Draco, too, seemed to observe the difference in his godfather. "It is good to hear you laugh," said the young man. "It has been so long since I remember you laughing."

Severus sobered at the comment. "For a long time, I could not find a reason to laugh," he said quietly. "I did not expect to survive the war, but now I have a chance to live. These past weeks have shown me who my friends are; how can I not enjoy their company or indeed..." and here he smirked sardonically at Lucius, "...the company of an attractive young woman who blushes so very fetchingly?"

"Oh, Severus," said Narcissa with emotion.

Meanwhile, Lucius smirked back at his old friend. This witty Severus was much like the young man Lucius had known and befriended as a youth, before their Death Eater days.

Severus next smirked at Draco. "I noticed the attention you were paying the younger Miss Greengrass. Did you not start the evening as the escort of her older sister?"

Draco coloured briefly before laughing at his turn of the roasting. "Daphne is in love with Roger Davies. He's a half-blood and a Ravenclaw, though, and her parents are not pleased. I'm a useful distraction mechanism. I dance and flirt, and they are pleased a Malfoy is paying court to her. Once their attention is diverted, I can pursue my own interests."

Lucius chuckled. "And what about young Miss Parkinson? I remember hearing about your rather public school romance."

"Yes, indeed," said Narcissa. "Why, her mother, the obnoxious woman, almost became overly familiar when news of your romance hit the society circles."

Draco shrugged. "Pansy's a good friend and will always be dear to me, but she's like the House broom. Now that the time has come to put away childish things, I realise that the woman I pursue needs to be of a different calibre. Astoria is much prettier than Daphne and more intelligent, too. I enjoyed her company this evening."

Narcissa smiled with motherly pride. It was good to see her son finally showing some maturity and careful thought to his future prospects.

Soon enough, the conversation turned to discussing the speeches and Miss Weasley's rather shameless dress. Draco sardonically observed that he had been able to ascertain with a good deal of accuracy that she had not been wearing any underwear. This caused both Lucius and Severus to chuckle rather darkly, while Narcissa blushed before joining in the laughter.

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The next morning, as Severus was making his way down for breakfast, he overheard Narcissa and Lucius talking about Miss Granger.

Narcissa observed, "I'm worried about her, Lucius. I didn't really expect to like the girl, but seeing her vulnerability really upset me last night. She's a very sweet thing, and I think she's been given a difficult time by her so-called friends. She's only Draco's age, and if someone had hurt my child in that way, I would be out for blood. How could her friends abandon her to such scandalous gossip, especially after she did everything to help them?"

Lucius' reply was so quiet that Severus had to strain to hear it, stood as he was outside the door. "Cissy, dearest, your heart is overly sensitive. I'm sure she's fine."

"I don't agree, my love," responded Narcissa. "Did you see Molly's glare? If Hermione is forced to be in that woman's presence, it is sure to get ugly rather quickly. I wish I

could help."

Lucius grunted. Severus could well imagine Lucius' exasperated expression at his wife's sudden interest in Miss Granger.

"To call that young woman promiscuous is akin to saying my sister Bella was an untried virgin when she left school."

This caused Lucius to burst out laughing. "Cissy, I love your turn of phrase."

Narcissa laughed too. Then she continued, "But really, dear heart, only an innocent would choose to wear the dress she did. A woman who knew her own sexuality would never wear something like that, or if she did, she could never pull the look off without looking ridiculously ingénue."

Severus had to agree with Narcissa's logic. Miss Granger had looked charming with her long chiffon dress in pale mint green, with its broad satin sash and tiny white satin rosebuds sewn on to the gently curving neckline. The dress had been pretty and suited her complexion remarkably well, but it was virginal. In contrast, both Miss Weasley and Miss Brown looked like sexually active women, while Miss Granger was glaringly still a schoolgirl, albeit an intelligent, witty and attractive one.

Severus' thoughts were brought back to the conversation he was listening in on when Narcissa said, "I've had an idea. Let us all go for a picnic somewhere nice. The weather is glorious, Severus is still with us, and we can use the opportunity to invite both Hermione and Astoria. I want to get to know both of the young women better. Besides, given our discussion yesterday, the more I think of it, the more I am convinced that Hermione would make an ideal match for Severus."

Severus had to use his considerable skill as a spy to not betray his eavesdropping. He had thought Cissy was jesting when she said she was matchmaking. Apparently not. This caused Severus to re-examine his thinking over the girl. Yes, it was true; he had flirted with her, but that had been more to infuriate the Weasley matriarch and her two youngest brats, as well as to give the gossips something to twitter about, than with any real sense of attraction to the girl. Rescuing Miss Granger and fulfilling his debt of honour to her had merely sweetened the deal. However, the thought of pursuing the Gryffindor Princess in actuality, to use her as the mother of his children, that was an entirely different idea. As Severus thought on the subject further, he could see the reasoning behind Narcissa's supposition that they were well matched. They had a love of learning and books; she could be easily manipulated and taught to appreciate Slytherin and the more traditional values of magic. She was basically alone, which would mean little or no contact with irritating in-laws, and most importantly, she knew him, his role in the war and would not need to be with him to fulfil her own grand desires of fame and fortune. *Hmm...* mused Severus thoughtfully, *the idea does have merit*. Severus decided that he would see how it all panned out.

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The picnic at Stonehenge turned out to be everything that Hermione could have wished for. No one commented on her obviously Muggle choice of attire. Professor Snape, who proved to be extremely knowledgeable about the historical and magical properties of the site, walked her around and explained a number of interesting features. He, together with Cissy and Lucius, turned out to be aficionados of magical historical tradition, and they delighted in educating someone with a similar passion for information. Hermione could still not get over how comfortable she felt in the entirely Slytherin group.

*I can't believe Lucius asked me to call him by his first name,* thought Hermione with a deep sense of shock. *Not long ago, we were mortal enemies, and now we are walking around, discussing Ancient Runes and their hidden meanings. Could things get any stranger?* Apparently, they could. Draco, who had always called Hermione nothing other than "Mudblood," or if forced to in the presence of observant teachers, "Granger," seemed perfectly at ease in referring to her as Hermione to her face and even shared his Muggle stash of canned Jamaican Ginger Beer, complaining that the older group had no sense of taste whatsoever when they stuck to their elf-made wine.

Hermione had thought that Astoria would be a stuck-up pureblood. She was now learning that the perception was very different from reality. The young woman turned out to have a warm, earthy sense of humour, with a sharp wit to match the Slytherin penchant for sarcasm and an intelligent turn of phrase.

The afternoon cemented the firm friendship of the group, and Cissy's delight in the two younger women was so obvious that the three men teased her unmercifully. At some point in the afternoon, as the ladies decided to rest and relax after their sumptuous picnic feast, the men set off for a brisk climb. It was then that Narcissa laid her trap. Looking pointedly at Hermione she said, "I'm really glad you and Severus get on so well."

As Hermione blushed and began to explain, saying, "No, Cissy, he's just toying with me..."

She was interrupted by Narcissa. "No, my dear. I don't mean to disapprove. I was going to thank you for rescuing Severus from the clutches of attention and glory-seeking women, who are desperate to be seen on the arm of *the dashing hero and spy*."

Astoria snorted. "Definitely," said the young woman shortly. "Why, last night I heard Parvati Patil and her little friend Romilda Vane discussing how dishy Severus was and how it would look really good if they could nab him since he's been reinstated as Headmaster."

"Goodness," said Hermione in disgust.

"Yes," said Narcissa. "You, on the other hand, are the kind of woman who does not require a man to boost her place in society. Your intelligence and actions speak for themselves. Besides, you would not use him and discard him."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "But, Cissy," said Hermione, "what would you have me do?"

"Nothing you feel uncomfortable with," said the older woman, "but you could be his friend, his date, if you will. It would help you quieten the rumours that are circulating following the Weasleys' treatment of you, and if you were seen to be with Severus, the gossips would not dare speak against you. Similarly, being seen with you would save Severus the trouble of having to avoid gold-diggers, and it would be lovely to have you join our little group. You may have noticed that we don't really socialise intimately with too many people; we are very private, and it would be lovely to include you in our midst."

Astoria smiled and nodded. "I've enjoyed today, and since Draco and I are hoping to see more of each other...." She blushed then and grew silent.

Narcissa giggled. "I've always wanted a daughter. I've waited a long time to have young girls to shop and gossip with. I think we make a fine trio, if I do say so myself."

Hermione smiled. Her mother had always said, "When one door closes, another opens." This was definitely proving to be the case. When she had felt completely alone and isolated, when she had thought that she had lost Ron, Ginny and the Weasleys, and when she suspected that Luna was being encouraged to move permanently to Sweden by her father, who was tired and disheartened with Wizarding Britain, it was lovely to find intelligent and interesting friends. "How can I refuse?" she said with a grin. "It will be a pleasure, both for the good company and the chance to prove my detractors wrong."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

# Chapter Fifteen: The Order of Merlin Awards

Chapter 15 of 40

The Order of Merlin Awards Ceremony is held. Hermione goes shopping, and Severus begins to give seduction serious thought.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you for the kind reviews. Please, please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.
- (iii) A big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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When Hermione returned from her day out smelling of sunshine and laughter, she was met by a confused Harry. Thankfully, the Weasleys had all left, even Ginny, so the two friends had the house to themselves. Over a tall, cool glass of Kreacher's lemonade, Hermione told Harry all about her day with the Slytherins. Harry was surprised, to say the least, but he could see that his friend was happy. However, he did question her over what he had observed the night before.

"Harry," said Hermione. "Promise me you won't get upset?"

Harry looked perturbed, but nodded.

Hermione continued. "While you've been coming to terms with the end of Voldemort and the war, events have changed a number of people. Ron, Ginny and Molly have been touched by Dark magic. We all have, actually."

Harry looked like he would deny this, but then, unhappily, he nodded. "Kingsley was telling me I needed to learn to control my magic, that my aura has changed, and that it is a normal progression."

"Normal, yes," said Hermione, "but still a shock to the system, especially if you are not willing to accept that it has happened and if you lack the control needed."

"So, what are you saying?" demanded Harry in concern.

"Well," said Hermione, tentatively, "Ginny, Ron and Molly are jealous of me for various reasons. They've accused me of sleeping with you and Ron while on the run, of being promiscuous and a 'scarlet woman'." Hermione tried to laugh, but it came out more like a choked sob.

"What?" exclaimed Harry in shock. "When did they do this?"

"They did it at the last Order meeting. Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall and Kingsley heard. That's why they had the special meeting afterwards with the Weasleys in the kitchen while we were in the library speaking with the others." She sighed. "The problem is that they aren't willing to accept that their behaviour has been altered, that they are displaying irrational feelings of resentment, envy, anger etc."

"Is that why you broke up with Ron?" Harry asked next.

"Yes," said Hermione with another sigh. "He called me a tart, Harry, and then he expected me to sleep with him, just because I kissed him once in the heat of battle. That's ridiculous. I've never slept with anybody. When it happens, I want to be sure; I want it to be special and with someone I love and trust. Ron's not that person, not now."

"And Ron, he said this? In front of his mother and everyone else?" clarified Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione gently. "You were speaking to Kingsley, and you didn't hear them attack me. Both Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape did. Professor Snape was amazing. He cut both Ginny and Ron into tiny little pieces for speaking of me that way." Then, she sighed again. "At the ball, when Ron left me to go snog Lav-Lav, Narcissa came to my rescue. She saw that I was upset, that I had no one to be with, and she took me to Professor Snape and her family. She's promised me that she means me no harm, and, Harry..." Here Hermione looked intently at him. "...I believe her. They want to change, and they are using me to show the world that, but I feel they really are genuine. We had such a good time today." She smiled again as she remembered the banter and the intelligent, relaxed conversation.

"Anyway," said Hermione, getting back on track, "last night, when I was being ostracised and gossiped about, Professor Snape took me under his wing. Cissy changed the seating plan around so that I could sit next to him, and he basically watched over me. He's pretending to play court to me to save him from the gold-diggers who want to be seen with a hero, and in return, I'm being redeemed from being branded as a promiscuous tart who has been jilted by Ron because I'm not good enough for the Weasleys."

Harry had listened to Hermione's explanation with growing anger. Finally, when she came to a stop, he stated in a cold tone of voice, "Hermione, nothing happened. We were too worried about trying to survive to even think of sex. What nonsense is this?"

"I know that, Harry," started Hermione, gently laying her hand on his arm, "but think about how it sounds on paper. A lone female, Muggle-born, with strange modern ideas about female emancipation, going off with two handsome..." here Hermione grinned, to make her explanation less harsh. "...hormonal boys, living in a tent away from all decent society, running for their lives; we could have done anything, experimented with anything. It's my word against Ron and his mother. Ginny is furious with me because she thinks I'm trying to take you away from her, so her not looking at me or speaking to me is being taken as a sure sign that I've tried to come between the two of you. People noticed last night when none of the Weasleys spent time with me, asked me to dance or paid any attention to me at all. Molly, Ginny and Ron were really angry with me when you refused to speak to people that first week after the battle and clung to me; they thought I was trying to keep you to myself."

Harry spluttered. "But that's preposterous! I was tired; I was resting. I told everyone that I was too tired to speak to people. You're the sister I never had. I told Ron that when the Horcrux lied to him."

Hermione nodded before looking at him with curiosity. "You never did tell me exactly what the Horcrux said. Anyway, we'll come back to that later. For now, though, like I was saying, Professor Snape said the Dark always feeds on hidden fears and insecurities, so if the Horcrux had picked on Ron's jealousy before, it is perfectly logical for the Dark to pick up on his feelings of jealousy and resentment again."

Harry nodded. His face, however, registered both shock and anger. Hermione worried that Harry's inner Darkness was rising, too. She squeezed her friend's shoulder and said, "Harry, Ginny has wanted to be with you from the first. Please don't quarrel with your girlfriend and future family over me. They are the only family you have, and now that I've begun to come to terms with the fact that I may never be able to reverse the Memory Charm I placed upon my parents, I realise how important family is. Don't lose

them over me; I'm not worth it."

Harry shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "You're worth everything. You're the one person who has always stuck by me, loved me, fought me, supported me and has done whatever you thought was right and necessary, even if it irritated me at the time. You've never let something slide because it was the easier option."

Hermione's emotions were overwhelmed. Hearing Harry's acknowledgement of her love and friendship was too much after the pain of losing the support of Ron and the Weasleys, whom she had always considered her second family. Tears poured down her cheeks. "I love you," she said, flinging her arms around her best friend.

Harry coloured before returning Hermione's embrace. Then, in a much more mature and practical tone, he said, "Now, tell me what I can do to help. It's not right that the Malfoys and Snape are bailing you out when I'm not doing anything. I suppose the fact that I spent all of last night with Ginny and didn't dance with you at all made the gossips talk even more."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Harry," she said gently. "They just assumed that now that you were back in civilised society, you didn't want anything to do with the tart. Ginny is a pureblood, and she has not had her reputation besmirched."

Harry nodded grimly. "Well, the Ministry is holding the Order of Merlin Award Ceremonies on the thirtieth. That will give us a chance to put a firm stop to any ridiculous rumours. We'll give the press another show, shall we?" he asked with a grin.

Hermione laughed in delight. "Oh, Harry," she said with a grin. "Yes, let's put on another show. I'll ask Cissy to help me shop for an appropriate dress, and we'll cause a proper buzz." Hermione knew that the Award Ceremony was bound to be an even bigger event than the Ministry Ball, since the world's media was being invited to broadcast live transmissions of the speeches and proceedings.

The week seemed to fly by. Now that Harry had a purpose, both to help redeem Hermione's reputation and learn to control his magic, he was much more cheerful and happy. He was out the door early morning, preparing for his Auror Entrance exams and training with Kingsley's handpicked aide, Williamson. Kingsley, as temporary Minister for Magic, had decreed that he was removing some of the criteria needed for admission into the extremely difficult Auror Training Programme. It made sense, really, because the Auror Office was the hardest hit during the days of Voldemort's reign, with many experienced fighters lost. Ron and Neville had been encouraged by Kingsley and McGonagall to take part in the training, too, and Hermione realised that this was the Order's way of ensuring that the three boys who had had the most contact with Voldemort's soul fragments learnt to control their exposure to the Dark Arts.

Meanwhile, Hermione read everything she could get her hands on in the Black Library and went on a number of shopping expeditions with her new friend, Cissy.

Narcissa had been delighted to receive Hermione's owl on Monday, thanking her for the lovely day out and asking her if she would help her find a suitable dress for the Award Ceremony. Smirking broadly, she showed the missive to Lucius over their mid-morning coffee. "A little bit of kindness and the girl is already repaying our investment of time and effort," stated Narcissa. "I shall, of course, take her to all of the major couturiers in London; perhaps even a trip to Paris would not go amiss. I shall help her with her hair and take her out to lunch, and by the end of the week, when the Award Ceremony is held, our reputations will be restored. If I am seen by the matrons of society to be helping the young girl in her formal presentation into Wizarding Society, no one can doubt our commitment and position in the new order."

Lucius smirked in response and said, "Quite." Then, in a more thoughtful tone, he said, "May I suggest lending her some of the Malfoy jewels for the occasion? My dear, that will be something that the old biddies will immediately recognise. She did not wear any suitable jewellery to the Ball, which I'm sure people would have noticed. If she now appears wearing something from our vault, which can only be a personal loan, a gesture which is only made between very close friends and family, it is sure to confuse people and make them rethink their understanding of how closely we worked with certain members of the Order."

Narcissa giggled. "Excellent, my love," she said with a smile. "I do like the girl, though, and having never had a daughter to dress up and guide, this is going to be a delightful experience for me on a more personal note, too. Astoria is charming, and I was very impressed with her yesterday, but she is too well brought up. Her taste is already excellent, and she really doesn't need my guidance in the same way that Hermione does."

Lucius nodded. He knew how broken-hearted Narcissa had been over their inability to have more than one child. *Narcissa was made for motherhood*, thought Lucius fondly. *If Hermione is to be her surrogate daughter, well then, I'm sure we can do no better. She is intelligent, good-natured and, other than for the misfortunate of her Muggle parentage, a lovely young woman.*

True to Narcissa's plan, the two women spent most of Monday afternoon discussing colours and styles over tea at Serendipity. Having already been to the exclusive club before, Hermione was not as surprised by the invitation or venue. Narcissa insisted that knowing what one wanted was essential before embarking on a major shopping expedition. They had a delightful time. They gossiped and giggled, and Hermione, who had never really partaken of such activities before, found to her surprise that she enjoyed it. Perhaps it was because Narcissa was so much older, perhaps it was because Hermione felt comfortable with the intelligence and wit of the conversation...whatever the reason, their almost military-like strategising of suitable apparel was extremely amusing and interesting. They had arrived, after careful deliberation, at the conclusion that Hermione was a 'Deep with a Warm undertone' to her colour palette. Hermione, who had never thought of colour classifications or even heard of the *Colour Me Beautiful* concept, was pleased to realise that if she stuck to her choice of colours, she would always look charming.

The next day saw the two witches visit the first of a number of couturiers. Now that they had a clear idea of what hues to select, which Hermione was pleased to note she'd generally got right instinctively, the shopping went much more quickly.

Cissy insisted that Hermione not try on anything that made her feel uncomfortable. "If you are uncomfortable with the dress, no matter how good it looks on you," advised the older woman, "it will show on your face and thus ruin your appearance."

The first boutique proved to be totally unsuitable. The dresses were too glitzy and daring, almost costume-like, in Hermione's opinion. She could easily picture Ginny in some of the dresses, even, oddly enough, Luna, but not herself. The second held dresses that were more pleasing, having elegant, understated designs. But when Hermione saw the prices of some of the dresses she was admiring, she nearly dropped her hand in horror. "Cissy," she whispered urgently, "I can't possibly afford any of these dresses."

Narcissa smiled. "Don't worry, my dear," said the older woman. "Once we find something that we both think is fabulous, I shall handle the payment."

"No," said Hermione vehemently. Then, seeing the raised eyebrows of the shop assistant, she said more quietly, "Cissy, you've been so kind. I couldn't take advantage of you."

"Nonsense," said Narcissa briskly. "The cost of the dress is nothing. I have enjoyed our planning and strategising. I have no daughter, and I've never had the opportunity to experience the joy of helping a young woman find a suitable ball-gown. Let me enjoy myself. Besides, if you feel that I am gaining nothing but pleasure, I can assure you that being seen in your company is helping Malfoy Industries as we speak. People are observing our every move; our place in society guarantees the way in which Malfoy business ventures perform."

Hermione blushed. Such calculated discussions of value and usefulness were not undertaken in Gryffindor circles. In truth, it was not even generally considered.

Narcissa patted Hermione's hand gently. "Is there anything you like? Why don't you go try it on, and we shall see how you look, hmm...?"

"I'm not really sure," said Hermione. "I want to look mature, but not like I've tried too hard."

Narcissa smiled. "In that case, shall I suggest you try on this rust-coloured gown? The colour suits your complexion, and it brings out your eyes beautifully." Then, walking over to the many display racks, she pulled out in quick succession dresses in olive green, apricot and amber. "Then, try these on," she said, "and in the meantime, I shall find a few more. We've got plenty of time; you may as well learn how colour compliments your appearance."

While Hermione was trying on the beautiful dress in rich rust silk, Narcissa found three others: one in golden brown satin, another in cream lace and a rather unusual dress

in turquoise chiffon with an exotic border of bronze beading.

The rest of the morning and afternoon were spent trying on and modelling the dresses to the very attentive Narcissa. Hermione was asked to walk, bend and sit so that she was assured that she could move easily in all of the dresses. They finally decided that the rust dress was a must. The colour was perfect, the cut classic with its rounded neckline, but daringly cut low in the back, which showed off Hermione's form and figure without making her look at all unladylike. It had an almost princess-like over-skirt in matching chiffon with a gentle train at the back. *If the colour had been different, Hermione thought, the gown could have been a bridal dress, so pretty was the design.*

However, Narcissa also adored the more Grecian-styled apricot robe. It was in the softest of chiffon with one shoulder bared while the other had a mass of cloth held together with a golden clasp. The waist was gently gathered, and it made Hermione look both innocent and seductive at the same time. "We must get this, too," insisted Narcissa. "There are sure to be more parties and balls, and you must have some proper things to wear."

Hermione could not refuse. It was obvious that Cissy was deriving immense satisfaction in choosing dresses for her. Smiling brightly at the older woman, she said, "I agree. It is really beautiful. I'm really grateful, Cissy. Thank you."

Narcissa smirked back and said, "Perhaps one more?"

Hermione giggled. "Cissy, you're incorrigible. How can I refuse? Everything you've made me try on has been utterly perfect, though I do think that Lucius will complain when he finds out how much you've been spending on me."

Narcissa smiled a saucy little smile. "Shall I tell you a little secret?" she asked with a quick glance to make sure she was overheard by the very attentive shop assistant. "Lucius noticed that you had not worn any jewels to the Ball and suggested that once we found you the right dress, I help you choose something suitable from the Malfoy jewellery collection."

"Really," gasped Hermione. "Lucius said that?"

"He did," replied Narcissa with a smile. "So please be assured, my dear, that he will not mind me helping you find a suitable wardrobe." Then, more briskly, she said, "What do you think of the lace gown? I adore the delicate beadwork, and I think it is extremely flattering."

Hermione blushed. "I've never worn anything like that," she said softly. The dress was the most daring yet. It was strapless, with beadwork circling the bottom of the dress before rising up to end cupping her bosom in gentle twirls.

"Well, it is your decision," said Narcissa, "but if you want to appear virginal, yet thoroughly mature and sensual, then that dress is perfect. The cut and the colour bring out your complexion, your eyes and your hair; it even maximises your cleavage."

Hermione blushed, and then giggled. "Yes," she said in agreement. "We'll take it. I just hope I have the confidence to wear it out."

"Well," said Narcissa with a smile. "You could always wear it to an intimate dinner party if you don't want to wear it out in public. In fact, since I've been toying with the idea of having a soiree for Draco's birthday, you could wear the dress then. It is ideal and will give you the confidence to begin wearing more provocative dresses in a secure environment."

The dresses selected, the next day was spent poring over Malfoy jewels at Gringotts. To go with the rust silk, Narcissa insisted that she wear the Malfoys' ruby and diamond ensemble set in delicate, goblin-made gold. There was a tiara, fabulously long, chandelier earrings and an almost cuff-like bangle that glittered and dazzled on Hermione's wrist. Dress and jewels decided upon, the next outing was to buy shoes. Hermione had never really been shopping with someone like Cissy. Hermione had always seen it as a chore, but to Narcissa Malfoy, it was a fine art.

Hermione, who had always done all of her magical shopping at Madam Malkin's or Gladrags, was now introduced to Antonio's, where she was encouraged to buy, in Hermione's mind at least, a silly number of shoes. First, there was a pair of golden Grecian-style sandals, then a pair of high russet heels with diamante detailing, then another pair of smart golden stilettos with charms worked in that allowed the wearer to walk on the heels in absolute comfort. Next, Narcissa insisted she buy her first ever pair of wizarding walking-boots, made for durability, comfort and protection from a number of magical spells and hexes. They were of dragon-hide, naturally, in a smart grey-green.

Thinking they were done, Hermione was surprised when Narcissa also insisted she buy a few pairs of cloth-covered court-shoes.

"You must have these, as well," said Narcissa. "They will be perfect for all our lunches and outings during the day. Now that you are part of good wizarding society, you must always be well turned out. Nothing ruins a smart look like a pair of bad shoes. You can be dressed in the oldest of robes or even your Muggle clothes, but if you are well-heeled, your look will still be well-groomed and appropriate."

Thus, Hermione was handed shoes in charcoal, stone, cream, light navy, golden-brown, coffee-brown and true red by the smirking Antonio. Narcissa Malfoy was one of his best customers, and he knew her methods perfectly. Hermione was stunned. She could not understand Cissy's munificence, but she had come to realise that her new friend had a generous and open heart, and that once someone had been included into the Malfoy circle, the sky was, indeed, the limit.

Friday, their shopping done, Narcissa insisted that Hermione accompany her to a day of sheer, decadent relaxation at a Parisian Spa. "The nymphs run the place," explained Narcissa, "with the help of a bevy of brilliant witches. They'll do our hair, wrap us in exotic balms and perfumes and make us feel like goddesses of the Nile. I've not been in a while, but I am looking forward to the experience."

The spa visit, which Hermione had not even indulged in even in the Muggle world, was the most magical event yet. First, she was wrapped in seaweed that was perfumed like the spices of Arabia; then she was massaged so that her skin glowed and felt as soft as rose petals. Hermione blushed when she realised that the wrap had also removed all the hair from her body. When Narcissa realised what had surprised the young woman, she whispered provocatively, "Wizards seem to prefer the completely nude look."

Hermione was starting to take Narcissa's teasing in stride. She realised that the Slytherin sense of humour was much darker and more suggestive than what she was used to. Pretending sangfroid she did not quite feel, she whispered in return, "How soon before it grows back? I don't want stubble."

Narcissa laughed in amusement. She was finding Hermione perfectly delightful. "Oh, my dear," she said still smilingly, "this won't come back for at least six months."

On the day of the Award Ceremonies, Harry announced that he had spoken to the Weasleys and indicated to them that they would all meet at the Ministry Ballroom. "I want to be seen coming in with you," said Harry in explanation. "Ginny was disgruntled, but I said there was no need for her to Floo from place to place, getting soot on her dress. That seemed to make sense, and Molly agreed."

The Award Ceremony had drawn a crowd even larger than the previous Ministry Ball. Almost all of the Ministers for Magic from Europe, Asia and Africa were present, as was the Muggle Prime Minister of Britain. He and his little group of aides stood in awe, their mouths open in amazement at the decorations and grandeur of the magically enhanced and enlarged Ministry Ballroom. The ceiling was like the night sky, glittering with stars and filled with the light of the full moon; the backdrop had been charmed to appear to be a rose filled grove with wood-nymphs and fairies providing music and light for the intimately placed round tables and fully stocked bar.

Kingsley opened the proceedings with a short and jovial speech before allowing the Muggle Prime Minister to address the gathering. His speech touched upon the bravery of British citizens in always fighting for the right and the good. Then, an old wizard, who turned out to be the Head of the Druidic Order of Merlin, began calling out the names of the award winners. Harry and Severus were given First Class Awards to much public acclaim and applause. Hermione, Ron, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Hagrid, Minerva, Arthur, Molly, Kingsley and others were then given Second Class Awards. Remus, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Fred, Colin Creevey and a number of others were then given posthumous Second Class Awards which their families collected with bittersweet pride. After these Awards were handed out, the rest of the DA and the Order of the Phoenix were called up to receive their Order of Merlin, Third Class Awards.



Ron, who had been placed just after Hermione in the list of award winners, complained loudly, "That's not right. I should have been given a First Class Award, too. Didn't I go on the run with Harry, and didn't I also kill a part of Voldemort's soul?"

Hermione said irritably, "That is nothing compared to the twenty years Professor Snape dedicated for the greater good. Harry, of course, is the Saviour of the wizarding world. He has to get a First Class Award."

Ron stared at Hermione and asked in wonder, 'Blimey, Hermione, don't you care about the money that goes with it?'

This should not really have surprised Hermione, but it did, and she looked at him closely, as if for the first time, trying to comprehend his mercenary bent.

Once the Awards had been presented, the band began to play. Harry and Severus were invited by the Head of the Druidic Order of Merlin to open the dancing. Harry, of course, turned around and offered his arm to a beaming Ginny, as was expected. Tonight, she had worn a striking, slinky dress in dark navy blue, which was completely covered in sequins that caught the light and made her dazzle.

Severus, who was also supposed to open the dancing, extended his arm, and Hermione, with a smile, laid her hand in his. This was almost too much for the youngest Weasley, if his red face was any indication.

In truth, Ron had thought that Hermione would pine for him; he had not expected her to be courted so obviously by the Slimy Git.

Hermione did not notice, for she was too busy staring at Severus, who looked particularly dashing in his black silk robes tinged with delicate and subtle thread-work on the cuffs and lapels in bright emerald green and silver. They made a striking couple, he the dashing, dark hero, and she, the so-called brains of the Golden Trio with a scandalous past, if stories were to be believed, dressed in her fabulously elegant ball-gown and Malfoy jewels.

Severus smirked at the youngest Weasley male and pulled Hermione closer into his embrace, his thumb gently caressing the exposed skin of her back. He had decided that he would test the waters with *the delectable Miss Granger* and find out if she was a suitable candidate for seduction and marriage. He still did not think that he would find love, but he had decided that he would try for friendship and possibly passion. Miss Granger had proved herself to be intelligent, loyal and strong enough to cope with trials and tribulations. He knew he could find no one more appropriately suited to putting up with his temperament and personality. She had, after all, been his student for six years and knew him well, and she had still done her utmost to clear his name. Besides, Severus admitted to himself, he found her unexpectedly attractive and her company more than pleasing. Having danced with Hermione before, Severus knew she would be able to follow his lead without difficulty. Twirling her expertly around the floor, smirking to their audience all the while, Severus said, "You look stunning tonight. The Malfoy jewels are, of course, the perfect touch."

Hermione dipped her head graciously and said with a smile, "Cissy said Lucius suggested I wear them."

"Oh," said Severus softly, his mouth pressed intimately close to her ear, "well then, I must congratulate you on winning the heart of not one, but both the Malfoys. If you've been loaned the jewels, they are indeed serious about taking you under their wing."

Hermione felt a thrill run through her as his voice caressed her ear. She realised he was toying with her, performing for their audience, but the music, the atmosphere, and Professor Snape's attentions were making her head spin and her heart beat particularly fast within her breast. Hearing his compliment delivered in that slightly sardonic, yet utterly smoky and seductive voice of his made her realise she was definitely playing with fire. Blushing furiously at the thoughts racing through her head, she raised her face boldly to look at him. "They are being enormously kind," she said at last. "I can hardly believe that they are the same people who hated me and my kind for so long."

"Not hated," said Severus thoughtfully, his fingers continuing to stroke the petal soft skin of her back, "more resented, feared. However, they have learned their lesson well, and they will abide by the new order. Although..." And here he smirked broadly before tightening his grip on her even further. "...they will do their best to influence you to help bring back some of the forgotten traditions of the magical world."

Hermione smiled up at him. She realised he was teasing her, testing her. "I promised to do all I can, remember?" she said gently. "I won't go back on my word. Besides, I've always loved history and tradition. I don't see why the magical world can't have both, a healthy respect for the past whilst embracing the advances of the modern Muggle world."

Severus chuckled. "Miss Granger, I think you will have to start a revolution if you are going to convince the people in the Ministry and the Wizengamot that the magical world can cope with both." Smirking again, he said, "I suppose if anyone can, it will be you."

"Why, Professor," said Hermione with a surprisingly Snapish smirk, "I didn't think you believed in me so ardently." She then did something she'd wanted to do since the dance began; she gently let her fingers slide into his hair and caress the back of his neck. Hermione knew she was playing a dangerous game, but if he could touch her, then surely she could touch him. Besides, reasoned Hermione, she could always say if questioned that she did it for the benefit of the watching press.

"My dear Miss Granger," said Severus with a look of a predator grazing his features, "I believe in you in such ardent fashion that I am likely to make a fool of myself in public." At Hermione's expression of curiosity, Severus rather deliberately ground his pelvis against hers as he twirled her around once more so that she felt his hardened flesh through the many layers of cloth that separated them.

Hermione gasped in surprise. She had realised, of course, that he was flirting with her, but she had thought it was all a jest, a ploy. She had not in her wildest imaginings thought that he, the epitome of control, was actually attracted to her. She had thought that she was the only one feeling the effects of his proximity, his touch and his presence. To feel absolute proof of his arousal was startling. She did not know how to respond.

Severus could clearly see the surprise on Hermione's face. But as he gazed at her intently, he realised that she was not repulsed. Her reactions were those of an innocent, but he quickly grasped, an equally aroused and interested innocent. Smirking inwardly at his success in planting the seed of seduction, he lowered his face to her ear once more. "Never fear, Miss Granger," said Severus seductively. "I won't take you until you are ready for the plucking. I have infinite patience; after all, it is an inherent requirement for a successful Potions master." As Hermione blushed furiously once more, Severus chuckled and buried his sensitive nose in her hair. She smelt of night blooming jasmine and honey, and he couldn't get enough of her fragrance.

Once the opening dance was completed, other couples joined them on the floor. Severus continued to dance the second dance with her, holding her closely, possessively. He let himself enjoy the sensations of a willing woman in his arms, knowing that it had been many years since he had been able to enjoy such simple pleasures. At the end of the second dance, he bowed low and kissed her hand in a courtly gesture before moving to lead Hermione towards the edge of the dance floor where a number of members of the press stood waiting to take countless photographs and sound bites. There, Harry smiled brightly at the returning couple and offered his arm to Hermione. "Dance with me, please?" he asked fairly loudly with a broad grin.

Hermione smiled brightly at Harry's obvious move, for they had agreed to give the press a bit of a show. "How could I refuse my hero of a brother," she said just as loudly before taking his hand and moving onto the dance floor.

Seeing Miss Granger dance with Potter made Severus feel an unexpected twinge of resentment. *How dare he*, was the rather irrational thought that ran through his mind, even as he acknowledged that he had clearly heard her refer to Potter as her brother. Feeling slightly foolish, he made his way towards the Malfoys who were observing the dancing with interest.

"I see Potter has realised the error of his ways," was Lucius' opening remark.

Before Severus could respond, however, Narcissa stepped in. "Hermione told me," said Narcissa, "that she had explained the situation to Potter. He's agreed to put on a bit of a show for the media in an effort to quell the rumours."

"Really?" enquired Severus. He knew he was being overly sensitive, but he did not like the idea that Miss Granger was being rescued by Potter. *That's my job*, he thought irrationally before laughing at his own streak of possessiveness.

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## Chapter Sixteen: Confusion and Comfort

Chapter 16 of 40

Narcissa and Hermione talk.

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Hermione was very confused. Even as she danced with Harry and smiled at the watching media, all she could think was *Professor Snape is attracted to me. Me. Professor Snape had a hard on. I felt it. Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!*

She was rather good at analysing her own feelings, and she realised first of all that she liked his attention. She had not thought she could feel anything but admiration and respect for a man so much older than herself, but when he had made that bold move to show her how much she had affected him, she had felt the thrill of it right down to her toes. It was like nothing she had felt before. With Victor at the Triwizard Tournament, she had felt beautiful, but it was a pale thing compared to the way Professor Snape's gaze made her feel. *Aren't I supposedly a prude? Everyone, well, Ron and the boys at Hogwarts think so. Then how come I liked him touching me? I did, I really did like him stroking my back, breathing in my scent. I wanted to touch him too. I did touch him. I ran my fingers through his hair and touched the back of his neck. Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Now I'm hyperventilating. This is ridiculous.* Chastising herself, Hermione shook her head at her own foolishness and smiled brightly at Harry.

Her smile seemed to reassure Harry, who was looking a bit worried since she'd done nothing but dance with him silently. "Everything okay, 'Mione?" he enquired softly.

"Yes, Harry. Just thinking about the events of tonight," she said, trying to grin cheerfully. Then, she went back to her whirling thoughts and analysis mode. Initially, she realised it had all been a game. She had compared his flirtatious behaviour at the Victory Ball to his spying, and she hadn't thought his flirting was anything more than just an act. To find out he was really aroused was fascinating, exhilarating and terrifying.

Hermione was unsure of how to react. Should she pursue the relationship since she knew Cissy and Astoria thought she would suit him? But he was Professor Snape, and even though he had touched her, he still called her Miss Granger. It was most confusing. And Harry, Harry would be appalled. *Besides*, thought Hermione, *isn't Professor Snape supposedly in love with Harry's mother?*

Knowing she needed a woman to talk to and knowing she could not really go retrieve her parents until she was sure she could undo the memory charm, the only option was Narcissa. So once she'd finished her two, surprisingly almost silent, dances with Harry, she kissed him on the cheek and sent him back to Ginny with a grin. Then, she made her way over to Cissy, who was chatting with Lucius and Draco. Severus had been dragged back onto the dance floor by Minerva, who insisted it was good to show how Severus was welcomed and revered by the members of the Order.

"Cissy, would you like to go to the loo?" asked Hermione. She really needed to speak to Narcissa without the Malfoy men.

Cissy immediately realised something was up. "Of course, it would be a good time to check our make-up."

When they were in the loo, Hermione cast locking, silencing and privacy charms and then said, "Something's happened."

"Oh, my dear. What is it?" asked Narcissa in concern.

"I think Professor Snape likes me, and I think I like him, but I'm not sure really. I feel all hot and strange and." She stopped. "I know I sound foolish, but I've never really felt like this before."

Cissy was amused, but she didn't let it show. "My dear, is it so bad that you find him attractive? He is an attractive man after all, and now that he's not forced to play the bastard all the time, unless he really wants to, he can be quite charming."

Hermione said, "I know. I'm just worried that he will tire of playing with me, and I'll end up getting my heart broken. I'm so much younger than he is. I'm not sophisticated like other girls my age. Besides, isn't he still in love with Harry's mother?"

"Lily?" asked Narcissa in surprise. "I thought he got over her years ago." She smiled softly at the clearly bewildered young woman. "You are young, but you are not foolish. Just because you don't try to ensnare men or know how to play the mating game is not a negative, Hermione; that's your strength. Can you imagine him with someone like Pansy Parkinson?"

Hermione giggled and nodded, taking that in. Her face broke into a grin as she tried to picture Professor Snape with the tart, Pansy. Then, her face grew serious once more, and she went on anxiously, "He'll never like my family. He'll say they are small-minded, pretentious and petty. He'll especially find my grandfather vulgar; everyone else does. I'm not prejudiced, but my family is so weird. Muggles can be prejudiced too you know. My parents ....Oh, how can I explain it?"

Hermione twisted her hands together in agitation and bit her bottom lip. Finally, she sighed. "My parents have always been very prejudiced. They've always insisted that I only marry someone they approve of, you know, class wise. Money never mattered, but class did, does. That's why although they liked Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, they didn't really encourage me to go out with Ron. He's never fit in with what we do as a family: the skiing holidays that I've never gone to, the dancing and riding classes I've been forced to take every summer. We are proper, solid, upper-middle class. My mother is from a very old family. Her grandfather lost all their money gambling, so her mother was forced to marry into the nouveau riche his family had made their money in the First World War, shipping." Hermione sniggered at what she thought was her family's foolishness.

Hermione's snigger reminded Narcissa of Severus so strongly that it nearly made the older witch laugh out loud. *Interesting. I wonder if she realises how much she looks like him sometimes. It's obvious she's learned much more than Potions from him.* Narcissa smiled wickedly. She was going to enjoy seeing Hermione and Severus come

together.

Hermione continued, "My father is the youngest son of a younger son, but we've got second cousins and third cousins who have country estates and a distant uncle who is a peer of the realm. I know my parents always thought I would eventually come back to the Muggle world, go to university at Oxford or Cambridge, meet a boy from a proper family and settle down."

Cissy smiled. "Severus Snape can't object. If he does, he's just being his usual boorish self, so don't mind him. His family is no better. Yes, the Princes had money, still have money, but his father was a mill worker in Manchester. Severus grew up poor and hungry; it was only Hogwarts and his desire to fit into Slytherin society that made him learn to lose the Mancunian accent and refine his speech. His background is not dissimilar to yours. He has upper to upper-middle class connections, but with enough vulgarity thrown in to make it hard for easy acceptance into good society. He's had to make his own way in the world. His family didn't do him any favours, my dear. I don't think you need to worry. You are not your family, and you are not living in the Muggle world. You are living in the Wizarding one, and here, we have different issues. Besides, if you like him, then that's what matters most, isn't it? Surely, if you are correct, and he does like you, then will he not forgive you your vulgar, petty relatives if you forgive him his weaknesses?"

Hermione blushed. "I know I'm over-reacting, but I've only ever liked Victor and Ron, and it never felt anything like this. I've never felt so confused. I had to talk to you; there's no one else. If my mother were here, I'd go to her, and she would have helped me deal with my feelings."

Narcissa smiled. "Come here," she said, opening her arms to the girl.

Hermione stared in shock for a moment before hugging Cissy and taking comfort from her motherly embrace.

Narcissa held her new Muggleborn friend and felt her heart ache. This was the way she would have held her own daughter if she had been blessed with one. She would have advised her daughter thus if she had been fortunate enough to have more children other than Draco. Her voice was filled with love as she spoke gently, "All will be well. You look beautiful. Go out, have a wonderful time at the ball and don't worry. If something develops with Severus, then all I can say is that you are well matched intellectually, socially and in temperament."

"Thank you," said Hermione. "I really needed someone to put things in perspective for me."

Narcissa thanked all the goddesses and gods in silence as she helped Hermione repair her make-up and touch up her lip gloss. She felt she did not deserve to be seen as a surrogate mother of such a genuine, honest young woman. If the Dark Lord had won, Hermione would have been exterminated like so much unwanted vermin. Grateful beyond words, she knew that she and her family were very fortunate that Potter had seen to the demise of the Dark Lord once and for all.

Arm in arm, the two witches rejoined the Slytherin group that was standing on the edge of the dance floor.

Narcissa and Lucius shared a moment of silent communication before Lucius said, "Come, Hermione, let's cause another stir in the media." As Hermione blushed, he took her hand and led her gracefully onto the dance floor.

Immediately, a buzz of conversation could be heard. Lucius Malfoy dancing with a Muggleborn was unheard of. "Smile," he said pleasantly, his own countenance that of a predator shark, his mouth stretched wide in a sardonic smirk. "Skeeter is dying of jealousy, and you can't tell me you won't enjoy seeing her cut down to size."

Hermione giggled. "Indeed, Lucius, seeing Skeeter cut down to size is one of my most ardent pleasures."

Lucius chuckled. "It is a pity Wizarding Britain has only one newspaper, though I suppose you'll tell me that *The Quibbler* qualifies too."

Hermione smiled again. "Well, it was the only one that was willing to print the truth about Voldemort and Harry." As soon as she spoke these words, she realised her mistake, for Lucius' face darkened, and he seemed to flinch. Hermione felt foolish for bringing up the past. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she apologised immediately. "I sometimes speak without thinking; please, don't be angry."

Lucius shrugged eloquently. "No matter," he said, trying to pretend he wasn't affected. "I suppose I shall have to get used to things like that. We all made mistakes."

Remembering Narcissa's graciousness, Hermione said quietly. "You did what you thought was best. The past is the past, and if I brought it up and upset you, then I did it unintentionally and I apologise." Then, she did a very brave and Gryffindor thing; she leaned up on her toes and kissed Lucius on his cheek.

Lucius stared down at the young woman, who was blushing furiously, with something akin to wonder. He realised that the entire world would see an image of her shy, tentative kiss tomorrow morning. She had kissed him publicly; she had apologised and then shown the world that there was no bad blood between them. Overcome with emotion, he smiled down at her gently before pulling her closer and squeezing her hand. "I'm so glad you and Cissy have grown close," he said at last to the top of her head. "We both always wanted a daughter; I think you will do quite nicely."

Hermione blushed once more. She still found it hard to imagine that she had grown so close to the Malfoys. A few months ago, they would have killed her on sight merely on principle. Unsure of how to respond, she hid her burning face in his shoulder.

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## Chapter Seventeen: The Malfoys entertain

*Chapter 17 of 40*

The Malfoys hold a soiree to celebrate Draco's eighteenth birthday. Severus' plans for seduction are starting to gather momentum.

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May had turned into June, and a month had passed since the fall of the Dark Lord. The days were glorious and brilliant, as if British weather was determined to make up for the simply dreadful summer of the previous year. June was traditionally a time for weddings and celebrations in both the Muggle and wizarding world. Thus, all the important and influential families planned festivities to celebrate the coming of mid-summer and the fall of Voldemort. In keeping with the spirit, the Malfoys had decided to combine their private celebration of Draco's eighteenth birthday on the fifth with a much larger garden party for the victors on the following day.

When the invitations were sent out, Hermione felt a maelstrom of emotions. On the one hand, she was afraid and reluctant to attend an event at Malfoy Manor. No matter her newfound closeness to the Malfoys, it was still the place that had seen her tortured. However, on the other hand, there was a strong feeling of curiosity as well. Although she did not have pleasant memories of Malfoy Manor, her new friend Cissy was insistent, telling her repeatedly that she would not recognise the drawing-room and entrance hall. Cissy kept saying that the house and its occupants were very different now. Hermione had grown to trust the older woman, and a part of her was inquisitive enough to want to attend. Besides, her reasonable side told her that not attending would imply a severe lack of trust in the Malfoys and would appear as a slap in the face after their generosity and kindness towards her.

Although Harry was worried about Hermione's invitation to the private dinner due to his first hand knowledge of the nightmares Hermione had suffered, he did not try to stop her attendance. One of the first things he had learned through his initial lessons at Auror Entrance Preparation was that confronting the scene of a traumatic experience was a good way of purging one's fears and phobias. Besides, Harry realised that the Malfoys would not risk hurting Hermione since the rest of members of the Order were all attending the picnic on the Malfoy estate the very next day.

Hermione had not mentioned her invitation to the soiree to the Weasleys. Even though Ron was now going to Auror Entrance Preparation classes and had calmed down significantly, she still did not feel completely comfortable in his presence. Molly and Ginny were still ignoring her as much as possible, and Hermione had not visited the Burrow since the fall of Voldemort. However, Ginny learned of Hermione's invitation through Harry and informed the Weasleys.

When Ron heard of the invitation, he was especially vocal with his objections. He had stopped by Grimmauld Place to collect Harry one evening for a game of Quidditch at the Burrow. "Mione, you know what those gits are like; they're probably laughing at your gullibility just like the rest of the wizarding world. Don't go. They are just using you. Besides, how you can want to spend time with dirty Slytherins is beyond me."

Harry overheard Ron's remarks and was immediately aroused into anger. "Come on, Ron, if it wasn't for those dirty Slytherins, I'd probably be dead, and Voldemort would be still in charge of the wizarding world."

Ron said nothing; he just shrugged his shoulders and reached for another piece of Kreacher's delicious fruit cake.

Harry rubbed his forehead and continued, "I may not like the Malfoys, but Narcissa lied to Voldemort to save me. You've got to admit that whatever their faults, they love their family."

Ron just sighed in disgust and replied, "You're both crazy, but it isn't any skin off my nose if you both get used by gits like that."

Harry stared at Ron. Ron had always been his trusted friend, his sounding board and co-conspirator in all his schemes and plans, but Harry realised that Hermione would never say something like that. She would never let him do something she believed was wrong, even if it meant that he would not speak to her or end up hating her for a while.

Despite the mixed feedback, Hermione decided she would go. Things had improved dramatically since the fall of Voldemort, and she realised that her not attending would put a lie to their new-found familiarity. The evening of the soiree, Hermione dressed very carefully for the dinner. She wore the lovely cream lace concoction selected for her by Cissy with the strappy gold sandals they had bought together. Looking at the pretty dress, Hermione felt like a fool for her indecision. The Malfoys had been kind to her; they were changing their ways, and she above all, should help them since she realised how much their integration into society would please Professor Snape. If she was going to try seeing where things went with him, then getting closer to his friends was surely the best way to proceed.

Dressed in her new gown, she twirled in front of the mirror and admired her figure. It was hard to believe that the elegant woman looking back at her was really herself. Cissy did have an excellent eye for clothes, for despite the dress being of a fairly simple design, it highlighted Hermione's slim waist and brought out her surprisingly curvaceous figure.

She Flooded to Malfoy Manor with some trepidation, for despite all of her rationalising, she could not forget that she had been tortured by Cissy's evil sister in this very house. But as soon as she entered the foyer, she saw Kingsley Shacklebolt speaking to Lucius. The sight of Kingsley set Hermione at ease. If the Minister was here, everything would indeed be fine.

After Hermione was greeted by both men, they made their way to the elegant drawing-room. Its light and airy colours, which were a stark contrast to the dark room that Hermione remembered, made her smile brightly at Cissy. *My new friend has spoken the truth*, acknowledged Hermione silently; *the house has indeed been transformed*. The rest of the guests were already present and gathered in little clusters around the room.

Besides herself and the three Malfoys, the rest of the invitees included Astoria Greengrass, Professor Snape and an elegant witch who turned out to be a Healer in Greece called Tisiphone Lestrange. Hermione's eyes widened at the surname, but she admonished herself with the thought that surely a Healer couldn't have also been a Death Eater. Also in attendance was Narcissa's estranged sister Andromeda Black, who had brought her grandson, Teddy, with her. Cissy had mentioned to Hermione that the family was trying to reunite now that the reason for their falling out was no more. The final person to be introduced to Hermione was Lucius' cousin, Julius Malfoy, who looked remarkably like him. He greeted her with a flourish.

"Ah," said Julius with a knowing look at Lucius, "the brains of the Golden Trio. How delightful." He kissed her hand graciously and said, "I've heard and read lots of good things about you."

Hermione blushed. "I'm sure most of it is totally exaggerated," she said modestly.

"Not at all," said Julius seriously. "My cousin is not one to flatter unless it is essential, and if that is the case, it is only done to the person in question, not to others when the subject is not present." He smirked in a manner that was so like Lucius that Hermione thought they could have been twins. Then, as if wanting to change the subject, he went on, "Lucius and I run the elf-made wine and mead conglomerate. I live and work in Italy. The weather is better and the food and wine even more so."

Hermione smiled. She realised he was making her feel at ease. "My parents used to love skiing in the Alps," she said in response.

"Yes," responded Julius, "skiing is one of the many Muggle activities I've come to love. I'll tell you about the others another time. I wouldn't want to annoy Lucius by monopolising your company all evening."

Hermione laughed again. She liked the chatty man. He was very different in personality to Lucius, despite their startlingly similar countenance and build.

Hermione's laugh drew Severus who had been secretly watching the young woman since the moment she entered the room. She looked like a vision of loveliness in her ivory dress: feminine and sensual yet at the same time painfully virginal. He had tried to control himself by not approaching her immediately, but seeing her laugh with Julius made him feel left out. Although he realised he was well on the way to making a fool of himself in his attraction for the younger woman, he still could not stop himself from joining the pair.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," said Severus gravely before nodding his head to Julius.

"Professor Snape," said Hermione, a catch in her voice and a blush on her cheek. "It's good to see you, sir," she added softly.

"Indeed," said Severus, who was immediately put at ease by her blushing display of awareness at his presence.

Severus was not the only one who picked up on Hermione's feelings of disquiet around the Potions Master. Julius noticed the change in her relaxed manner too. Wanting to test the reason behind the tension in the air Julius said, "There were some very charming photographs of the opening dance at the Order of Merlin Awards presentation. You both made a wonderful couple."

Hermione blushed bright red at this comment and looked round the room for a means of escape.

Severus gazed directly at Julius as if analysing the comment for hidden meanings before changing the topic briskly. "Miss Granger, did you know that Julius, here, is merely a sophisticated version of our own Horace Slughorn? He too collects people and claims to know everyone of importance in Southern Europe."

Julius laughed at this remark. "No claims, Severus, I do know everyone of importance in Southern Europe."

As both men laughed, Hermione smiled. Now that the topic of conversation had moved away from the photos in the press, she was able to relax. She hadn't liked having her feelings discussed. For although Hermione wanted to deny it, she knew that the photos had captured the moments on the dance floor with disquieting accuracy. Hermione herself had gasped at seeing the blatantly intimate moment in the newspapers and had been unable to prevent herself from cutting out the glossy prints from *Witch Weekly* and hiding them in her bedroom drawer. She had told herself that they were ostensibly to show her parents once their memories were brought back, but she had kept them mainly because she liked to look at the intense expression on Professor Snape's face as he gazed down at her with focus and concentration as they danced silently to the music that still seemed to swim in her conscience.

Not long after, dinner was announced. Once everyone was seated around the large dining table, Narcissa smiled and said, "I've had the elves recreate a slightly altered version of the ten course meal designed by Auguste Boulanger. Bon appetite."

There were murmurs of delight, and Severus, who was once again placed beside Hermione, leaned over and whispered, "Miss Granger, you're indeed in for a treat. The feast is going to be the best of French cuisine."

Little menu cards appeared in front of each place setting. Hermione read hers and wondered at the list of things to eat.

***Course One - Scallops on Rocket and King Prawns with Sweet Chilli Sauce***

***Course Two - Hickory Smoked Heirloom Tomato consommé***

***Course Three - Port Poached Salmon with Lobster Mouseline***

***Course Four - Grilled Mignon Medallions with sauce Lyonnaise***

***Course Five - Herb-Encrusted Roast Baby Rack of Lamb***

***Course Six - Crisp Romine Salad***

***Course Seven - Roast Squab with Elderberry Sauce***

***Course Eight - Cold Asparagus Vinaigrette***

***Course Nine - Basseterre Spinach Pastry***

***Course Ten Warm Chocolate Fondue with Vanilla Ice-cream***

A little overwhelmed, Hermione whispered, "What's squab?"

"It's pigeon," said Severus quietly in amusement.

"Oh," said Hermione. "I've never had pigeon before. I've had partridge, but never pigeon." She realised she was babbling out of nervousness at his presence by her side.

Thankfully, Kingsley was a warm and somehow fatherly figure on her other side, and it allowed her to relax further. However, Kingsley seemed to be spending most of his time speaking to Andromeda. To Hermione, Andromeda was a real inspiration. Despite losing her husband, only child and son-in-law in the long fight against Voldemort and the Death Eaters, she was gracious enough to attend the Malfoys' soiree. It made Hermione glad that she too had accepted Cissy's invitation. For Hermione realised that she had not lost as much as Andromeda. And yet, here was Andromeda, sitting next to Lucius and doing her best to heal the rifts of blind prejudice and horror that had been the Voldemort wars. Teddy, her baby grandson, had been whisked away into the long-empty Malfoy nursery with a contingent of gleeful house-elves who were delighted to have a little wizard to care for.

The conversation around the table was interesting and humorous. Julius Malfoy was especially witty, and he and Lucius seemed to enjoy sniping at each other whilst smirking like sharks. Hermione found it all fascinating. She realised that she was rather privileged to see the Slytherins at such ease.

Severus had been rather quiet at the start of the meal, but as the excellent wine that accompanied each course was consumed, he, and everyone else around the table started to relax further.

Hermione was conscious of the amount of alcohol being served and tried her best to be really careful by only sipping at each glass, but by the end of the meal, she had unknowingly consumed nearly five glasses of wine and was feeling very tipsy. She was a little worried, but realised that in the presence of so many responsible people, especially Kingsley, Andromeda and Professor Snape, that she really did not have anything to fear. Besides, Cissy had insisted that Hermione spend the night, as everyone else who was invited was. Therefore, she did not have to worry about Flooing or Apparating when intoxicated.

After the meal, they all retired to the drawing-room, where Narcissa sat like a queen on her ornate French sofa with Andromeda and a giggling Tisiphone beside her. Draco and Astoria wandered over to stand by the French windows looking out into the Japanese water garden while holding hands and smiling fondly at each other. Lucius and Julius sat by the cheerful fire, drinking port and smirking at each other. Hermione hoped she never found out what made the two of them look that wicked and gleeful.

As Hermione stood looking at the titles of the books that lined one wall of the drawing-room, Severus approached her with his glass of cognac. "If you find this collection of books interesting," said Severus, "you'll love the Malfoys' library. It's got a very impressive collection, with generations of Malfoys having added to it in a myriad of diverse subjects."

Narcissa, who had overheard Severus' comment, immediately nodded in agreement and said, "Yes, Severus, you must show Hermione the library. I'm sure the two of you can spend the rest of the evening pouring over ancient manuscripts."

Hermione blushed because she knew Cissy was setting her up. When she looked at the older woman, Cissy just smirked and waved the two of them away.

The library was beautiful, but it was Severus who drew her attention. He had a lazy curl to his lips and a smouldering intensity to his gaze. As she made her way to stand under the domed glass ceiling of the library, he moved to stand by the darkened window. Looking at her intently, he said suggestively, "Miss Granger, you look like you've been dipped in molten metal, so well does the dress cling to your curves."

At Hermione's blush, he murmured seductively, "I wonder if touching you will burn my hands."

Hermione was speechless. Her heart beat wildly. She had never really been seduced or had a man pay any sort of sexual attention to her.

Severus caressed the ancient leather of the book bindings and ran his hands along the leather arm chair before sitting down on the sofa to look at her.

Hermione watched his actions with eyes large with arousal. As his long-fingered hands trailed over the leather of the arm chair, she recalled his gentle caress of her bare back at the Order of Merlin presentation dance. Shivering in awareness, she tried her best to appear composed, when in truth she felt very foolish and suddenly very conscious of her sexuality. When he patted the seat next to him, she didn't know how to refuse, especially because she really did want to sit beside him. Walking shakily across the room to the sofa, she lowered herself beside him cautiously.

As Hermione sat nervously on the edge of the sofa, Severus was once again struck by her innocence. It was obvious that she was both aroused and afraid of her attraction. With an inward smirk at his own raging excitement, Severus began speaking to her in his mesmerising voice, asking her why she went back for his body.

The evening passed in a swirl of sexual tension for Hermione. She was unaware of what she said; she just knew that Professor Snape spent the rest of the evening watching her, smiling his mysterious, half-smile half-smirk that made her feel as if her insides were nothing but a puddle of goo. His hand lazily toyed with her curls as he spoke to her of things like the rebuilding of Hogwarts and Cissy's plans for the orangery.

At some point in the evening, he took her hand in his and said, "I believe it is time we retire, Miss Granger."

Hermione nearly shuddered at the implied meaning, at hearing the collective 'we'.

Severus just smirked sardonically at her and led her back to the drawing-room so that they could make their good night salutations. Julius and Tisiphone had already retired, as had Kingsley and Andromeda. Draco and Astoria were out in the rose garden, so they said "Good night," to Cissy and Lucius.

Narcissa casually said, "Severus, you have your old summer guest room. Hermione is directly opposite. Do you mind, showing her to bed?"

Lucius smirked at the obvious ploy, as did Severus.

Hermione just blushed furiously again and said, "Good night," one final time. She could hardly think as she was escorted up to their rooms in the south wing by Professor Snape.

Severus offered her his arm as they walked up to bed. She held his arm and felt the strength beneath her fingers. He was lean, but very muscular. She had admired his grace of movement, his almost sensuous, sinuous stalk, but feeling his strength, the intensity of his gaze was tremendously overpowering. At the door of her chamber, he lowered his head until he was whispering directly into her ear. "Never fear, Miss Granger. When I ravish you, and I will, you will want it as much as I already do."

She gasped out loud at his audacity and bravely looked up at him.

He seemed to take her upward glance as a sort of challenge, for he lowered his mouth and kissed her boldly, hungrily like a man who was starving. There was no tentative exploration, no request to enter her mouth. Instead, he stormed her defences, and when his arms wrapped tightly around her waist like bands of steel, to anchor her to his hard body, she gasped again. He thrust his tongue into her mouth at her gasp and slid his hands to cup her bottom and pull her intimately against his erection. Hermione was lost; she had never been kissed with such intensity, such superb technique.

As if they were dancing, he moved them and turned them around until she was pressed against the wall beside her door. Using the wall to hold her up, his hands caressed her body, his fingers stroking her bared neck and shoulders before cupping her breasts in the palms of his hands. "Utterly delicious," he whispered in her ear, his mouth nipping and tasting her throat and shoulder.

Then, with a surprising display of control, he kissed her lips once more, much more gently than he had in all of the previous moments, and reluctantly let her go. Once he had stepped back, he smirked and opened the door to her room and wished her, "Good night." Trailing his hand against her soft cheek, he murmured suggestively, "Like I said, Miss Granger, when I ravish you, you will be ready and be mindless with need."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Eighteen: The entertainment continues

*Chapter 18 of 40*

The Malfoys host a garden party. Hermione stakes her claim.

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(iii) A big hug of gratitude to my beautiful, brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Hermione spent a restless night. She kept reliving the kiss, that most fabulous kiss, over and over again *Who would have thought that Professor Snape could kiss like that*, thought Hermione. She knew he wanted her; he had made it shockingly plain. And yet, he had left her after what was really just a fairly brief *snog*, *God*, thought Hermione with a silly giggle, *I snogged Professor Snape and I liked it*.

Breakfast the next morning proved to be a quiet affair. Everyone seemed subdued, and Cissy was distracted and busy getting everything perfectly set up for the garden party. The other guests had been invited for eleven o'clock, so it was a bit of a mad rush to be ready for their arrival, especially given the hour in which the soiree had ended the night before. Dinner had gone on for quite a while.

Professor Snape continued to be charming, although more restrained in the company of others. Hermione could not help but feel slightly disappointed, though relieved at the same time. She had enjoyed the attention and the knowledge that he was focused solely on her. However, she rationalised that Professor Snape was not likely to be overly demonstrative given how private a person he generally was, even in the presence of people he obviously was at ease with.

After last night's unspoken admission of mutual desire, Hermione took extra care with her appearance for the garden picnic. She spent ages debating what to do with her

hair before finally giving it up as a bad job and braiding it as neatly as she could into an elegant French plait. Now she was doubly glad that Cissy had taken her shopping and helped her to choose a more adult wardrobe.

It wasn't that Hermione had suddenly grown vain, but she was conscious that she didn't want to appear too much like a gangly teenager, even though that was what she technically still was. She wanted instead to project an image of a young woman.

Going through the things she'd packed, she settled for a simple sleeveless shift dress in amber linen with a cowl neckline. The dress brought out the golden highlights in her hair really well and complemented the colour of her eyes. Hermione was not really comfortable with wearing much make-up, but a simple peach tinted lip gloss and some mascara made her feel like she had done enough to be ready for the party. Pleased with her appearance, yet confident that she didn't look like she'd been trying too hard, she made her way down to the rose garden to greet the guests who would be arriving shortly.

Narcissa had arranged for a magnificent buffet to be laid out for people who wanted to mingle and picnic rugs with baskets of food that kept filling for those who wanted to lounge scattered all over the grounds. The guest list had once again been kept fairly small, given the number of people that were generally invited to high society events. However, most of the senior members of the Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore's Army had been invited along with prominent members of the Wizarding pureblood society. It would be interesting to see the different groups rub shoulders and try to pretend that this eclectic mix of individuals with disparate ideologies and world-views was normal. The Malfoys, however, had made it a point to ensure that the press were kept firmly out and much speculation ensued in the media.

Rita Skeeter, among other members of the world press, who seemed to currently spend her time watching the heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts, could only take pictures from outside the gates. The barring of the press from the Malfoy party had generated particular interest following the publication of photos from the Order of Merlin Award ceremony. There had been wild suggestions ranging from those that suggested that Hermione was Lucius' secret love child to those that suggested that she was his mistress, circulating following the much discussed kiss and dance.

Lucius and Cissy, of course, had been delighted with the rumours, finding the controversy utterly amusing. This in tandem with pictures of Hermione dancing the opening dance with Severus and then partnering Harry had meant that Ginny's utmost desire to be the most photographed woman of the night had failed completely. This had caused the red-head to be even more irritated since she considered it to be Hermione's deliberate attempt at stealing the limelight.

Skeeter had never been one to follow the rules. Desperate for a good story, she attempted to enter the Malfoy grounds uninvited in her Animagus beetle form. She was, however, unsuccessful because the Malfoys, as former Death Eaters, had extremely stringent wards that ensured that anyone not specifically invited, or anyone who attempted entry in disguise, was barred from the property. The malicious reporter caused quite the uproar when she was caught and tossed out by the magical barriers.

Harry who had witnessed the ejection smirked in elation. Grabbing the chance that presented itself to him, he made his way to Kingsley. "You know, I don't think she's registered as an Animagus," he murmured with a pleased grin.

Kingsley raised his eyebrow in enquiry. "Interesting piece of information, Harry. I'll look into it."

Hermione enjoyed catching up with members of Dumbledore's Army and chatted to her friends as she circulated among the younger guests. Once she's said her hellos to everyone, she sat with Luna. She had not forgotten her resolution to get to know the intriguing Ravenclaw better. Harry saw the two girls sitting alone on one of the picnic rugs, engaged in animated conversation. Glad to see more friends, he moved to join them. He was finding the attention and notoriety tiring.

Once he was comfortably sprawled on the blanket, Harry enquired curiously, "How was dinner last night?"

Hermione replied with a grin, "Oh, Harry, it was wonderful. Kingsley and Andromeda were there as well, and we had a really pleasant and interesting time."

Harry nodded. "I'm glad you were comfortable having dinner and even spending the night at the Malfoys."

"So am I," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Seeing Andromeda made me realise how foolish I would have been if I had refused. If she can forgive the Malfoys, given the years of tension, bad blood and mistrust between them, then surely so can I."

Neville was the next member to join their little group. Smiling broadly, the young man sat down and helped Hermione lay out the food and drink that had been carefully arranged in the picnic basket. The spread was fabulously good. One glance at Neville made it obvious to Hermione that he had spent his time since the battle working in the gardens. He was already tanned and looked extremely handsome and manly.

Ginny arrived with the contingent of Weasleys, looking extremely pretty in a pale yellow sundress. Her face soured though on seeing Harry seated with Hermione, Luna and Neville. Walking up to Harry, she kissed him rather passionately. "Let's go find ourselves a blanket," said Ginny with a whine. "We never seem to get time alone."

Harry coloured brightly in embarrassment. "Come sit with us," said Harry. "I've not really had a chance to catch up with Luna."

This was a rather tactless thing to say, and Harry did seem to realise his error almost immediately, for Ginny turned to stare rather fiercely at Luna.

Trying to mitigate the damage, Harry said, "Why don't you go sit with Ron and the others; I'll join you in a bit."

Ginny pouted in anger. "Harry Potter, you're a coward and a tease." Then, with a toss of her hair, she flounced off.

Luna and Hermione both looked uncomfortable and didn't know how to react to Ginny's irrational display of temper. Neville, however, rushed to the rescue and said very diplomatically, "Ginny is always fiery; she does live up to the colour of her hair."

Neville's humorous remark broke the tension and they all laughed. The four relaxed, catching up on each others' news.

Neville informed the others, "I've been hard at work with Professor Sprout in the greenhouses and gardens at Hogwarts. Since most of the battle was fought on the grounds, a lot of damage was done to the magical plants. The giants tore out trees, and the Forbidden Forest needed a fair bit of loving attention and replanting."

Hermione had not thought of the damage done to the Forbidden Forest. She realised that reconstruction work would be taking place all over the grounds as well as the castle.

Harry enjoyed the time he spent with Luna and Neville. They, like Hermione, expected nothing of him, and their behaviour around him had not altered or changed since the Battle of Hogwarts. Given the scrutiny he seemed to be under almost constantly, their gentle teasing and company was a blessed relief.

Not long after they had begun eating some of the picnic feast, Neville was called over by his grandmother to play with Teddy and sit with Andromeda. Harry was left with Luna and Hermione. Seeing the breaking up of the group, Cissy called Hermione over to where she stood conversing with Tisiphone.

Hermione smiled as she joined the other women. Cissy was in the process of teasing Tisiphone.

"Just because I was busy," said Narcissa with a mocking smirk, "didn't mean I was oblivious to what was going on last night. I'm quite sure I saw you creeping out of Julius' chamber early this morning."

"Cissy," said Tisiphone with a surprisingly youthful giggle. "You're such a gossip."

Hermione blushed. She realised it could easily have been her doing the creeping back to her chamber if Professor Snape had been a little bit more forceful. Hermione's blush seemed to remind Cissy of her attempts at match-making.

Turning to look at the young woman, Narcissa asked, "So, my dear, is Severus as good as Tisiphone's countenance proclaims Julius to be?"

Hermione blushed even more if that was possible. "I've not, I've never ..." began Hermione, before stopping short in embarrassment.

The two women, however, immediately realised that Hermione had not spent the night with Severus. Narcissa made comforting noises and apologised. "I'm sorry, my dear, I sometimes forget how young you are. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Tactfully, Tisiphone changed the subject and said, "It really is a pleasure to see Severus looking so well. We are so lucky that he was retrieved when he was. If the treatment had been delayed by even a few more hours, the consequences would have been much more long term."

Hermione was now even more grateful that she had gone to retrieve Professor Snape's body. Quietly, she confessed, "I thought he was dead. I just wanted to make sure his body was given a proper send off. It terrifies me to think how easily I could have brushed off going back due to tiredness or lethargy."

Lucius saw the women having a serious discussion and came to inform them with a smirk, "Today is for flirtations and laughter. You all look far too serious, and that is not permissible." Then, with a broad wink at Cissy, he slipped his arm around Tisiphone and said, "You, my dear Healer, are required to entertain my very irritating cousin. I fear that Julius is beginning to frighten our esteemed guests with his unique brand of charm."

Narcissa and Hermione shared a smile. It was quite obvious that Lucius was playing match-maker and ensuring that Tisiphone and Julius had time together.

Not long after, Narcissa drew Hermione's attention to Severus, who was being pursued by the newly widowed, second Mrs. Nott. Dressed in an extremely low-cut dress that was almost transparent in the bright sunshine, the second Mrs. Nott looked very much as though she was out on the pull. Her face screwed up in distaste, Narcissa said, "Please, my dear, go rescue him from Clarissa's clutches. She married the besotted Odin Nott, even though she was old enough to be his daughter. Now that she's rid of him, she is seeking another husband."

Narcissa knew how to arouse Hermione's sense of jealousy. She might not have been brave enough to allow Severus to seduce her, but she was not going to let him fall into the clutches of another woman, especially not one as odious as Clarissa Nott.

Hermione looked at Narcissa, and when Narcissa nodded, she headed off to speak to Severus.

"Professor Snape," Hermione said brightly, "I was wondering if you'd care to go for a stroll. Cissy was telling me that there are loads of interesting potion ingredients growing in the orangery which she said I was sure to find fascinating."

"Did she really?" asked Severus with a smirk. He knew what Narcissa was up to, but bowing politely to the displeased Clarissa, he took Hermione's hand, placed it upon his arm and guided her towards the orangery. As they walked through the park, they shared a pleasant conversation. He pointed out the exotic flowers and shrubs that could be used for various potion ingredients, some that didn't even grow at Hogwarts. Once ensconced behind the glass walls, he asked casually, "Do you know a lot of these plants and flowers are aphrodisiacs and are used extensively in lust potions?"

Hermione blushed furiously. She could not understand why this man had the ability to make her feel like a gauche girl with a single phrase.

Severus smirked inwardly. He had hoped to seduce *the delectable Miss Granger* last night, but he had realised that she was still unsure. She desired him, that much was obvious, but she was not ready to progress further. In a way, her innocence pleased him. He did not want his victory to come easily, for he wanted to win her affections completely so that she would always be his. Severus was very self-aware, and he realised that he had consciously worked his entire adult life to ensure that he would never again be discarded as casually and as thoughtlessly as he had been by his so-called love, Lily. Severus was extremely possessive, and so he reasoned, *if I make Miss Granger, or indeed, any woman, my legal wife and the mother of my progeny, I shall insist upon complete fidelity, both sexually and emotionally. If this is to be the case, then I will need to court my future bride with great care. I will make her desire me absolutely at the very least, even if the Dark Veela curse makes love an almost impossible possibility.*

Playing with Hermione, Severus said, "I wonder why Cissy mentioned the potion ingredients. Do you think she wants me to teach you how to brew some aphrodisiacs?"

Hermione goggled at him. "Really, Professor," she finally said with a blush.

His smirk turned into a shark-like grin, and he patted her hand that was still on his arm. "We don't need them, do we?" he asked conversationally. "I think we did perfectly well on our own."

Hermione realised he was teasing her and shook her head in amused exasperation. She couldn't believe that this flirtatious, humorous man was her dour Potions master.

Severus could see the wheels in Hermione's head turn as she began to piece his personality together. Wanting to draw the attention away from his plans and schemes, he began pointing out Lucius' exotic orchid collection. Once they had examined some of the exotic blooms, he said regretfully, "It is a pity that the Lestranges are dead. Before all this madness with the Dark Lord, Rabastan had the best orchid collection in Britain." Reaching up, he stroked the petal of a beautiful yellow bloom. Then, in a thoughtful tone of voice, Severus said, "I wonder what happened to the plants."

Hermione suggested, "You never know, sir, they might still be alive, albeit wild."

Severus agreed as he moved onto the next orange bloom, "It is possible, I suppose." Frowning thoughtfully, he said, "I must ask Lucius to investigate. The estate has, of course, passed on to Narcissa as the closest living relative of the Lestranges."

Curiosity aroused, Hermione asked, "What about Tisiphone?"

"Oh," said Severus in explanation, "even though they share a common surname, Tisiphone isn't as closely connected. Narcissa would inherit everything that belonged to Bella, naturally. Nothing would have been left for Andromeda."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Nineteen: The Fudge Ball

Chapter 19 of 40

Another ball is held. Harry begins to think.



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- (iii) And finally, a big hug of gratitude to my beautiful, brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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The constant whirl of parties and outings continued, and Hermione, who had never been part of the wizarding society social scene, was swamped with invitations. Most she wanted desperately to avoid, but she had been informed sternly by Cissy that she should make it a point to be seen at each and every one of them.

"You need to get yourself known, not just as a heroine of the battleground or the brains of the Golden Trio, but as a person in your own right," explained Narcissa. "It is only then that you will be able to use your position and hard-won fame effectively. If you stay an unknown entity, your ability to bring about real change politically and socially will be lost."

Hermione heeded her friend's advice. She realised that if nothing else, Cissy understood the importance of appearances and networking. Thus, when an invitation to the ball being held at the Fudge residence arrived for the following Saturday, the thirteenth of June, despite her dislike of the odious politician, Hermione accepted and insisted that Harry do so as well. It was well known that Cornelius Fudge was trying, currently unsuccessfully, to win back his position as Minister for Magic in the elections that were to be held in the coming spring. He was trying to gain the approval of the Boy-Who-Bested-He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. And as Hermione said to Harry, "The best way to ensure he doesn't get up to mischief is for us to keep a close eye on him."

Harry agreed. He was adamant that Cornelius Fudge never come back into office. So despite Harry's reluctance, he too accepted the invitation. The newspapers, of course, made a big deal about the acceptance of the Golden Trio, information obviously leaked by a very smug Mrs. Fudge.

Ginny was, of course, very keen to attend. When Harry spoke of his misgivings and reluctance to keep accepting the long list of invitations, Ginny said passionately to her boyfriend, "Harry, you must go. Besides, I've always wanted to be a part of high society. Please, Harry, you're my ticket into a world I could never be part of otherwise. I couldn't go without you. If you didn't go, the press wouldn't be interested in covering the ball, and I won't be photographed. You owe me after the way you were seen with Luna."

Harry was starting to feel extremely uncomfortable with Ginny's mercenary ways. He realised that even though she did understand him, she was very keen on the public adoration that was directed at her as the girlfriend of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. He, on the other hand, wanted to vanish into Auror training and concentrate on leading a quiet, private life. He was tired of being in the gaze of the public and the media. He knew how fickle society could be and how easily they could turn against him.

What Ginny really wanted was to be the fiancée...in time, the wife...of Harry James Potter, saviour of the Wizarding World. She had realised after the press conference that Harry was by no means assuredly hers. She was desperate to rectify that situation as quickly as possible. Using all of her charms, Ginny was, without much subtlety, pushing Harry for an engagement ring. She kept bringing up the topic of how she would love to be a June bride. She even let Harry know that a year-long engagement would give them plenty of time to get to know each other better. Knowing how reluctant Harry was about the whole sex situation, given Molly's stance on promiscuity, Ginny even boldly informed Harry that she would be able to sleep with him openly once they were engaged. "Harry, darling, I could even move into Grimmauld Place if we were engaged. Mum wouldn't stop me, not once we were betrothed."

Harry was appalled. He did love Ginny, but he was still trying to come to grips with all that he had done during the war. He had used the Cruciatius Curse and meant it. He had Imperiused; he had wanted more than anything to kill Voldemort. After the many hours he had spent in discussion with Kingsley and the trainers in the Auror Programme, Harry understood the consequences of his exposure to Dark magic. He had much to reconcile, much to learn. Even though the lure of easy sex with the woman he loved... wanted... was tempting, Harry had finally grown up enough to realise that he was not ready for marriage. Hoping desperately that Ginny would understand, Harry said gently, "Ginny, it wouldn't feel right. Let's wait until you finish your seventh year. There's no rush, surely."

This, of course, didn't please the red-head, but she was smart enough not to push Harry too far. Instead, she smiled, but put down his reluctance to the meddling of Hermione. *That bitch*, thought Ginny irrationally. *It's her fault Harry won't sleep with me. She didn't sleep with Ron, so now Harry thinks it's wrong for us to get engaged and move on. Cow!*

Luna had returned the previous week from her holiday in Sweden and had made her first outing to the much acclaimed Malfoy picnic. It had been a brave move, for she had not forgotten how she had been held prisoner in the dungeons of the Manor. But Luna and Hermione had maintained a spirited and almost daily correspondence since the day following the Battle of Hogwarts, and Luna had heard in great detail how Hermione had been adopted into the Slytherin circle. Though Luna had vanished almost immediately into the bosom of her Swedish cousins with her father after his release from Azkaban, she was perfectly aware of her promise to Kingsley. She and Hermione had discussed and analysed everything that Hermione had learned about pureblood concerns and politics. That Luna's cousins shared many of the concerns so well expressed by Headmaster Snape and Narcissa Malfoy had strengthened the Ravenclaw's desire to return to England and aid her friend in her quest to reconcile modern Muggle-born values and old, traditional pureblood customs and rituals.

Luna's father, although he was not yet completely recovered, had finally put some of his ghosts of Azkaban to rest, and she had been able to persuade him of the need for them to be in England. She wanted to finish her education at Hogwarts. Although moving to Sweden, the land of her mother, was tempting, Luna loved Hogwarts.

Pleased that she could now finally be with her friends, Luna gladly accepted the invitation to the Fudge Ball too. Fudge was being extremely conciliatory and had even invited Xenophilius, which greatly pleased Luna.

On the night of the ball, Luna wore a simple white silk dress, which had belonged to her late mother, with daisies in her hair. She had on no make-up and no jewels. She did, however, look like an angel with her halo of pale blond hair framing her tanned and healthy face.

In comparison, Ginny had dressed in the latest of fashion finery. She was using her position as the girlfriend of Harry Potter to wear the latest of designer labels on loan, assuring the fashion houses that having her seen in their creations was sure to boost sales. That she was completely correct in her assumptions only went to up Ginny's confidence and fame among the readers of the glossy wizarding magazines. For the Fudge Ball, Ginny wore a stunningly sexy ball gown in black silk, bedecked with glitter and beading, which did nothing to hide her ample curves and creamy skin.

Unfortunately, although Ginny did look ravishing, Luna's simplicity, for Harry, was breathtaking. He was male enough to appreciate all that was on display, but after his quiet chat the day before with Severus, Harry's understanding of Ginny's desperation for publicity had taken on a sinister and unpleasant undertone. *How odd to call him Severus*, thought Harry with an internal grin. *Who would have ever thought that the bat would lower himself enough to extend his hand half-way through the conversation and say, "I'm no longer your professor, Potter, just call me Severus."*

Severus had come into the Ministry to speak to Kingsley about the Weasleys, and Harry had been invited into the meeting due to his close association with the Weasley family. Kingsley and Severus had wanted Harry to use his influence to get Molly and Ginny to visit with Auror Fran Warrington to participate in exercises to control or better manage their Darker tendencies. When Harry had learned the details of how Kingsley, Minerva and Severus had already tried speaking to the Weasleys as a family after the last meeting of the Order of the Phoenix, he realised the problem was much more acute than he had ever imagined. For although Hermione had mentioned the meeting with the Weasleys previously, Harry had at that point really not fully comprehended the gravity of the situation. Now, though, the young man had been made fully cognisant of the state of affairs and realised that something had to be done to help the people he loved.

However, his concerned musings were interrupted by the sight of Luna and Neville. Harry couldn't help but smile broadly as he watched Luna dance with Neville. They were both laughing and having a lovely time, completely ignoring the many photographers lining the periphery of the ballroom. Once the song ended and Neville wandered off to get himself a drink, Luna continued to twirl around on her own, uncaring of the press. She was having fun, and to Harry, Luna looked the way a girl of sixteen should look. Ginny looked far too adult, and her mature style of attire made Harry rather uncomfortable. He had been forced to grow up sooner than he should have, but thankfully, his maturity had come with a sense of understanding of what was going on. He was really grateful that Kingsley had called in Severus. Despite Severus' aloof

and cold demeanour, Harry had come to admire and trust the taciturn man. Hermione's obvious respect and admiration had rubbed off on Harry, and Harry could not deny the fact that Severus was very well-versed in the Dark Arts. If the Order of the Phoenix's Dark Arts expert was worried, then Harry knew things were not getting better. Besides, Harry knew that Severus and the Malfoys had stepped in to help Hermione, who Harry now thought of, not as a best friend, but as his very own sister. Thus, the conversation with Severus and Kingsley had been, to Harry, extremely enlightening. He had known about his own changing magic, but learning about what was going on with the Weasleys, as well as his other friends, had helped him put things even more into perspective. Harry now understood why Hermione was adamant about going back to finish her final year of school. He, of course, was doing much the same thing, but instead of Hogwarts, he was entering Auror training, as were, thankfully, both Neville and Ron.

As Harry stood on the sidelines thinking and observing both Ginny and Luna, he realised that his fight against Darkness had only just begun. What Voldemort had signified was merely the tip of the iceberg. The problem was much more insidious. He could now also appreciate Hermione's tirade about the need to learn about the old ways, about the need to understand the Dark Arts.

Thinking about Hermione made Harry look towards his friend. He found her giggling in a corner with Luna. Harry was glad that Hermione and Luna had become close. As Harry watched, Luna walked away from Hermione and went up to Severus, who stood alone by the punch table. Standing up on tip toe, the brave Ravenclaw gave the stunned Slytherin a peck on the cheek before wandering off again. Harry observed the amazement that graced Severus' face before noting how the stern man looked not towards the retreating Ravenclaw, but towards the grinning Hermione. Harry watched as the Potions Master raised his eyebrow inquiringly at his now blushing friend. Harry had not really thought about the dynamics of that friendship, but as he watched Hermione blush furiously and Severus smirk in response, he realised that that was something else he would have to think of later.

Harry could not help but evaluate his relationship with Ginny much more seriously. It hurt him to see the way in which Hermione was being treated like a pariah by the Weasleys for breaking up with Ron. Just because he understood what drove their irrationality did not mean he had to like how it affected his truest friend.

Deciding that he had stood and brooded for long enough, Harry pasted a smile on his face and walked over to Hermione. "Hey, pretty sister, care to dance with your dunce of a brother?"

Hermione grinned back. "Of course, Harry. How could I refuse such a gallant request?"

Bringing up the topic that was foremost on his mind, Harry asked Hermione, "Seriously, 'Mione, what do you think of my relationship with Ginny?"

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione gently. "It all depends on what you want. But know this. I'll be your friend no matter what you decide and whom you end up with."

Harry smiled, "I know I can always count on you."

Hermione smiled back and gave his arm a squeeze.

Harry continued, "I don't like the way you're being treated by the Weasleys, though."

Hermione responded, "Don't worry about that, Harry. You know Molly always was ready to believe the worst of me. Remember the fiasco after the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry did remember the silly story in the newspaper and laughed.

Hermione smiled too. "My mother always said: when a door closes, a window opens. Just because Molly, Ron and Ginny are being difficult doesn't mean I'm without friends, Harry. I've found wonderful friends in Luna, in Professor Snape, in Cissy, Astoria and the rest of the Malfoys. Even Draco's being decent, which still shocks me more than being on friendly terms with Lucius."

Harry relaxed. He knew Hermione spoke the truth. She was glowing with happiness and did not seem to be alone or depressed.

After the dance ended, he kissed Hermione on the cheek and left her in the company of Cissy as he went to get himself a drink. He was just returning when he overheard Molly speaking to Ginny.

Molly was saying, "I told you that girl is up to no good. Look at the way she's dressed. First, she pushed Ron away so that she ended up camping with Harry alone in the forest, and then, after the battle, she told us all to leave Harry alone while he rested. What right did she have to bar us from Grimmauld Place? You are his girlfriend; you should have comforted him, and you should have stood with him in front of the world media on the day of the Victory of Hogwarts, not her and that Lovegood girl."

Harry waited with deep interest for Ginny's response, but her reply disappointed him greatly. "You know, Mum, I never really liked her. I only put up with her because Ron and Harry clung to her. Thank goodness Ron's broken up with her. An uptight cow, she thinks she's always right. She's nothing but a bookworm. She is so horrendous to live with. She does nothing but read and then stuff what she has learned down our throats, trying to show off how clever she is."

Harry was appalled. He knew he was more than a bit naïve at times, but he knew that despite whatever else, however much he had hurt Hermione in the past, doubted her in the past, she had always done what she thought was the best for him. She would risk his anger and hatred if she thought he needed to be told something or protected. Looking over to Hermione, who was now speaking to Neville, Harry could see nothing provocative about Hermione's dress. It was a pretty peachy-apricot gown with a golden belt that seemed to be of the Grecian style. Compared to Ginny's dress, even Harry could see that Hermione's single bared shoulder was very modest indeed.

He decided to seriously rethink his decision to propose to Ginny. She had been hinting so constantly that she wanted an engagement ring before returning to finish her seventh year that Harry had, in the decision of appeasing his girlfriend, thought that it was one possible solution. Now though, he realised that it would be a monumental mistake.

Deciding that he needed time and space before confronting his girlfriend, he turned the way he had come. As he made his way back towards the punch table, he spotted Luna, who was once more twirling by herself to the orchestra. With a grin, Harry approached Luna.

"Hey, Luna," said Harry with a smile. "Would you like to dance?"

Luna was entranced and she replied happily, "I'd love to dance, Harry. Isn't the music lovely?"

Harry agreed. The Fudges had spared no expense and had hired a wonderful orchestra to perform for their guests. Smiling, the two friends danced with much frivolity to the happy tune. Harry though was quiet as they jiggled around the room and Luna, who was as perceptive as ever, noticed at once that Harry looked lost and thoughtful.

In blunt honesty, Luna said softly, "I don't think you're enjoying all the public attention, are you, Harry? I think you should do your best to avoid being photographed so very often."

Harry smiled at his friend's ability to cut to the heart of the matter. With a nod, Harry replied, "I do hate it, Luna, but Ginny insists on being seen at all the parties in her nice dress robes."

Luna nodded and said serenely, "Then Ginny should do something to be famous. She shouldn't rely on you to take her places."

Harry watched Luna in fascination. He could not help but agree with Luna's pronouncement.

Luna went on peacefully, "Remember, Harry, people love you for who you are, not what you are or what you do or have done. That's beside the point."

As the dance ended, Luna kissed Harry on his cheek, much in the same way as Harry had watched her peck Severus on his cheek, before wandering away to look out of the balcony.

Harry realised that Luna was right. He was going to give Ginny and himself some real time and space apart. There was no need to rush headlong into a marriage just because he was starved of a family and felt afraid of being alone. He smiled at Hermione, who was once again dancing with Severus. *What an odd couple*, he thought fondly before he choked at the realisation. *A couple. Bloody hell! Is Hermione going out with Severus? No, it can't be*, said Harry to himself. Trying to calm his suddenly agitated mind, he reasoned, *It's like Hermione said: Severus is just being polite and kind because she went to retrieve his body.*

But then Harry got to pondering why Hermione was thinking of Severus at that most crucial of moments. That disquieting thought forced Harry to consider why the bat of the dungeons, the man most unlikely to be polite and kind, was acting so out of character with Hermione. Not too comfortable with the conclusions he was drawing, Harry decided to firmly place the puzzle of Severus and Hermione out of his mind for the time being. He would instead focus on enjoying the ball as best he could and think about how he was going to explain to Ginny his desire for distance in their relationship without it backfiring on both Luna and Hermione. The new, more aware, Harry was not foolish enough to be ignorant of the fact that it would be his two female friends who would bear the brunt of Ginny's wrath.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty: A new home for Severus

*Chapter 20 of 40*

Severus acquires a new home. Hermione pays him a visit.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story. Your reviews mean the world, and they help me keep writing.
- (iii) A big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Even though Severus had done up Spinner's End with the help of Narcissa, he had come to realise that his cramped Victorian terrace in Manchester was unfortunately too small for a family. Moreover, it was in too run-down of an area for him to want to do much with the exterior. Spinner's Row, the street where he lived, and the whole area of Spinner's Corner was now filled with immigrants and students, and though that was not a bad thing in itself, the lack of employment in the area meant that there was plenty of prostitution and crime in the neighbourhood. He did not want his children to grow up like he had done, afraid and persecuted.

His conversation with Miss Granger at the Malfoys' garden party had brought the abandoned Lestrangle property to mind, and Severus decided to approach Narcissa and Lucius about buying the house. Wizards didn't generally sell their holdings, but Severus knew that the Malfoys were not too pleased with their links to the Lestrangle estate. They were determined to put their Death Eater past behind them, and hanging on to the property that so clearly belonged to the most ardent of Voldemort fanatics was in no way politically sound. But Severus, with his hero status, was if not exempt, then at least somewhat protected from such negative scrutiny. Besides, he was, as a former Death Eater, one of the few people other than the Malfoys who could gain entry into the property. It had been so heavily warded and protected that none of the Aurors or Ministry officials had ever been able to infiltrate the estate throughout the length of the Lestranges' incarceration at Azkaban. Severus knew that Rabastan had used ancient blood rituals to mark the boundary of his land and to ensure that none other than those invited by the owners specifically could step across the magical barriers.

Lestrangle Manor was located in the south coast of England near Ryde. An old property built during the time of the Norman Conquest, it was majestic in its appearance, though not as beautiful as Malfoy Manor. Lestrangle Manor had a harsher look, as befitting a stronghold built to keep watch over the coast and keep out the unwanted Celtic and Saxon warriors.

Once Severus came to a decision about the possibility of acquiring Lestrangle Manor, he felt much more at ease. It was a house worthy of a wife and family. And if that wife was to be Miss Granger, she would be able to properly appreciate the huge, cavernous library that the Manor housed. She was unprejudiced enough to find the many Dark Arts texts educational and not proof of the inherent darkness of all Slytherins. Pleased with his thought process, Severus Flooded over for morning coffee with the Malfoys. Once he was seated with Lucius and Narcissa in the orangery with a delicious cup of French roast, Severus brought up the reason for his visit.

"You know, of course, that I am serious about finding a wife and having a family," said Severus as way of introduction.

"Yes, old chap," said Lucius, as Narcissa nodded her head in agreement. She hoped that he was thinking of making his relationship with Hermione more formal.

"Well," said Severus hesitantly, "I've been thinking that a proper home is a must. No woman of good standing would want to move into Spinner's End. However nicely it's been done up, it's still a small house, and it doesn't really have much of a back garden. I'd like to grow my own potion ingredients, have a proper lab. I really need a bigger place."

"I agree," chirped in Narcissa. "Although we've both done a fine job in expanding the rooms and redecorating the place, it is still quite small and having a growing family in it would be a tight squeeze."

"Yes, well," said Severus. Then with a sigh he went on, "I've been thinking about Lestrangle Manor. I know you find owning it a slight inconvenience; have you perhaps thought of selling it?"

Lucius did not reply. The house was after all left in Narcissa's name.

"You want to buy Lestrangle Manor?" asked Narcissa in disbelief.

"Yes," said Severus boldly. "Of course, if you do not wish to, I shall never mention the topic again. I just thought it was a shame to see the estate go to ruin, and I remember the old orchid collection. I wonder what happened to it all."

"No idea," said Lucius with a shrug. "No one's been there in over twenty years, not since Rodolphus, Bella and Rabastan ended up in Azkaban after the first fall of the Dark Lord. I've never even given the house any thought at all."

"Neither have I," said Narcissa finally. "It's just been shut up. It never seemed the right time to go see what was going on with it. Bella never cared for the place anyway, and none of us ever thought it was safe enough to return to it once she escaped."

"Mmm...", murmured Severus thoughtfully.

Silence fell as the three Slytherins considered the madness of Bella and the deterioration of the Lestrange name.

"So, do you think you would be amenable to selling the place to me?" asked Severus. "Rodolphus and Rabastan both extended formal invitations to me to drop in any time before their incarceration, so the wards should recognise me. And if you officially hand over the property to me, the wards should effectively recognise that fact as well. If any of the protective spells are engineered to only permit someone with the Dark Mark, I should still be able to enter the estate."

Narcissa looked over to Lucius pensively. "Can we discuss it and get back to you?" she asked at last. "I've just never thought of the house, or the possibility of getting rid of it, really."

"Of course," said Severus. "Take as long as you need. I just thought of it because I wanted to acquire a home before the start of term. And buying a Muggle dwelling and then turning it magical is so much harder than finding a suitable magical property. I'm keen to find a place that is far enough away from Muggle inhabitation to allow for easy Apparition and for me to grow my numerous potions ingredients."

Once the offer had been tabled, the trio began to discuss other matters. Severus brought up Hogwarts' business. Lucius was still a governor of the school board after all and did have a fair bit of interest in school policy.

"Minerva and I have decided to have all the students who attended Hogwarts last year to arrive at the castle in the last week of August to sit for their end of term exams. We never did get to hold them before the Battle of Hogwarts. Now that the castle is repaired, it is high time that the student body arrive so that pupils can take their NEWTs and OWLs and graduate."

Lucius nodded. "Draco seems to have suspected that would be the case. I've been amazed to see him actually studying over the summer."

Severus's lips curled up slightly in pleasure. "Draco really has grown up since the fall of the Dark Lord," he remarked.

Narcissa and Lucius both beamed in pleasure. They had, for a long time, worried about their son, but seeing his sudden maturity gave them a lot of hope for his future place in society. The rise and fall of Voldemort had changed the young man from a pouty, spoilt brat into a thoughtful, conscientious adult. It was a dramatic transformation.

Once Severus had departed for a meeting at Hogwarts with Minerva, Narcissa and Lucius discussed the sale of Lestrange Manor.

"What do you think about selling the place, Lucius?" asked Narcissa.

"It's a valuable property," said Lucius, putting on his business hat. "The land itself is worth quite a lot, and the house has a lot of historical value."

"True," said Narcissa, "but we are never going to use it. Draco has never even been there, so he's got no memories or sentiments attached to it."

"I suppose," said Lucius. "But it is a part of our family's holdings. If we are selling the house, shouldn't someone in the wider Lestrange family have first rights?"

"Really, Lucius," said Narcissa with a smirk, "how many members of the Lestrange family are there?"

Lucius swept his hair off his shoulder and sighed. "I see your point. There are only four members of the extended family, and they are all firmly settled on the continent. None of them are going to want to pack up and move to the wilds of Ryde."

"I know you don't want to sell land and that you go around buying property and building the Malfoy empire, but we owe Severus. He needs a proper, stately house, especially now that he has been firmly established as the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Bella's home is politically tainted, and it will take a fair length of time before the name Lestrange is not synonymous with insanity and excessive violence. He's practically a part of the family anyway with the life debt we owe him for Draco. This way, we are unloading something we can't really use, and we are ensuring that Severus is suitably grateful for our generosity. Our debt to him will also be fully discharged."

"My wise and beautiful wife," said Lucius with a tender caress of her hand. "I do know how fond you are of Severus."

Narcissa smiled. "Oh, my love, it's not only for Severus that I am thinking of selling the house. If my instincts are correct, then the woman that will soon be mistress of Lestrange Manor is going to be none other than our very own Gryffindor Princess. Imagine how quickly the taint from all Lestrange holdings will vanish if she is seen to be dwelling in Lestrange Manor."

"I see," said Lucius with a smirk. "Yes, it does make financial sense in that case. If the Lestrange property in Ryde is seen to be purged, at least eventually, of its taint via their occupation of it, then the two properties in the wilds of Wales will also be quick to lose their stain. I've always liked the hunting lodge close to Dolbenmaen. Although we've not really been hunting since before Draco was born, the land surrounding it was quite lovely. Marvellous walks."

"Mmm...", said Narcissa in agreement. "Though personally, I've always loved the house in Borth. But then again, I've always been partial to the views of Cardigan Bay."

Three days later, when Severus dropped in for coffee once more, Lucius and Narcissa brought up the topic of Lestrange Manor again.

"We've been thinking of your offer, Severus. It is hard for us to part with the property," said Lucius, "but Narcissa is inclined to let you have the house. She can't wait to start playing honorary grandmother to your offspring."

Narcissa blushed. Lucius had pinpointed her weakness very accurately.

Severus was extremely pleased. "Thank you, both," he said with a broad grin gracing his features. "I've always liked the utter isolation of the Manor in Ryde. It is so stark, so strong a construction. The grounds are perfect for my purposes too." He extended his hand to Lucius to shake on the deal and then leaned over to kiss Narcissa on her cheek.

"Besides," said Narcissa practically, "as a former Death Eater, you'll be perfectly placed to dismantle the multitude of curses and wards placed upon the place. We all know how paranoid Rabastan was with protection."

Severus chuckled darkly. "Rabastan and Rodolphus both, although I think Rodolphus' paranoia was a result of Bella's unique brand of amusement."

Narcissa and Lucius both smirked, though Narcissa did feel a twinge of remorse at her sister's behaviour. She knew how unfaithful her sister had been to Rodolphus. He had been a kind man at one point, but being married to Bella had changed him into a suspicious, ruthless killer. The Darkness that possessed Bella had been extremely destructive. Narcissa wished that things could have been different. She had cared deeply for both Rodolphus and Rabastan, more so than she had ever let on, for she knew Bella would have ridiculed her fondness for her husband and brother-in-law. She was so very grateful that the Dark Lord was no more. She had feared that Bella would corrupt Draco and send him down the same destructive spiral. Thank goodness Draco had been saved. His maturing relationship with Astoria and growing friendship with Hermione was doing much to alter his perceptions of the world and his place within it.

Once the sale was agreed upon, the two sets of lawyers got down to the nitty-gritty of the paperwork. Thankfully, unlike in the Muggle world, wizarding legalities were concluded with surprising speed, the goblins handling the transactions of Galleons with alacrity.

Thus, less than two weeks after Severus approached the Malfoys, he was handed the keys to the Manor. Lucius and Narcissa accompanied him to the house. They would be useful supports if the house decided that it did not recognise Severus as its new master. Wizarding houses were known to be tricky and many had personalities of their own. These were usually a combination of the magical intent behind their enchantments and a residue of the magical spell-craft utilised within the premises. Severus' now faded Dark Mark, however, was acceptable, and he was able to gain entry with no difficulty whatsoever. Once he had passed through the gates of the Manor, Severus

turned around and graciously and courteously invited the Malfoys in. They were his first official guests.

Severus was a cautious man. He had decided that he would keep almost all of the Lestranges' enchantments and protections. There was no reason to lose the extremely effective wards merely because the war was over. The only change that Severus made, which was one of the hardest to enact, was the removal of all hexes and curses that were in place to hurt, torture or kill Muggle-borns, for Severus was conscious that he wanted Miss Granger to enter his new home. He could now admit that he wanted Miss Granger to be impressed with his new status of hero and landowner. She would, he had decided, make a very good wife and consort.

The house was, thankfully, in excellent condition. The nearly two-decade-long absence of a master or mistress had not, as had been suspected, caused the house to fall into wrack and ruin. The house-elves had instead been breeding, and the place was nearly overflowing with able bodies eager to clean and maintain the property. Now that Severus was the owner of the property, the allegiance of the house-elves had been transferred to him. For unlike most house-elves, who were tied to the family they served, the Lestranges', fearing for their safety from internal family feuds and plots, had enchanted their elves to be faithful solely to the master and owner of the house. Thus, despite the house's inherently dark décor, the actual condition of all the furnishings and interiors was pristine. The floors gleamed, the furniture shone with the patina of hours of polishing and varnishing, and the brass and silverware dazzled in the light of the lamps. The Malfoys were amazed at the care the house-elves had given the place. However, Severus understood that to the elves, the house was their real master, and they had cared for it as they would a wizard child, with all of their devotion.

Pleased that he would have to expend no real energy into the house, he instead asked that tea be served in the morning room. The elves beamed with joy at their first task from their new master, and within moments, a sumptuous tea was laid out.

As they sipped their excellent pure Ceylon tea, Severus spoke. "Lucius, Narcissa, I have no words to thank you for the generosity you have shown in allowing me to purchase this beautiful home. I assure you that you have my heartfelt gratitude."

Lucius smirked. Then, he said with a calculating gleam in his eye, "I expect the house more than settles our life debt to you. We are now, as they say, even."

Severus smirked in return. He had expected that comment and had one of his own prepared. "Indeed, old friend, though I must insist that you not forget the benefit of me being the owner of this fine house gives the rest of the Lestrangle properties."

Narcissa giggled. She could not help it. Severus was as shrewd as Lucius in judging how the change in ownership of Lestrangle Manor affected the value and political position of the rest of the Lestrangle holdings.

Lucius frowned at his wife before giving up his ire at his friend's excellent reading of the situation. "Indeed, old man, indeed," said Lucius before reaching out to help himself to a slice of vanilla cake.

Once their tea was consumed, the party explored the rest of the estate. The greenhouses and orangery were in perfect condition, as was the rest of the house. The collection of orchids that had sent Severus down the path to acquiring the house had grown and become even more abundant than before, which caused Lucius to frown with ire once more. Lucius now wished that he had taken the time to investigate the property before allowing himself to be talked into parting with the estate. Though, he did realise that it was Narcissa's decision, and she had decided to give Severus the house no matter its financial and indeed, socio-political value. With a sigh, the Slytherin acknowledged that he was merely being territorial. Severus needed a grand house, and the property was still technically in the family. It was not as though the house had passed into completely unknown hands. Looking closely at the orchids, Lucius began plotting how he would acquire some of the plants for his own collection. The elves at Lestrangle Manor had done a wonderful job in breeding and interbreeding some very interesting hybrid varieties.

Not long after the keys to the Manor had been acquired, Severus moved in. It did not take long for his newly obtained army of house-elves to pack up and remove all of his possessions from Spinner's End. Once the terraced house in Manchester was cleaned and vacated, Severus decided he was going to donate the property to charity. Severus was very conscious of the fact that Squibs and witches who made unfavourable marriages were often disowned by their pureblood families, and he realised that these vulnerable individuals needed a shelter to help them back on their feet when they hit difficulty. His mother had had no recourse but to stay with his father, even though she and he had been physically, mentally and emotionally abused. Her family, the Princes, had completely turned their backs on her and Severus because of her poor choice of spouse. If she had had a shelter or refuge to go to, Severus felt that she would have tried to escape. But not being registered in any way among Muggle authorities meant that she could not claim any kind of Muggle social benefits. Neither could she use their resources to escape Tobias' beatings and abuse.

Severus was not a rich man by birth. He had inherited nothing but his parents' home in Spinner's End, but he had saved almost all of his teacher's salary. His headmaster's pay had been substantial, and Severus had spent none of that in the last year either. That, together with his Order of Merlin First Class pension and his many acquisitions during his Death Eater days, meant that he had enough to purchase the Lestrangle Manor with ease, as well as to give his old home to a worthy cause. Severus' wealth was not in any way comparable to that of the Malfoys, but he had saved cautiously and invested wisely. Growing up poor had made him very careful with his hard-earned money, and he had learned everything he could about investment both in the Muggle and magical world. Losing Lily to the much wealthier Potter had made him realise yet another advantage of wealth, and he had vowed that he would never be seen as a poorer rival again. Moreover, Severus had created enough new potions and improvements to old potions that he had a large number of patents bringing in a steady supply of income his way. But growing up poor had ensured that no one suspected the amount of wealth that Severus had accumulated over the years. Being a spy had forced him to utilise great care in his behaviour and habits. His needs were simple, his dress completely practical and devoid of ostentation. The only two things that he had spent money on were potions ingredients and books.

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Despite Harry's decision to put space and distance between himself and Ginny, he did not want to break off the relationship completely. Therefore, Harry was still spending the time not spent at Auror Training playing Quidditch at the Burrow with both Ron and Ginny. Hermione had still not been forgiven for her alleged role of trying to break up Harry and Ginny, so she had never visited the Burrow since the fall of Voldemort. Arthur had tried to get Hermione to visit for Sunday lunch more than once, but she had told him quite frankly that she didn't need to be in a situation where she was unwanted or seen as a pariah.

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One lovely morning, on the second of July, Severus wrote to invite *the delectable Miss Granger* to view his orchids. The house had been made safe for a Muggle-born, and Severus was keen to show off his latest acquisition. He wanted, though he was unwilling to admit it even to himself, her approval.

Severus' owl had arrived as Hermione and Harry were having breakfast. Harry watched as Hermione's face was transformed as she read the missive that the bird offered up with a stately lift of its leg.

"What is it, 'Mione?" asked Harry in curiosity.

"A letter from Professor Snape," said Hermione, passing the missive over. His owl had obviously been instructed to await a reply, for it was delicately eating a bite of sausage off Hermione's plate while she searched for parchment, quill and ink.

Harry took the parchment from Hermione and read.

*Miss Granger,*

*I've recently bought Lestrangle Manor. The orchids have survived, as you suspected, and I think you will enjoy viewing them. If you are agreeable, please be ready for me to collect you at half past ten this morning.*

SS

Harry was slightly uncomfortable at the imperious tone of the missive, but Hermione did not seem to mind. She was, even as he watched, penning a missive with her agreement.

Harry leaned over to read what she was writing.

*Dear Professor Snape,*

*Thank you so much for the invitation. Yes, I would love to see the orchids.*

*I shall be ready at half past ten.*

*See you then.*

*Best wishes,*

*Hermione*

Once the missive was sent, Hermione fled the kitchen, her breakfast uneaten, to get ready for Severus' arrival. Harry recalled his uneasy suspicions as he watched Hermione's excitement and flushed appearance at Severus' invitation. Deciding that he would postpone his departure to the Ministry, so that he could see Severus and Hermione together to ease his suspicions, Harry finished his breakfast at a much slower pace.

Hermione was, indeed, flattered and flushed at Professor Snape's invitation. She knew that there was more than their mutual admiration of orchids behind the invitation. She was smart enough to realise that he was inviting her to view his new home. She was therefore excited and nervous at her acceptance of the invitation. Her thoughts whirled. *I'll be all alone with Professor Snape in his new house. We'll be all alone and there'll be a bed there, his bed.* Feeling foolish at her immediate thoughts of his bed and bedroom, she calmed herself and looked over her wardrobe. She wanted to wear something suitable. She wanted him to kiss her again. It had been almost a month since their heated snog outside her bedroom door at the Malfoys', and she wanted, no, she needed a repeat performance. For although they met almost every weekend at some fancy ball, and although they always danced and flirted shamelessly, he had never again initiated a tryst. She was now extremely aware of him as a man, and she was desperate to feel his passion again.

Pulling out one dress after another, she finally settled on a simple sleeveless cotton frock in a pale mint hue. It was extremely becoming with a deep V neck. It came to just above her knees and reminded her of the dress she'd worn the night Professor Snape had first danced with her.

When Severus arrived at Grimmauld Place to collect Hermione, he found Harry waiting in the kitchen.

The young man greeted Severus with a handshake and said, "Hermione's just getting ready; she'll be down shortly."

Severus nodded. He was in no mood to make small talk with Potter, no matter how cordial their recent association had been. Thankfully, less than a minute later, the kitchen door opened and Hermione appeared. She looked beautiful. Her recent days in the sun had given her a becoming light tan, and the mint dress brought out the golden highlights in her hair.

"Professor Snape," said Hermione breathlessly, "thank you so much for the invitation. I'm really looking forward to seeing the orchids."

"Miss Granger," said Severus formally with a slight bow.

Harry watched Hermione's colour rise and Severus' smirk begin to appear. Realising that his conclusions about a relationship between the two of them had been correct, Harry decided to cut them some slack and leave them alone. He didn't like being a gooseberry, and he wanted time to come to terms with this latest development.

"I need to get to the Ministry," said Harry, making his way out of the kitchen.

"Bye, Harry," called Hermione distractedly as she stood looking up at the smirking countenance of Professor Snape.

Once Harry had departed, Hermione and Severus stood looking at each other in silence. They had not really been alone since the night of Draco's birthday soiree, and suddenly, the sexual tension in the air was thick and heavy. They were both utterly aware of each other. Finally, Severus moved towards Hermione. As he moved forward so did she, so that they met next to the kitchen table. This had not been part of his plan, but seeing her, framed by the sunlight streaming through the kitchen window, took his breath away. Forgetting all his plans for a slow and cautious courtship, Severus pulled her into his arms and kissed her ravenously. Like before, there was no gentle exploration or request for invitation. He plundered; he conquered, and Hermione responded with equal fervour.

Hermione had dreamt of his kiss almost constantly, and after almost a month of fantasising, she was more than ready for a repeat performance. This time, she did not hesitate; she showed him how much she desired him by sliding her arms around him to hold him close to her body. As the kiss deepened even further, she arched her body, doing her best to show him how much she craved his touch.

Severus did not disappoint. His arms moved from her waist to cup her bottom and pull her even more snugly against his hardened erection. As Hermione gasped at the intimate contact and rubbed herself wantonly against him, he moved them around so that she was perched on the kitchen table. Parting her knees, he moved ever closer, his hands now cupping and fondling her breasts. Hermione moaned and threw back her head as Severus began to kiss and nibble along the column of her throat.

Hermione's moan broke Severus' sensual haze. With a groan, he slowly pulled himself away from her embrace and rested his forehead against hers. "This is neither the time, nor the place," he said gently.

Hermione sighed. She had never been kissed so thoroughly, and she did not want to stop.

Severus smirked at Hermione's reluctant sigh. Gently, he kissed her once more. "I've no intention of making a spectacle of myself in Potter's kitchen, Miss Granger," said Severus.

Hermione smiled. Her arms were still firmly wrapped around his surprisingly broad shoulders. She let her hands trail down until they were pressed flat against his chest. "I think that after that greeting, you should call me Hermione," she said with another soft kiss.

Severus chuckled darkly. "I agree, and I think it is time you stopped calling me Professor. Severus will suffice. Potter's already made the transition, although, you'll have to go back to Professor when we are at Hogwarts."

Hermione nodded. She did not want to think about how they would act within the confines of Hogwarts. It was a minefield she was not yet ready to contemplate.

With yet another gentle kiss, Severus pulled completely away from her and offered her his arm. "Are you ready to see my orchid collection?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yes, Severus," she said with a smile, testing out his name for the first time. It felt so decadent calling him by his name. She had never even thought of him as anything other than Professor Snape, even as she fantasised about his kisses.

Severus felt a thrill at hearing her speak his name. He had the wildest urge to ravish her right there on the kitchen table, just to hear her scream his name out loud. Laughing at his own foolishness, he escorted Hermione to the front door. Once the door was shut, and they stood outside, he looked around. Satisfied that there was no one about, he slid his arm around her, pulling her hard against his body.

Hermione gasped aloud at the sensation. She could feel his still obvious erection.

Severus was delighted with her evident reaction to his arousal. Her blatant desire for him assured him that his seduction was moving along as planned. Severus smirked

yet again and Apparated them both to just outside the gates of Lestrange Manor so that she could see his new estate in all its glory.

Hermione fell in love with the house at first glance; it was so majestic and imposing. The walk up to the house allowed her to see the house and the surrounding gardens. She glanced up at the man whose arm she still held, and she saw his palpable pride and delight at his new home. She couldn't help but smile, and when he looked down at her, she did not think twice about standing up on tip toe to kiss him on the mouth.

"It's really beautiful," she said honestly. "It's breathtaking, in fact."

"Yes," said Severus simply. "The first time I came to Lestrange Manor, I was only sixteen. They had a Mid-Summer's Eve bonfire party, and the grounds looked utterly magnificent in the dying summer sun."

Hermione had never really heard that tone of wonder in Severus' voice. Wanting to know more about the man she was so attracted to, she squeezed his arm and waited silently for him to continue.

He didn't disappoint her. "When you suggested that the orchids might have survived the Lestranges' abandonment of the property, it got me thinking, and I approached Narcissa and Lucius about buying the house. They agreed, and it is now mine. I thank you for making me remember this place. I always loved it for its stark beauty. It is so different from the ostentatious décor and facade of Malfoy Manor or even the grander Goyle Castle."

"The Goyles have a castle?" asked Hermione in shock. No wonder the Slytherins looked down on the rest of the school.

Severus chuckled. "You'll need to have a look at the wizarding Who's Who. You'll be surprised to find out who owns what and what their lineage is. All students at Hogwarts are automatically entered in each annual, as are, of course, all the half-blood and pureblood families."

Once they entered the house, Hermione was amazed at the large number of elves that came to greet them. She had always been uncomfortable around house-elves and wondered if they were mistreated. But one quick glance at their smiling faces and their happy, yet deferential inquiries made her realise that these were contented elves.

Severus could see Hermione's observation of his elves. He, like all of the staff, knew of her efforts with SPEW, and he chuckled darkly once more. When she looked up at him in question, he said in explanation. "The elves are bound to the property, and therefore to me as the master of the property. I could no more release them than ask them to leave their home."

Hermione nodded. She had come to understand, through careful study of texts found in the Black library, about the house elf enchantment and magic.

Refusing the elves' eager offer of tea and refreshments, he took Hermione directly to the library. "I'll show you, what I am sure, will be your favourite room of the house before we visit the orchids," he said with a smirk.

As she met his eyes curiously, he said, "The library," as way of explanation.

"Oh, yes," she said with a delightful clap of her hands. "That's one of the nicest things about stately homes, a proper library with loads of interesting books."

The library took her breath away, and although there were plenty of texts on the Dark Arts, it also held plenty of tomes on Charms and Transfiguration, which had been Rabastan's strong points. Severus could see her eyes sparkle as she perused the titles, and before he could restrain himself, he said, "You're more than welcome to visit and use my library. Just make sure you inform me what you're looking at so that I can remove the wards and protective enchantments on them."

Hermione turned around and beamed at Severus. "Thank you, Severus," she said breathlessly. "I've never seen most of these titles. The library at Hogwarts doesn't have most of these books."

Severus smirked. "No, I don't expect it does," he said in agreement. "These are mainly written by Slytherins and are on the darker spectrum of the scale. Also, a lot of these texts were published on the Continent, and although they have been translated, they are not part of the Hogwarts' curriculum."

Hermione nodded. She wanted to start reading immediately, but she knew there was much more to see. They'd yet to explore the grounds and the orchids, which had been the main purpose of her visit. After looking at the orchids and making plans for what else needed to be done to the grounds and gardens, he produced a picnic basket hidden beside a cool brook and grove of cherry trees. Hermione was charmed at the thoughtfulness of the gesture. She realised that he had planned on a gentle seduction and that their heated kisses at Grimmauld Place had been a spontaneous reaction on both their parts.

They ate a delicious picnic lunch and shared a bottle of Lucius' marvellous champagne. Hermione, who was still not used to drinking, had two deliciously cool glasses and was soon feeling quite tipsy. Unable to resist the allure of Severus' lean form, she moved so that she was pressed up against him. Severus smiled down at her and marvelled at her open, honest display of attraction. Kissing her upturned face, he put his arm around her and pointed to some birds in the nearby corpse of trees.

*Even if I can't find true love, thought Severus, then this affection, trust and attraction will do. Hermione is delightful. If this time alone is any indication, we should get along just fine.* Feeling quite pleased with himself, he gently turned her so that she was facing him and drew her into another heated and passionate kiss.

Hermione responded immediately. The beautiful setting, the sound of the bubbling brook and Severus all made for an intoxicating mix. With unrestrained ardour, Hermione slid her hands into his hair and caressed his skull. He groaned and pushed her so that she was lying on her back. Then, Severus following her to fit himself snugly between the cradle of her thighs. One part of her brain tried to caution her, to admonish her for being so easy, but Hermione did not listen. She had never felt so beautiful or desirable. No man had ever heated her blood the way Severus' kisses did. He was like a drug, and she could not get enough.

Severus trailed kisses down her throat and the valley between her breasts. His hands cupped and shaped her breasts, his clever thumbs flicking against her nipples until they furled and tightened into tight, aching points that he then began to lave and suckle through the thin material of her simple cotton bra and dress.

Feeling his mouth on her breast made her arch her body into him in aching delight. "Oh, God," she moaned, as he thrust his erection against her heated core. She had never felt this wanton, this needy.

Severus moved his mouth from one pointed peak to the next, driving her insane with sensation while one hand moved down to her thighs and swiftly pulled up the skirt of her frock.

Hermione gasped as she felt his hand on the bared skin of her hip. The shock of the intimacy of his touch so close to her centre caused her to pause in her mindless arching and squirming.

Severus realised that she had stopped grinding herself against his hardened flesh. Realisation dawned on him as well. He had not planned on getting so carried away. Releasing her still engorged nipple that he had been in the process of nipping and sucking, he raised himself on his elbows to look down on her.

"Sorry," she said softly, meeting his enquiring gaze in embarrassment.

Severus smirked. "Don't apologise," he said tenderly, his voice thick with passion. "We both got carried away."

Hermione smiled. She had been afraid that he would not stop, that she would have to ask, or push him away. That he was so attuned to her body and her emotions set her mind at ease. "I've never...", she said before stopping. Then, Hermione sighed. "I've never really kissed anyone like this. Feeling your hand on my thigh just scared me."

Severus nodded before rolling over to lie on his back beside her. "I didn't mean to rush you, Hermione. But you're so utterly delicious. I could devour you, ravish you quite easily."

Hermione blushed, though her heart swelled with pleasure. Turning so that she faced him, she leaned over and kissed him gently. "I love what you do to me, but since I'm so new, you will have to be patient."

Severus felt a strange emotion come over him at her honest admission. Not only did she admit to wanting him, to enjoying his ministrations, but she wanted to continue their mutual explorations. Although he had been with a number of women in the past, he had never been with an innocent. He too turned so that they were lying on their sides facing each other. Gently he let his hand caress her cheek. "We have all the time in the world," he said tenderly. Even he was amazed at the gentleness, the tenderness in his tone. Realising that he had truly begun to care for Hermione, Severus grew pensive. "Let me see you home," he said finally. "The hour grows late, and I'm sure Potter will be waiting for you."

In truth, Severus wanted to be alone. He needed to think. For if he was starting to care for Hermione beyond the simple emotions of lust and desire, what did that mean in light of the Dark Veela curse? Did that mean he had the chance of finding love?

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty-One: Conversations

Chapter 21 of 40

Hermione has a chat with Harry. The Gryffindor Princess shows off her Slytherin qualities.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you for the thoughtful reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story. Your reviews definitely help me keep writing.
- (iii) A big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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In thoughtful silence, his mind dwelling firmly on the Dark Veela Curse in light of his discovery of real emotion for the young woman on his arm, Severus Apparated Hermione back to Grimmauld Place.

Hermione too was quiet. She was coming to grips with their explosive passion and the realisation that she was not only attracted to Severus, she was also starting to feel strong emotion for him. Severus' display of tenderness had moved Hermione greatly. She realised that it was not an often shown emotion on the part of the sardonic Slytherin, and she was quick to grasp that he too had feelings invested in their growing relationship.

Hermione had understood, and correctly so, that although they had not spoken the words out loud, Severus was courting her. His intentions towards her were honourable and serious. She recognized that if he merely wanted a flirtation and a bed-mate, he would not be so attuned to her needs, he would not be willing to be so patient. Clarissa Nott would have been a much better option if Severus merely required a warm body.

Severus kissed her hand courteously at the entrance, and after ensuring that she was safely inside, he left with a silent spin.

As Severus had predicted, Harry was waiting for Hermione in the library.

"How were the orchids?" he asked by way of greeting.

"Brilliant, Harry, just brilliant," said Hermione distractedly as she walked over to look out of the window. She wished that Severus had not brought her home so swiftly. She wanted to be with him still. Her feelings were all in a muddle, and she wanted to discuss them with him. *Is this love?* wondered Hermione. She'd thought she had loved Ron, but it had felt nothing like this: this utter need for Severus' touch, his kiss. *Goodness*, thought Hermione, *I can't think straight. All I want is to be back by the brook, Severus' stronger, larger body thrusting, grinding into me. I love the way he kisses me.*

Harry could see that Hermione was confused. He walked over to her and slipped his arms around her waist. "Did something happen to upset you?" he asked in concern.

"No, Harry," said Hermione with a sigh. "I think... no, I know that I have strong feelings for Severus." Hermione turned to look her friend in the eye. "I'm not sure what these feelings are, though. How can I be in love, Harry? I hardly know him. But when I'm with him, nothing else matters, and when I'm away from him, all I can think about is him. I never felt this way about Ron. I'm so confused."

Harry nodded and said, "I thought as much when I saw you both dancing at the Fudge Ball. There was such intensity in the way you looked at each other."

Hermione blushed. "I wonder if everyone knows." Then she giggled, "Cissy and Lucius probably suspect; Draco, too." Hermione looked at Harry. "Do you mind, Harry?"

Now it was Harry's turn to sigh. "Not really, 'Mione, though it does make me slightly uncomfortable. Not because I don't think he's decent or anything, but because I realise that he's a very complex man. He's done so much, seen so much. Can you live with his darkness?"

"I think his darkness is one of the things that attracts me," confided Hermione. "I don't know why, but his control over the darkness shows his tremendous magical power, and that power is intoxicating. He has such command over his magic, such vast stores of knowledge and magical strength. It's like a drug. When I'm near him, I can't help but want to touch him, be touched by him."

Harry blanched. "Too much information, 'Mione," he said with a grimace.

"Sorry, Harry," said Hermione with a cheeky grin. "But you did ask."

"True," said Harry, "just don't start getting all soppy on me, please. I don't think I could stand it."

Hermione laughed. She was glad she could talk to Harry about her feelings. At least her best friend understood what was going on.

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Harry's conversation with Hermione had got him thinking further. Realising that the Weasleys were the most likely candidates to upset his best friend, he decided to do something about it. For Harry reasoned that when Hermione's relationship with Severus became public knowledge, she was going to get the worst of it. He had heard what Ginny and Molly had been saying, after all.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns, Harry asked Ron out to Muggle London for a drink. "It'll be a change, mate," said Harry in encouragement. "We're always mobbed when we go out in Diagon Alley. This will be different, like an adventure."

Ron agreed immediately. He loved Muggle London. The girls were easy, and the drink though not as strong as Firewhiskey, was still cheap and gave him the feeling that he was being daring and adventurous.

Once they were comfortably ensconced in a Muggle pub called *The Dog and Partridge*, with two pints of ale, Harry brought up his concerns. "Ron, you know I've been working with Kingsley and Williamson to control my Dark Magic. How's your own training progressing?"

Because Harry had spoken of his own training, Ron could not deny his own. "Slow, mate, slow. I'm so angry and resentful all the time."

Harry nodded. "I just feel guilty and often times, despondent. I want to save the world, to make sure everything is fine and that everyone is happy. Kingsley says it's a good thing to have, but that I mustn't let that control my life. Severus just sneers and says that I need to control my urge to be the one to rush into things headlong without planning, and without knowing the full situation."

Ron nodded. This conversation he could handle. If Harry was having issues, then his problems were in comparison not such a bad thing.

"How are things with Hermione?" asked Harry next. He knew his two best friends were now speaking, but he had watched and heard their strained communication.

Ron shrugged. "You know Hermione, Harry, she's mental. She's always with the bloody Malfoys, or Snape." Then, as if recalling something, he asked, "Did I just hear you refer to the git as Severus? When did that happen?"

Harry grinned. "I know. I was in a meeting with Kingsley, and Severus turned up for it. Halfway through the conversation, he sighed and just said, 'I'm no longer your professor, Potter, just call me Severus,' and then shook my hand. I nearly died. The git's not that bad, really. A lot of what went on at Hogwarts was just us being an annoyance and a worry to him. He had to act like he thought we were scum for the benefit of the people watching. You know what horrid little snits most of the Slytherins were. He had to make sure that his absolute hatred for us was sent back home in their letters. Also, and this I learned later from Kingsley, if Severus was seen to be horrid to us, and if we were seen to mistrust him and dislike him intensely, Voldemort could never ask him to bring me to him. Everyone knew that I would sooner hex Severus than believe some cock and bull story he made up to get me out of Hogwarts."

Ron nodded. "Makes sense, mate, but he didn't have to enjoy it so much."

Harry grinned. "Well he is a Slytherin. Killing more than one bird with one stone is the normal mode of operation for that lot."

Ron agreed with a grunt.

"Anyway," said Harry, "I've been thinking. You need to ease up on Hermione, Ron. You know you both never really had anything in common. You speak a totally different language. She wants to study, to work, to change the world. You want a woman who dreams of being a wife and a mother, someone who wants to take care of your house and be like your mum. Hermione is not that woman. Lavender might be."

Ron sighed. "I know, mate. But I don't like seeing her with the Git. Have you seen the way the slimy bugger keeps dancing with her? It makes me want to puke. And besides, I wanted to shag her first."

"Ron," said Harry in disgust. "She's our best friend, don't be so crude."

"Sorry, mate," mumbled Ron in contrition. "But 'Mione's well fit, and well, I thought after our kiss that she liked me. This whole bloody Dark Magic thing ruined everything."

Harry nodded. "I know, but we have to fight it and control it. We can't let this hurdle ruin our friendship."

Ron nodded. "I'll try, Harry. But it's not easy. Especially when Hermione's so pretty and looks at me like I'm a bloody flobberworm. I want to shake her and then kiss her. It's just the way it is."

"Well kiss Lavender instead," said Harry in annoyance. "And leave my sister alone."

"Your sister?" asked Ron in high tone of surprise.

"Yes, my sister," said Harry gruffly. "She's the closest thing to family that I have ever had. I love her, Ron, and you're making her cry with your beastliness. You've got to stop, mate. She's affected by the Dark too, but it's just made her overly sensitive, overly fragile. She's always crying after you or Ginny say something to her. I'm tired of cheering her up."

Ron looked extremely embarrassed. He had not realised that he was hurting his friend so much. For despite the darkness and his insensitivity, he did care for Hermione in his own way. He did realise that he was being a berk. "Right, Harry," said Ron. "I'll try to be better."

*One down, two more to go*, thought Harry, doing a little victory dance in his head. He knew that now that he had explained things to Ron, that his friend would start thinking. Ron may be an insensitive prat, but he was strategic and a theorist. He would analyse what had been said and come to the right conclusion. This, Harry knew for a fact.

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Severus, unfortunately, had no one to speak to about his confusing emotions. Instead, he brooded and tried to come to grips with his unexpected and inexplicable feelings. *Can this be love?* wondered Severus. *Can the Dark Veela Curse be lifted this easily?*

The Dark curse, however, was like all Dark magic. It was insidious, sneaky. It worked on already established insecurities, weaknesses. Thus, Severus convinced himself that he was not in love with Hermione. *I just want her body*, he told himself ruthlessly. *Just because I find her delectable, utterly and completely fuckable does not mean I'm capable of love. I'm probably confusing desire with affection.* Saddened but resigned to his inability to love or be loved, Severus decided to take his seduction of Hermione even more slowly. *I want her to want me, to come to me, to make the next move. I'm not going to sweep her off her feet. I never want her to turn around and accuse me of seducing her.* Feeling more secure with his course of action, Severus began to plot once more.

Two days later, Severus sent out invitations. He had decided to hold his first luncheon at the Manor and thereby grant access to the select few who would be able to enter his new home. Hermione, the Malfoys, Potter and Kingsley had been invited. So too had Astoria, as Draco's date, and Minerva, as his long-term friend and colleague.

At the luncheon, Severus did his best to re-establish their boundaries. He still called her Hermione, but he made no move to be alone with her. Even when the opportunity presented itself while he was showing his guests around the estate, he made no move to kiss her or indeed, to give her an opportunity to kiss him.

Hermione was disappointed, but she did not despair. She was smart enough to realise that Severus, too, had been taken aback by their explosive passion. *He's regrouping*, she thought with a fond smile. Hermione was an intelligent young woman who knew her taciturn Potions Master well enough to know that he would find their sudden intimacy and closeness alarming. Her mother had always said, 'Fight fire with fire,' so Hermione decided that she would use Slytherin tactics on her Slytherin lover.

She would seduce him. She would confuse him and force him to rethink his obvious ploy of re-establishing their guarded courtship.

Moreover, Hermione decided that she would find another, more covert way to engineer quality time alone with Severus. If he was uncomfortable being her lover, she would be with him as his friend. To that end, a day after the luncheon, Hermione sent Severus an owl. Working hard to maintain a cool tone, she wrote:

*Dear Severus,*

*I have for some time wanted to retrieve my parents from their exile in Australia. Do you think I could meet with you to discuss the Memory Charm I used and other matters relating to this issue? I have no one else I am comfortable discussing this with. Since you've already expressed more thought and interest on the matter than anyone else in my acquaintance, and since you are the Order's expert in the Dark Arts and mind-related magic I felt you would be the best person to consult.*

*I do hope you will say yes. Let me know when and where is convenient for our meeting.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione*

Once the letter was written, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She knew that she had made it seem very businesslike and practical. There was no cloying sentiment to alarm her sardonic professor.

Severus, on receiving the missive, was unexpectedly hurt. He had hoped that she would display some sort of desire for him. Instead, she wrote of his usefulness to her course of action. However, re-reading the letter, he paused at her phrase, *I have no one else I am comfortable discussing this with*, for it gave him hope. If she trusted him with her personal worries, then perhaps he still had a chance.

Thinking carefully, Severus decided to alter his planned course of action. He did not want her to dismiss him as a suitor, after all. Thus, the letter he sent back was warmer and more affectionate than he had previously designed to be.

*Dearest Hermione,*

*I am at your service in this or, indeed, any other matter. If you would like, you may come for tea at half past three this afternoon to Lestrange Manor.*

*I remain your devoted,*

*Severus*

Hermione smirked as she read Severus' note. Her businesslike tone had done the trick. He had immediately backtracked on his decision to play it cool. Smiling, she decided she would continue to woo him like a Slytherin. If her Gryffindor brashness sent him scurrying away, she would use her Slytherin wiles.

To that effect, Hermione dressed very carefully for tea with Severus. Not an overtly vain young woman, Hermione had learned via Cissy how to dress to emphasize her best features. Under Cissy's tutoring Hermione had learned that her eyes and her hair were prime features, as were her tiny waist and pert, full breasts. Thus, with careful thought, she realised that she would dress as if she were still unaware of her sexuality. The body of a young woman dressed in the garments of a young girl was sure to arouse and hopefully, positively confuse her Slytherin would-be lover, for Severus would not expect Slytherin cunning from Hermione. Hermione wanted his attention focused on her and her ripening sexuality.

Smirking in an exceptionally devious manner, she wore an old sleeveless cotton dress in pale ivory that had an all overprint of tiny green leaves that was now just a little too short and tight for her. She had grown in the bust over the last year, and this dress had been bought in her sixth year at Hogwarts. But because the dress was not in any way obviously provocative and did indeed look its age, she could just shrug off his suspicion that she had dressed for him. Once she wore the dress, she looked at herself in the mirror. The tiny pearl buttons that held the bodice were pulled taut against her straining breasts, and Hermione opened the top two to give herself some breathing space. With the cotton frock, she wore her golden Grecian style sandals. They elongated her legs and showed off her slender calves.

Dressed and prepared mentally to seduce and entice, Hermione Apparated to Lestrange Manor at precisely half past three in the afternoon where she was met at the gates by Severus.

*Merlin's baggy underpants*, thought Severus. *The girl is gorgeous. I wonder if she realises how utterly Lolita-like she looks in that dress. I could ravish her this very instant.* Trying to discretely adjust his suddenly extremely tight trousers, Severus extended his arm to Hermione.

Smiling broadly, Hermione placed her hand on his arm. She had seen and noted the way in which Severus' gaze had flicked heatedly over her body. Pleased that she had caught his attention as planned, she moved on to the real purpose of her visit. "Thank you so much, Severus, for agreeing to help me. There is no one else I can trust with this problem."

Severus bowed his head graciously. Her words pleased him. "You're welcome, Hermione," he said. "I'm pleased you trust me with this delicate matter."

As they walked up to the house, she once again admired the grounds and the placement of the Manor. "This is such a beautiful drive," said Hermione. "You're very fortunate that the Malfoys were willing to part with it."

"I know," said Severus. "I think Cissy is the one who swung the deal my way. If it were up to Lucius, the house would still be rotting, sitting all closed up."

Hermione smiled. She realised that Cissy was planning ahead. She really did owe her newest girlfriend for her obvious plotting.

Once they were comfortably seated in his well appointed study, Hermione brought up the topic that was foremost on her mind. "Now that Kingsley assures me that all Death Eater sympathisers have been rounded up or contained, I think it's time to try bringing back my parents. I miss them, Severus. I miss talking to my mother, cooking with my father. I just want them home."

Severus listened to Hermione. He did not know how to respond to her candid explanation of her feelings. He had never really experienced anything similar. All he could do was nod his head in encouragement.

It seemed to be enough for Hermione. "When I placed the charm on my parents, I didn't know if I would be alive to reverse it. But I hoped that if we did win the war and I survived, I would go with Harry and Ron to bring them home. Now, I don't know. Ron and I can hardly speak civilly to one another, and Harry is in no condition to go with me to Australia. He's got enough problems trying to figure out what to do about Ginny and training for the Auror Programme. Severus, will you help me? Will you come with me? You know more than anyone else about Legilimency and Occlumency. We might need both of those skills if the incantation to reverse the Memory Charm does not work. Goodness only knows how successfully I did the Memory Charm in the first place. I had so little time and no previous experience in mind magic. Please?"

Hermione stopped then and left the chair she'd been seated on to kneel on the carpet before his armchair. She placed her hands on his knees and looked up imploringly at his face. "Severus, I trust you. When I'm with you I feel safe, secure. I know you'll take care of me if things go wrong: if we can't find my parents or if the reversal is unsuccessful. I know it's a lot to ask, but I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be with at such a troubling time. I know Arthur Weasley would be happy to come, but I would rather have you. I want to try and bring them home before I go back to Hogwarts for my final year. Please, will you help me?"

Severus was moved by her plea. He realised that she wanted him, not because he was her only option, but because she trusted him above all others. It helped soothe his ego. After a long silence, he finally sighed and inclined his head. "I shall accompany you. You cannot go to Australia alone, and if things do not go as planned, you will

need someone to be of assistance."

Hermione threw her arms around him in gratitude and kissed him with all of her hopes and dreams. She did not hold back in her passion or her joy at his agreement.

When Hermione rose to her knees and embraced Severus exuberantly before smothering him in kisses, something in his cold, lonely heart shattered. *She does like me*, though Severus in satisfaction. *I'm not just a tool. I do mean something to her.* In response, he too returned her kiss, pulling her so that she was soon seated across his knees, Severus' arms wrapped securely around her waist. She cuddled into him, holding him tightly, her face pressed against his strong chest.

Hermione was where she wanted to be, with Severus, held securely in his arms.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty-Two: What happened to my parents?

Chapter 22 of 40

Severus and Hermione travel to Australia. They are disappointed in what they discover.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story. Your reviews mean the world, and they help me keep writing.
- (iii) A big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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The great whirl of parties and balls continued well into July. However, as July came to an end, Severus and Hermione felt confident that their duties to the wizarding world were complete for the moment.

Severus, wasn't really one to take a break, but he had promised Hermione to go with her to Australia. To this end, he ensured that all his responsibilities relating to the rebuilding of Hogwarts were complete. He strengthened and added to the warding and worked long hours to ensure the paperwork required for the returning students and the missed end of year exams were up-to-date.

Minerva understood what drove him, and promised to stay at the school to ensure work continued apace.

Thus, they began to prepare for their departure to Australia. Minerva and Kingsley had helped secure them international Port-Keys, and with the blessings of the two older Gryffindors, they set off in the first week of August.

They took the first Port-Key on Monday the third of August and arrived without trouble in Doha. After a brief rest and an official lunch with the Chief Minister for Magic of Qatar, they caught the next Port-Key to Singapore. Here they spent a night as guests of the Singaporean Minister for Magic, who had thrown a magnificent ball for two such celebrated heroes of British wizarding society. Hermione was in no mood to be felicitated, but she realised that Kingsley and Minerva wanted them to use their trip abroad to strengthen ties with the international magical federation.

With concealed disgruntlement, Hermione and Severus pretended to enjoy the attention being showered upon them.

"I wish we could have just flown," said Hermione in resignation after she had finished accepting yet another over-the-top greeting by an irritatingly long-winded American wizard.

Severus sniggered. "At least you're not being eyed as though you are a tasty morsel for desperate gold-diggers," murmured the dark wizard as he skillfully avoided the hungry gaze of a strikingly beautiful Singaporean witch in a clinging turquoise blue cheongsam of embroidered satin that did little to hide her voluptuous figure.

Hermione followed Severus' scowling stare and felt her jealousy rise. Deliberately, she slid her fingers down his arm to encircle his clenched fist and stroked his hand until he turned to meet her eyes. Holding his gaze, she raised his hand to her lips.

Severus' eyes darkened with desire. Hermione was wearing the ivory lace dress that left her shoulders and neck bare to his amorous look. He had found her stunning when she had worn this dress to the Malfoy soiree, and she appeared even more delectable tonight with her hair pinned haphazardly atop her head.

"The kitten has claws," he murmured sardonically, even as his eyes slowly dipped to admire the curve of her breasts.

Hermione smirked at him. "She does, indeed. And she's staking her claim."

Severus chuckled. But inside, something in him stirred. He had never been claimed by a woman so possessively. A tightly held kernel of doubt loosened and began to disappear. He realised that she was not ashamed to be with him, that she genuinely wanted to be by his side.

Hermione saw the pleasure that flashed in Severus' eyes. She realised that he liked her staking her claim. He wanted her to make the moves in their silent dance around each other. It terrified her, for she realised she had little practice in the mating game. But she was not a Gryffindor for nothing. Straightening her spine, she looked him challengingly in the face. "If I claim you, it is forever," she said honestly. "I don't like sharing."

Severus shuddered. It was only long years as a spy that kept him from betraying the utter shock at her pronouncement. But it was shock firmly mingled with pleasure and understanding. Finally, he inclined his head. "I don't share either, and I'm just as possessive," he said quietly.

This Hermione could well believe. She knew him well enough to know that he was tenacious in his possessiveness. This was the man that hung on to childhood grievances for years, even after the perpetrators were dead and buried. "Good," she said decisively.

Pleasure was a flame that flared throughout the entirety of Severus' very soul. He wanted to pick her up and ravish her that very instance. Instead, he growled low in his throat. "Do not toy with me, witch," he said gruffly. "Never forget that I am a dark wizard. Claiming me means giving me everything you are. Remember, like for like. If I am yours, then you are mine."

Now it was Hermione's turn to shudder. Hearing him speak those words, in that tone of voice sent a white, hot pulse of desire to her very core. She may have been an innocent, but she was a woman and the primitive woman in her responded to the primitive man within him. All she could do was whisper hoarsely, "Yes."

Eventually, once they had spent enough time to please their hosts, they quietly took their leave from the gathering. They had another Port-Key to catch first thing in the morning and they needed to catch up on their sleep so that they would not feel the effects of international Port-Keying on arrival.

Severus could feel his need to take her pounding like a tattoo in his blood. Everything in him called him to take her, now, this very instant, but he was a man of control, too. He fought with himself not take her roughly up against the nearest wall. He kept reminding himself that they were going to retrieve her parents. Doing his best to leash his raging libido, Severus parted ways after seeing Hermione to her room door.

Hermione hoped against hope that he would kiss her, but when he just bowed and began to walk away, she called out in irritation, "Severus."

He stopped and turned around.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she asked softly.

When Severus looked puzzled, she walked up to him and kissed him on his mouth. She could feel him smirking through the kiss, but it did not bother her. Instead, she pulled him closer to her body and ground herself wantonly against his thigh.

Something snapped in Severus then. With a growl he lifted her and turned her so that she was pressed flush against the wall. Using his hands to cup her bum, he lifted her so that he could fit his engorged flesh between the juncture of her thighs. Meanwhile, his lips, mouth and tongue devoured her, licking, nipping, thrusting, until Hermione was completely blown away by his ardent display of passion.

Hermione moaned raggedly into his kiss, and Severus swallowed the sound, growling low in his throat in response. Hermione too had not been idle. Her hands were buried in his slick locks while her body was doing its best to grind against the hardness it so desperately craved.

The kiss seemed to go on forever, until with a gasp, Severus wrenched his mouth away from hers. "Not here, not now," he growled.

"You always say that," said Hermione in irritation. She was more than ready for the next stage. She wanted to touch him, to feel his skin. She had never desired a man as desperately as she wanted Severus right now.

Severus sighed. "Hermione, we are about to look for your parents. We must not be distracted."

As Hermione opened her mouth to respond, he laid his finger across it. Cheekily, she licked his digit before taking it into her mouth to suck.

Severus groaned as his arousal rose another notch. "I'm trying to be rational, woman," he said gruffly. He pressed his forehead against hers and sighed. "Hogwarts reopens in less than a month's time. Whatever we have now can't really continue at school. It would destroy your reputation. We must be discrete."

Now it was Hermione who sighed. "I want you," she said simply.

Severus shuddered in arousal. "I know," he said cockily. Even as a part of him rejoiced at her Gryffindor honesty, another part of him worried about what it meant based on the Dark Veela curse.

Hermione's eyes flashed at his smug expression.

Severus chuckled before kissing her softly again. When they broke apart, he said tenderly, "Don't worry, Princess." His hand caressed the petal soft skin of her cheek as he allowed her to slide off his body. "Never think that the wanting is one-sided. I want you too." Taking her hand, he placed it on his still hard flesh. "See," he groaned, as her hand began to stroke him through the cloth that covered him, "proof positive that I want you, but for tonight, I shall say good night."

Hermione nodded. She was not ready yet to seduce him, although if he had taken her, she would have gone willingly.

Severus could read the clear invitation in her eyes. Gently, tenderly, he kissed her once more. Then, like he had at the Malfoys', he opened her door, and murmured, "Good night, Princess."

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The next morning, they caught the Port-Key to Sydney. When they arrived, it was nearly lunch time. Once at their designated hotel that straddled the Muggle and magical worlds, they retired to their rooms to freshen up. A long hot shower for Severus, and a nice long soak for Hermione, ensured that they both were refreshed and ready to begin the task of locating the Grangers.

When Hermione had sent her parents to Sydney, she had done so purely based on Arithmancy calculations. However, a desperate week later, they had to admit defeat. There was no trace of the Grangers or the Wilkinsons anywhere in Sydney. They had visited every name in the telephone directory and to no avail. Severus finally coaxed Hermione into using the resources of the Australian Ministry for Magic. Through the Auror department contacts, they searched the airport arrivals' records and found confirmation that the Wilkinsons had indeed come to Sydney. However, they had relocated, and it took the Ministry a fair number of days to discover that her parents had moved to Perth where they had taken up occupation in the Swan Valley wine region. Hermione recalled that her father had always loved Australian wines, so the relocation did make sense in some comforting way.

On arrival in Perth they discovered the Wilkinsons running a born-again Christian missionary church. When Hermione and Severus visited the church, her parents, who were suspicious of two strangers, still agreed to meet them when it was mentioned that they were from England too. At the local organic café, over a cappuccino, Hermione attempted to tell them that she was their daughter and that she had removed their memories to send them away to safety.

Monica and Wendell listened to Hermione's explanations quietly, but finally shock their heads. Monica was very sorry for the poor girl, and laid her hand gently on the Hermione's arm and said, "It's very good of your Priest to accompany you on your quest."

Before Hermione could even explain that Severus was not a priest despite his robes, Wendell said rather rudely, "Monica, don't patronise the lunatic. You'll only make her worse."

Hermione gasped at the remark. Her father had not been a crude or rude man. This altered person she could not recognise.

Severus clutched his wand tightly in his hand and said menacingly, "What if we could prove that magic is real? What if we show you?"

"Your joke is in poor taste, sir," said Monica in irritation. She looked over to her husband, who nodded his head. Standing up, Wendell held her hand and together, they began to leave.

In agitation, Hermione followed. Severus ensuring that no one paid undue attention to their hasty departure before following the trio.

Out in the parking area, Hermione pulled out her wand and cried, "Watch this," and cast a charm to turn her hair blonde.

Her parents gaped at her in wonder before Wendell remarked snidely, "We don't have time for your cheap tricks. This is all quite enough."

As they moved to get into their vehicle, Hermione rushed up to the window and begged, "Please give me a chance."

Monica was not a cruel woman. Reasoning to herself, *Was Jesus not always kind to the hurt and the incapacitated*, she placed her hand on her husband's arm. "Perhaps we can give her a few more moments of our time, honey," she said softly.

Wendell grunted. He too felt pity for the mad young woman. She was pretty, and looked so much like his dearest Monica. "There's a park not too far from here called Langley Park," said Wendell gruffly. Looking at Severus, who had come to stand behind Hermione, he asked, "Do you know it? It's between Victoria Avenue and Plain Street."

Severus nodded. "We'll be there."

About fifteen minutes later, Hermione and Severus saw Monica and Wendell drive into the car park. It was winter in Australia and the park was relatively quiet and unoccupied. There, once the Wilkinses were seated comfortably on a park bench, Hermione and Severus performed the counter charm. It did not work.

Hermione's parents had not expected it to. But Monica had made Wendell agree to giving the poor unfortunate girl a chance to get what she wanted to say off her chest. Thus, although the counter charm did not work, the couple sat and listened as Hermione tried desperately to explain all that she had done.

Even after Hermione's long narration, the Wilkinses were not convinced. In fact, they pitied the child even more. Wendell offered in his gentlest tone, "Do not worry, my child, my wife and I will pray for your damaged soul. Trust in the power of Jesus. He will help you find your lost parents."

In desperation, Hermione turned to the man beside her "Severus, do something please," she pleaded anxiously.

Severus sighed, but nodded his head in resignation. Then, Severus looked deep into Monica's eyes and murmured, "Legilemens." What he found there saddened him. He learned that Monica did not want to believe Hermione. She did not want the burden of a mentally scarred child.

"Muffliato," said Severus quietly.

Hermione blushed as she watched Severus cast the spell she and her friends had abused and used from his old Potions textbook.

Once the spell was cast, Severus bluntly said, "Your counter charm does not work because they do not want it to work. They do not want to remember, Hermione. The mind is a curious thing. Your mother is blocking all attempts to release the memories she does not desire."

"I don't believe you," said Hermione, her voice quivering with pain. "Not my mother."

Severus shrugged. He had not expected the reclamation of the Muggles to go smoothly, no matter how confident Hermione had been. Finally, seeing the sheer desolation on Hermione's face, Severus said, "There is one more thing I can try. It is dark magic, but it will work."

Hermione nodded. "Anything, please, Severus."

Severus sighed. He had studied spells from the darker spectrum of mind magic during his days as the Dark Lord's interrogator, but he had not wanted to expose Hermione to that nature of magic unless it was their last resort. Now it appeared that she would be forced to see her parents in pain. However, Severus understood Hermione's need and put aside his own fears that she would resent him for the suffering he caused her parents.

Raising his wand, he began chanting a dark curse in ancient Greek to remove all traces of previously performed mind magic. It was an old spell that had been developed and used to torture and to remove all protective mind spells from captured soldiers during the Persian Wars waged by Xerxes.

As he finished his incantation, Monica and Wendell began to convulse in excruciating pain. However, it was obvious that their memories had been restored.

Terrified and still clutching their aching heads, Monica and Wendell glared at Hermione and Severus balefully. "Devil incarnate," whispered Monica, crossing herself in agitation.

In their year away from England Monica and Wendell had discovered religion in its most fundamental of forms. Horrified at what they had witnessed, the memories that had just been restored of magic, they imagined that Hermione was the worst of devil worshipers.

Wendell, now Roger Granger said, "Young woman, you are nothing but the spawn of the devil. What evil have you brought into our lives?"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. Brokenly she whispered, "I'm not evil, I'm your daughter and a witch."

"Yes, a witch," said Ruth Granger. "You're the spawn of the devil. We don't want to have anything to do with you and your kind."

"Mummy," moaned Hermione in disbelief. Her mother could not possibly reject her. Ruth was the kindest of women.

Roger Granger shook his head as though to clear the last remaining tendrils of dizziness. "We shall pray for your immortal soul that you are cleansed in the fires of hell and can be reborn in the love of Christ. But you are not our daughter. We will not have a witch as our child."

Hermione was really upset. She fell on the ground before her father and begged him to reconsider. "Please, daddy. I've missed you so. Why have you become like this? You were so proud of my being a witch before." Hermione had always been a daddy's girl and she could not understand their sudden rejection and altered thinking.

Her father sighed. Now that he had his memories back, he remembered how much he loved his only child. A child he knew his wife had never wanted, and had had merely because he had been so keen on becoming a father.

"Hermione," he said, trying to explain, "even if I could hurt Ruth by accepting someone as flawed as you, I could never trust you. You could have fabricated these memories just as you fabricated our memories of being the Wilkinses. You took us away from our extended family, our roots and home to live in this land of convicts. How can your mother and I ever forgive you? Do you know how long our family has lived in England? Do you know what place we occupy in society? And then, you reduce us to this, to living in Australia like common scum. I thank the Lord that we have the church to help us find out bearings in this time of grave turbulence."

Ruth nodded her head in agreement. She recalled how much Roger had loved his only child. She knew now that she had never wanted to be a mother, but that she had given in for the sake of her husband, who had therefore taken care of Hermione most of the time.

Coldly Ruth said, "Please don't try and contact us again. You have done enough damage."

Hermione turned back to her father. "Daddy, please. I've missed you so much."

Roger sighed. He wanted more than anything to wrap his arms around his daughter. But he could not forgive her betrayal. And he could not hurt his wife by accepting Hermione into their lives once more.

Severus had been silent since he had finished casting the incantation. Now, he was moved to intervene yet again. Looking squarely at the older couple, he said, "Look into your hearts. Does not your Christian god speak of forgiveness and mercy? If you find it in your heart to accept your daughter, your memories will show you how to contact her in Scotland. Any letter addressed to her at Hogwarts will find her there."

Roger nodded, but did not respond. Instead, he stood up and took his wife's hand in his. Silently, without a backward glance at the now weeping Hermione, they walked away.

Hermione was shattered. She cried, great gasping sobs that wracked her body.

The Slytherin in Severus realised this was the best time to press his suit. Even though he did genuinely care for her, his instincts screamed at him to make her his permanently now. She was needy, she was vulnerable. She would not refuse. But even as these thoughts circled through his head, another notion entered his mind. It was one born of honour, of a need for her to come to him with all of her heart and her mind. Though he did not want to admit it, even to himself, Severus had started to believe that he would be able to break the Dark Veela curse. He had begun to believe that he would find true love. Thus, he did not want Hermione to come to him when she was not in her right mind. He wanted her to want him completely, thoroughly, with full knowledge of what she was doing. Calling himself all kinds of fool, he gently pulled her into a close embrace as opposed to the heated kiss he wanted to bestow upon her.

Severus had from the very beginning suspected that this trip would not end in joy. He carefully put his arms around her and soothed her with gentle strokes to her back.

In her desolation, Hermione held on to him, the only constant and source of security in an alien and unpredictable world. Even as she cried, her eyes met his. They were wild, feral, and almost completely unhinged. Hermione had lost her surrogate family, the Weasleys. She had lost the boy she had thought she would always end up with. She had lost her faith in Dumbledore, who she had thought was infallible. Now, she had lost her parents; her father, who could do no wrong, and her mother, whose sensible and practical presence Hermione had taken as the example for her own way of being. Thus, as Severus murmured soft nonsense words into her ear, she held him as if her life depended upon not letting go and cried even harder.

Most men would have been made uncomfortable by Hermione's tears. But Severus had been Head of House for long enough to know what to do with crying children. Moreover, he had learned the art of soothing a wild animal from a true master, Hagrid. When an animal needed comfort, you comforted it. So Severus held her and rocked her gently as she cried and finally Hermione ran out of tears.

When the tears turned to soft sobs, he released one arm from around her to pull out a handkerchief. Kissing her gently on the forehead, he said, "Shh... my dear, enough now."

Hermione tried to smile bravely, but failed miserably.

Severus did not sigh or show in any way that he was irritated or annoyed. Instead, as gently as he could, he said, "Come now, Princess, blow your nose."

That did make her smile. *Who would have thought*, said Hermione to herself, *Severus Snape has a truly gentle side*. Looking up at the man whose presence made her feel safe and secure despite the heartbreak she had just undergone, she whispered hoarsely, "Did you suspect?"

Now Severus did sigh. As gently as he could, he replied, "Yes."

At Hermione's tearful, yet inquisitive gaze, he continued, "Hermione, you must understand that all Muggle-borns have at some point to make a choice. They must decide if they are going to live either in the magical or the Muggle world. Even if they hope to live in both, circumstances usually end up forcing them to choose, one or the other. It is otherwise very difficult for their spouses, their friends and their livelihoods. This is one of the main causes for the mistrust the wizarding world has for Muggle-borns because they have always had this choice. Muggle-borns can choose to betray who they are and leave the wizarding world. Purebloods do not have the choice, and so they feel they are more true to magic."

Hermione nodded. His talking of other things had helped distract her.

When Severus saw that Hermione was calm, he gently leaned over and kissed her on her forehead. "Never fear, Princess, you have a home at Hogwarts. Cissy and Lucius have taken a shine to you, and I owe you a great debt of gratitude. You are not alone."

Hermione shuddered at the words. Quietly she murmured, "I don't want to be indebted to you. I don't want to hold any kind of debt over you. Severus, you have had enough of that in the past, you are now finally free."

Severus had expected Hermione's predictable response. It was such a Gryffindor sensibility. No Slytherin would have let such an opportunity slip through his or her fingers. With a smirk, Severus said, "The gratitude is not because I feel I am oath bound. I give it gladly, one friend to another."

Hermione nodded. This she could understand.

Severus inwardly shook his head. Gryffindors were so easy to manipulate. He knew just what to say to calm their over-zealous sense of honour. Tightening his grip on the young woman, he kissed her gently on her mouth.

Hermione responded to the kiss immediately. She was alone and afraid. Severus was suddenly the only anchor in a strange and choppy sea.

Severus seemed to understand the need that was driving Hermione's kiss. Gentling his own exploration of her warm and willing mouth, he gave her a warm hug before releasing her.

"Our work here is done," he said decisively. "I think we should do our best to return to England as soon as we can."

Hermione nodded.

Severus drew her into his embrace even further, and with a quick and silent spin Apparated them to their hotel.

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After her terrible disappointment Hermione did not want to return to Grimmauld Place. She could not bear to see the Weasleys, especially Ginny or Molly's gloating face. Instead, when she whispered her concerns to Severus, he suggested Hermione stay with him or the Malfoys. "Cissy would be most unhappy if she learned that you were all alone and did not go to her."

Hermione nodded. Severus, she knew, was right. She was not brave enough to move into Severus' home, however much a part of her wanted to. But Cissy was a true friend and she knew the Slytherin would give her the mothering she needed after the trauma of rejection.

Thus, Hermione spent the next week at the Malfoys'. Hermione and Cissy's friendship blossomed. The Slytherins were quick to use their time with the Gryffindor Princess to further her education into pureblood ideology. Under the tutelage and guidance of Lucius and Severus, Hermione began her reading of the wizarding history, pureblood tradition and culture. Narcissa meanwhile showed Hermione the importance of pureblood genealogy and helped the young woman understand the way in which pureblood society worked. There were so many layers and nuances to the way in which status and position was established that Hermione was utterly intrigued by the mystery of it all. Draco too began to unbend further and the two teenagers formed what was to prove a lifelong friendship.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

# Chapter Twenty-Three: Post-Oz Results

Chapter 23 of 40

Hermione returns to Hogwarts for her final year. The students react to her publicly highlighted friendship with the Slytherins.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this story. Your kind reviews have helped me so much. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.
- (iii) And finally, big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

August proved to be as hot and as sunny as the rest of the summer months. Hermione, Luna and Astoria took delight in their new friendship and spent most of their last days before their return to school sunbathing by the Malfoys' Japanese water garden. When not sprawled inelegantly around the grounds and gardens, the three spent much of their time reading and preparing for their return to Hogwarts.

Staying at the Malfoys' had at first seemed strange, but soon Hermione found that she was able to quite confidently call the Manor home. It made her laugh in amazement, because she had never thought that she would be so comfortable around the haughty Slytherins.

Draco seemed to find the three girls' friendship very amusing, and he started calling them the Tempting Trio. Luna had blushed furiously at this moniker before informing Draco quite categorically in her unabashedly sincere manner that the man she fancied was still too blind to notice.

Astoria and Hermione both grinned at this comment. In their lazy afternoons of relaxation and sun-worshiping, the two had been able to discover that Luna had formed a more than passing interest in the Saviour of the Wizarding World.

Severus had always been a fairly regular visitor to Malfoy Manor. Now he had another reason to visit, and it soon became a fairly frequent occurrence to have him join the Malfoys and the three young women for dinner and drinks. Indeed, the slow and gentle courtship that Severus had initiated at the start of the summer vacation had progressed to the state that it was now an open secret among their friends. However, as the days moved swiftly towards the start of term, Severus decided to speak candidly to Hermione. Going out into the rose garden where Hermione was reading in the evening sunlight, Severus sat down on the wrought iron bench beside her.

Hermione put down her book on wizarding feudal practices and turned to kiss the man beside her. "Hello, you," she said with a happy smile.

Severus continued to find it amazing that she would greet him so openly with a happy smile and kiss. No one else had ever really wanted him as openly as Hermione did. Returning her kiss, he drew her to straddle his thighs. Sliding his arms to hold her to him, he groaned as she began to wantonly rub herself against his immediate and insistent erection. "Stop that, Princess," he murmured. "Cissy and Lucius are probably glued to the window watching us at this very moment. Do you really want to give them more teasing material?"

Hermione blushed and giggled. She knew how much her friends enjoyed roasting the two of them for their so-called slow-burn relationship. Indeed, Cissy had taken Hermione aside on more than one occasion to ask if she required contraception potion, or even, at Hermione's most recent revelation that she had still not been bedded by Severus, a bit of Bella's incredibly powerful lust potion. Letting her hands caress his long, lank hair, she impishly replied, "Yes."

Severus chuckled darkly. "Bloody Gryffindor," he said before standing swiftly to turn and deposit her back onto the bench. "I'm not going to ravish you for the amusement of the match-making duo."

"You always have a reason for not ravishing me," said Hermione with a pout. She knew she sounded ridiculous, but she wanted him. Ron had been dying to get into her pants, but he had left her feeling cold and frigid. Now that she'd finally found a man who turned her body to molten lava, he bugged up her plans of being taken by playing the bloody gentleman. "It's really not fair that you can be such a gentleman when all I think about is ripping your clothes off and begging you to take me any way you want," said Hermione in annoyance. She was beet red as she finished her little tirade, but she wanted there to be no doubt in Severus' mind that she was more than ready to be taken.

Severus chuckled again, even as he grew impossibly hard at the image of Hermione ripping off his clothes. He had never thought that he would be accused of being too much of a gentleman or of hearing a beautiful young woman beg him to take her any way he wanted. He could easily imagine taking her in a number of ways. Kneeling before her on the grass, he gently caressed her face. "You know I want you, Hermione, but I'm no callow youth. I don't want to take you and then pretend that we've not been lovers. I don't want to make you mine, only to let you go."

"I don't want you to let me go, ever," said Hermione tenderly. "Severus, I care deeply for you."

"Oh, Princess," groaned Severus raggedly. His heart swelling with unnamed emotion, he arose in one fluid move to stand before her. Struggling for control, he took her hand in his and said, "Walk with me please."

Hermione nodded. Leaving her book on the bench, she allowed herself to be led to a low wall that overlooked the formal marble fountain. Once there, Severus lowered himself to sit on the wall, pulling Hermione to sit astride him.

Pleased that he'd drawn her to sit on him, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and laid her head on his broad chest. "I'm listening," murmured Hermione. In their slow courtship, Hermione had learned that Severus needed time to speak his heart.

Sighing, Severus tightened his grip on his beautiful companion. What he was going to say was sure to hurt his Gryffindor, especially now that she had admitted to caring for him. But he knew it was the best thing he could do for her. He knew she could not take subterfuge and skulduggery in her stride like he could. Hiding her affection for him would destroy her purity. Burying his sensitive nose in her hair and breathing in her jasmine and honey fragrance, Severus said hoarsely, "I've given us a lot of thought, Hermione. This relationship cannot continue at Hogwarts. There's no way for us to keep the nature of our friendship a secret. It is part of the Hogwarts enchantment. The castle will not allow us to carry on an illicit love affair. And we can't openly announce our involvement. The scandal would ruin your chances of taking the NEWTs in a calm and unbiased manner. They would blame me for ruining you, at best, and at worst, they would find reasons to suggest that the only explanation for why you've done so well in all your educational endeavours was because you were willing to do *extra credit assignments*, and I don't mean that in the polite sense. You've worked too hard to let being involved with me tarnish your academic record. This, your final year, should be about finishing your education, not about your relationship with me. There's far too much attention on us now, but if we go back to Hogwarts and this continues, it's going to be much worse."

Hermione's eyes had filled with tears as Severus had begun to speak. Now she listened, tears streaming down her cheeks as he bitterly finished his explanation. She knew he was doing the right thing, that he was being mature and reasonable. But she wanted him, and she couldn't understand how he could be so strong as to let her go.

Severus tenderly wiped the tears that were pouring down her face. He kissed her softly on her mouth, taking her desolation and sadness into himself. "I'm not abandoning you, beautiful," he said gently. "I'm just saying that we can't continue this at Hogwarts. Once you finish your NEWTs, and if you still want to be with me, then I shall welcome you into my arms and into my bed with all the passion that I possess. But for now, we must keep our heads."

"Oh, Severus," moaned Hermione. However, she did understand his point of view, and although it hurt her greatly, she clung to the fact that he had not said he did not want her. Sliding her hands into his slick locks, she pressed her forehead against his. "I will not change my mind, Severus. I want you now, and I know that I will want you when the year is done. Promise me you will not turn me away."

"Never," breathed Severus raggedly. He had not thought it possible that he could feel so strongly for another person. Realising that he cared deeply for Hermione, just as she professed to do for him, his heart bloomed with the thought that in a year's time, he would finally know true love. He realised that he had come to the edge of the precipice. Soon he would defeat the Dark Veela Curse. Soon, when the coming year was through, he would be able to explore the depth of his feelings for Hermione and hopefully find and express true love. Bracing himself for the loss of the girl-woman who had come to mean so much to him, Severus strengthened his resolve.

"We can continue to be friends," said Severus decisively. "We will not speak of this again until your NEWTs are complete, but we will both know, and we can look forward to us being together then. I have waited a long time, Hermione, to find a woman to love and adore. Now that I have let you into my heart, now that we are on the brink of something truly precious, I will not let this slip through my fingers."

Hermione sighed. Severus had all but admitted to feelings of love and adoration. She could bide her time. She was no foolish girl. Her year on the run, together with the maturity that living through a war had brought, had taught Hermione the importance of patience. "Yes, Severus," she said gently. "I will wait and be your friend in the interim."

Narcissa and Lucius were full of encouragement for the unfolding relationship, for they had taken Hermione into their hearts with no reservations. But they worried that things had changed between their beloved Hermione and their dour friend, for they could see that the couple no longer spent quality time together. Narcissa had been sure that Severus was about to propose when he had gone out to speak to Hermione in the rose garden. But on their return to the house, Severus had seemed withdrawn and morose, and Hermione had worn no additional piece of jewellery.

Hermione, in turn, had begun to treat the older Malfoys like the surrogate parents they wanted to be. Thus, she gently told the older couple over coffee the next morning that she and Severus had decided to put a halt to their relationship until she finished school. This disturbed the Malfoy couple, for they had been sure that their friend Severus was growing attached to Hermione, just as she was growing attached to him.

Unlike Molly and Arthur, Lucius and Narcissa had both the time and the money to indulge their newest honorary family member, and Hermione was showered with the affection she craved after the cruel rejection of her parents and Severus' supposedly sensible withdrawal. Indeed, Hermione now began to see and learn first-hand what it felt like to be a truly wanted and adored child. Draco had been spoilt and pampered for so long because he had been the Malfoys' only offspring. He had had to bear the burden of being their perfect son, the only manifestation of their aspirations and desires. Now, it seemed that Hermione had taken over some of that burden. Indeed, Lucius and Narcissa confided in Hermione that her influence seemed to have helped Draco grow up, and the formerly listless and spoilt boy had become a man with a mission to help bring back the lost glory of the Malfoy name through solid hard work.

Thus, Hermione returned to Hogwarts on the first of September to complete her final, seventh year and sit for her NEWTs with a calm and serene mind if a troubled heart. She was looking forward to completing her exams with no crazed Dark Lord looming over the horizon, just as she was yearning for the time when she could claim her place beside the dark man who had swept her off her feet so thoroughly over the summer. She hoped too that Severus would have more time to spend with her, since he had been working flat out for most of August. He had, over the many evenings spent at the Malfoys' home, discussed over dinner how he and Minerva had taken it on themselves to totally overhaul the Hogwarts syllabus.

However, Hermione discovered on arriving at the Hogwarts Express that she was one of the very few students who had chosen to return for their final year. She had, of course, heard as much from her close group of friends, but she had not really thought of what it would mean in reality. It was only when getting on the train that she realised that most pupils had, like Draco and Daphne, sat for their NEWTs before the start of term. Others, like Harry, Ron and Lavender, had gratefully accepted the token results handed out by the Ministry and left Hogwarts and its traumatic memories behind.

Moreover, on Hermione's return to Hogwarts, she found that her public friendship with the Malfoys had made her suspect with most of the junior students of her own house. They had, like Ginny, not been able to reconcile the stories of Severus Snape, daring spy for the Order of the Phoenix, with Severus Snape, git of a Potions master and headmaster. Severus' tenure as Head had been one that had caused immense suffering for the students of Gryffindor House, and they could not see the subtlety of his performance that had saved them from serious injury under the brutal Carrows. Thus, the other Gryffindors were happy to follow Ginny's lead of keeping away from the brains of the Golden Trio.

Apart from the teachers and the Hufflepuffs, the only people to look kindly upon Hermione were Luna and Astoria. Their unity encouraged the other Slytherins to form tentative acquaintances with the now proclaimed heroines of the Battle of Hogwarts. This caused the Gryffindors to be even more suspicious of Hermione.

This, however, did not trouble Hermione as it would once have done. She was content with her two girlfriends. It felt strange to be without Harry and Ron in classes, but Luna and Astoria were intelligent, vibrant young women, and their company helped Hermione adjust to being in school once again.

The end of the war and the summer had done much to transform Astoria and Luna. Astoria's formerly more reserved behaviour, at least outside Slytherin circles, had lessened. Having two non-Slytherins for friends had allowed the young woman's natural personality to emerge in public. Luna too seemed to have lost some of her formerly vacant mannerisms. She still gazed searchingly at the empty spaces around people, and she still wore unusual accessories, but there was a new and more forceful presence to her. When Luna spoke, people now seemed to listen.

Late one night, a week into the new term, Luna and Hermione were sitting quietly in the library. Astoria had retired to bed, but the two girls who had discovered a special affinity for history and charms, were researching some of the enchantments of Hogwarts castle.

Neatly placing a bookmark and closing the book that lay before her, Luna rested her head on her hands. Then, with a vacant stare that seemed to be focused on the stained glass windows, Luna brought up the subject that was constantly on Hermione's mind: Severus Snape. "Do you know," said Luna without preamble, "Headmaster Snape is even more lonely this year?"

As Hermione's eyes widened in shock, she too shut her book to focus intently on her friend.

Luna did not seem to be aware of Hermione's deep concentration. Still gazing at the image of Merlin depicted in the centre panel of the library archway window, she continued, "I think he's got used to company and affection. However much the staff regret their actions, they were horrible to him last year, and they don't seem to be able to get over it now. Have you seen how strained their conversations usually are? Guilt and remorse are ugly things when they are continuously tainting the surroundings. He's doing his best, but his eyes are more lost than they were last year. Before, he gave his duty all of his attention; now without that to cling to, his loneliness and desolation seem even more acute. It's only Professor McGonagall who seems to have been able to get beyond remorse to actually doing something about it."

This brought Hermione up short. Looking at Luna inquiringly, she asked her friend candidly, "What can we do?"

Luna smiled. "That's easy, Hermione. Be his friend. He needs people who really care about him to be around him. He needs affection and caring that's not brought on by a sense of wanting to do the right thing, or indeed, a sense of pity or righteousness or shame. I've started kissing him on his cheek every time I see him in the greenhouses, which seems to be nearly every morning. It really startles him, but it does make him work hard not to smirk or indeed, blush."

Hermione laughed. She could well imagine her friend startling Severus with random kisses. Resolving to not let him maintain the distance he'd insisted on before the start of term for what Hermione could now see were superficial reasons, she once again began to plot. She knew that she needed ammunition if she was to persuade her Slytherin of her ability to maintain discretion while still pursuing a relationship.

It gladdened Hermione to see Luna coping with their return to Hogwarts. Hermione had worried that her friend would suffer as a result of her separation from her father and the memories of her long imprisonment at Malfoy Manor. Spending time at the Manor or lying on the grounds and sunbathing with the Slytherins, had seemed easy enough for the Ravenclaw to accomplish, but Hermione knew from firsthand experience what dark fears emerged when the drapes were shut in lonely bedchambers.



"Are you sure you're truly okay?" Hermione asked Luna gently. "You don't need to hide the pain. I tell you almost everything, you know. You can tell me if you're not sleeping well or something."

Luna smiled and hugged Hermione. "Thank you, Hermione. But don't worry. I've got specially charmed radishes around my bed to ward off nightmares, and my father has given me some wobble wimbles, which I've kept in my trunk. It stops bad thoughts from lingering in my room."

At Hermione's widened eyes, Luna smiled and stroked her friend's arm. "I wasn't really mistreated at the Manor you know. Lucius even came down and healed me at one point when Bellatrix had wanted something to play with and had me brought up for her amusement. And when Draco returned to the Manor and learned that I was imprisoned in the cellar, he came below a few times with rations of food that were significantly better than anything Pettigrew ever brought down."

Hermione shuddered. She knew firsthand what it was like to be a plaything of the crazed Bella. She could not imagine how Luna could be so forgiving of people who had imprisoned her. But Hermione had come to realise that there was a core of steel within the psyche of the random Ravenclaw, and she acknowledged if anyone could know of the Malfoys' true intent, it would be Luna, with her strong skills in perception.

Hermione had never really been friends with people who were serious about education before. For the first time, she found that she did not have to force or drag her friends to the library, for the girls were more than happy to spend much of their free time in the library studying. The library had been for both Luna and Astoria a special place, especially during the last trying year. When the girls were not in the library, which was one of the few places where students of different houses were allowed to mingle, they were out in the grounds when the weather was mild, walking around the lake. It was on one of these walks at the end of their second week back at Hogwarts, as the trio strolled arm in arm, that Luna said into the quiet gloom of twilight, "Headmaster Snape is quite beautiful."

Astoria sighed dramatically for a moment before giggling. Then, with a sly grin at Hermione she said, "I wouldn't say beautiful, but he is extremely sexy in a dark and dangerous kind of way."

When Hermione merely startled at her friend's audacity and blushed furiously, Astoria broke into amused laughter. With a devilish smirk Astoria asked, "Did you think you were the only girl to fantasise about him, Hermione?"

Hermione tried to formulate an answer and failed completely. Her friend, however, did not seem to want a reply, for she continued speaking. "I'll have you know that we Slytherins have thought him hot for years now. Almost every year there's a dare going around to try and seduce him, to get beneath the layers of his dark and suppressed exterior."

As Hermione goggled at the thought of girls wanting to seduce Severus, her Severus, Luna explained with a dreamy voice, "I see with my heart, not my mind. I wasn't talking about his sexuality, more about his magical signature."

Astoria smirked. "Well, everyone's allowed to see something in our sexy headmaster if they so desire. He's never encouraged any of the students to pursue him before though, so you must be doing something right."

"What do you mean, pursue him?" asked Hermione in confusion.

Astoria laughed. "Really, Hermione. No wonder you've not made your move yet. He's all but told you outright that you can have him if you want. He's not going to do the running, girl, he's a Slytherin. He'll not make his heart vulnerable. But if he wanted, don't you think he would have cut you up into little pieces for the familiarity you showed when you spent time with him over the summer?"

Hermione nodded. "I did think so. I mean, we've been having a kind of relationship, and he did say he wanted me. But then, just before the start of term, he said us having a liaison would not be appropriate. He insisted that we maintain our distance, that he would not have my reputation ruined by rumours of an illicit affair between a member of staff and a student."

Astoria was now grinning openly. "Silly girl, he more than openly said he wanted you. He was giving you the opportunity to disagree. He was putting the ball in your court, leaving it to you to find a way to be with him without letting your little friends at Gryffindor tower know about your passionate affair with the headmaster."

"Oh, dear," said Hermione with a blush, "couldn't he have just said so?" Then, she grinned. "No, of course he couldn't; he's a bloody Slytherin. I had planned on doing something about it, but the days have just sped by and I've not really found time to be with him alone."

Astoria giggled. "Well, I'm no Harry Potter, and Luna here is no Ron Weasley, but I'm sure we three can come up with a plan or two to ensure you've got plenty of alone time with our sizzlingly sexy headmaster."

Hermione grinned and flung her arms around the shoulders of her two friends. "I never really thought of him as sexy before this summer. I've always respected him, of course, but I never really thought about him as a man until I learned about his love for Harry's mum. Now after getting to know him, he just seems more real. I guess because he's stopped being merely a two-dimensional figure of the brilliant but sarcastic educator and brave but misunderstood spy and has become a person."

Luna nodded. Then looking beyond Hermione to gaze into the Forbidden Forest, she murmured, "There's more to Headmaster Snape than we all realise. He's got a dark shadow that surrounds him, and his light pierces through it with great difficulty. It's like looking at the sun through scratched sunglasses."

Hermione stared at her friend. She'd never really thought about magical auras. But lately, hearing Luna explain more clearly what she saw when she looked at people helped Hermione understand Luna's often distracted expression when talking to others. Hermione vowed to herself to pay more attention to people. She wanted to see what Luna saw.

Thus, Hermione started to look at Professor Snape with more care and began to see the blindingly bright beauty that seemed to glow from his hands, his eyes and his upright posture. It was as though some parts of his body were more conducive to emitting light than others. It confused her but it did little to halt her amazement that the beauty of his brilliant aura was so obvious but had been so well hidden for so very long. Her attraction for him that had begun at the Victory Ball had over the months of knowing him and seeing him in a more personal setting altered her feelings for him. Now it was no longer just mere attraction, but the real tendrils of love.

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Severus was uncomfortable pursuing a student, but he missed his Gryffindor Princess. He longed for her intoxicating kisses, and he constantly berated himself for allowing her to return to Hogwarts. He should have insisted that she sit for the exams with Draco so that she could be courted instead of avoided.

Late one night, just before curfew, Hermione ran into Severus as she was leaving the library. It was a few days before Hermione's nineteenth birthday, and the Gryffindor Princess had been plotting. Looking around to make sure they were completely alone, she slipped her hand into his before reaching up to kiss him softly on the mouth. "I've missed you so much," murmured Hermione against his lips. "I can't believe we've been back here for so many days and have not managed even a few minutes alone."

Severus was undone by her admission. Squeezing the soft hand that was ensconced within his, he led her swiftly to a deserted alcove in an out-of-the-way corridor. There, he promptly cast Silencing and Privacy Charms before pulling her into his arms for a deeply satisfying kiss. He'd been dreaming of her soft and yielding mouth for days, and he was not going to let this opportunity slip through his fingers.

Hermione moaned as Severus unleashed his passion upon her. Sliding her fingers through his locks, she rubbed her body wantonly against his.

Severus groaned at her obvious reciprocation. Letting his hands slide down to capture her delectable arse, he fit himself between her thighs and pleased her through their many layers of clothes.

Hermione could barely restrain herself. Pushing herself slightly away, she began attacking the buttons of his robes in desperation. She wanted him; she had been denied him for too long. Now nothing was going to stand in her way.

Severus seemed to realise the frenzy that had been unleashed in Hermione. Capturing the hands that were busy undoing his row upon row of cloth-covered buttons, he did his best to still her.

"Don't stop me now, Severus," pleaded Hermione. "I can almost hear what you're going to say:*This is neither the time nor the place.*"

Severus chuckled darkly. "Well, I would be right, would I not, my wanton know-it-all. We can't fuck in a deserted corridor, however impressive my Silencing and Privacy Charms may be."

Hermione moaned in annoyance. "I'm tired of you being reasonable. I promise to be very discreet if you will let us carry on exploring this thing we have between us."

Severus sighed before kissing her gently on the mouth. "Have I not said I want you? Of course I want to explore what lies between us. But we cannot have your reputation being dragged through the gutter. Wizarding Britain would not take kindly to us being together if our affair became public knowledge while you were a student."

Hermione sighed. "I know. But I'm not a fool. I know you've been avoiding me. I miss you, Severus. I miss our conversations, our time together."

Severus wrapped his arms around Hermione and caressed her back. He did not know how to respond, but her words pleased him beyond measure. He now more than ever believed that he could defeat the Dark Veela Curse. *She obviously cares for me*, thought Severus. *She wants me, she misses me. I'm sure to defeat the bloody curse.* Buoyant at this Severus decided to speed up his slow courtship. Sighing gently, Severus nudged Hermione to sit on the broad window-seat of the alcove before taking a seat beside her. Holding her hand, which he caressed with his thumb, he softly began to speak.

"Princess, you must understand the castle enchantments. I've done plenty of reading into the laws governing staff-student relationships. If we continue to meet in private and if our relationship progresses to the physical, which it obviously will, the castle will reveal our liaison to all and sundry. This is an inbuilt enchantment to protect the interests of students. The castle will not allow a student to be secretly abused by one of the professors. If a relationship is in existence, it has to be open and above board."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty-Four: Slytherin Plotting Gryffindor Style

Chapter 24 of 40

Hermione decides to ask for help. She is adamant that she is not going to let the castle, wizarding Britain and Severus' over-blown sense of propriety halt her sexual awakening.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this story. Your kind reviews have helped me so much. Please do continue to let me know what you think of the story.
- (iii) And finally, big hug of gratitude to my beautiful beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Hermione listened to Severus' explanation with quiet despair. She knew that he would have researched the topic thoroughly. He was too much like her to not read the fine print on staff-student relationships. *Why did I not take my NEWTs with Draco?* wondered Hermione. *I could have easily sat for all the exams and been free to pursue a serious relationship with Severus.* But even as she questioned her decision to return, Hermione knew that she had come back for a reason. She wanted to learn the mysteries of Hogwarts castle. She wanted to really take her time to understand the complexities of the various magical practices. She didn't just want to study material that was relevant for testing. In her heart, she knew that she wanted to figure out what to do next. She had no idea of what she would do at the end of her magical education and that terrified her. The wizarding world did not have universities. The next step after NEWTs was gaining a low-level employment position with the Ministry or finding an apprenticeship with a Master in one's chosen field.

Hermione's confusion arose because one, all Masters offering apprenticeships were based outside Britain due to the political climate of the last few decades, and two, because realistically, despite her love of learning, she had not narrowed down which field she really wanted to go into. She knew she loved Arithmancy, but she couldn't imagine dedicating her entire life to that one field. She knew she was particularly gifted in Charms, but she didn't particularly want to go live in Lithuania, where the foremost Charms Mistress, Grazyna Zujute, lived and taught. In an ideal world, mused Hermione, she would live with Severus at Hogwarts castle, take on one apprenticeship after another with the professors, if they were capable of providing it, and then write.

However, thinking about her ideal life was neither here nor there. Severus was waiting for an answer, and she needed to respond. And so, Hermione sighed and nodded her head. "All right, Severus," said Hermione in resignation. "I won't pounce on you in darkened corridors and attempt to rip your clothes off. But please, don't keep your distance. At least talk to me, if only in the presence of Astoria and Luna. I miss you so much. Let me have something to keep me warm in the chill of my too big and lonely bed."

Severus shuddered. *Does the girl...no, woman...realise how her words affect me?* thought Severus. For her words of need sent sparks of desire to his very soul. He wanted to be loved so desperately, and here was this innocent woman, telling him everything he had thought lay forever beyond his blackened soul.

Taking her small and delicate hand to his lips, he kissed her fingers softly. Then, he turned her hand over and kissed her palm before slowly, excruciatingly, kissing his way to her wrist. "I promise," he murmured against her pulse point.

Hermione groaned. She was burning up with desire. Never in her wildest imaginings had Hermione thought that she would find her snarky Potions Master so very attractive. Now, he was the centre of her universe. "One final snog before we need to be circumspect," whispered Hermione, leaning up to nuzzle Severus against his ear.

"I do not snog," said Severus imperiously, even as his lips curled up into a lazy smirk. "I ravish; I plunder."

"Do you, now?" teased Hermione nibbling his earlobe. "Then I suggest you demonstrate your technique of ravishment and plundering, for I am in great need of such

treatment."

Severus chuckled darkly. "Minx."

"Yes, now kiss me, you great bat," ordered Hermione, the hand not being held by Severus coming up to slide into his hair.

"As my lady wishes," murmured Severus, raising his hands to twine his fingers in her unruly mop. Then, slowly, drawing out the tension in the moment to its almost painful culmination, he lowered his mouth once more onto hers.

Hermione gasped at the touch of his lips and opened her mouth fully to give him complete access, and as he'd stated, Severus ravished and plundered. But Hermione was no unwilling captive. She too poured all of her suppressed passion and desire into the kiss. Soon, Severus had pulled Hermione to straddle his thighs once more, and Hermione was pressed as tightly as she could be against him. They kissed for what felt like hours, hands exploring, stroking, while their lower bodies did their best to mimic the act of love through their many layers of cloth. Hermione was moaning almost continuously into the kiss, as she did her best to rub herself almost frantically against Severus' hard and insistent erection. Finally, with an impassioned groan, Severus wrenched his mouth away from Hermione.

"Enough now, Princess," he said gruffly, his voice thick with passion.

"Oh, Severus," shuddered Hermione breathlessly.

Severus growled softly at the pout worn by his aroused lover. Taking a deep breath to regain more control over his own raging libido, Severus gently put Hermione on her feet and stood up. Forcing himself to composure, he said in a silky purr, "Let me walk you back to Gryffindor tower."

Hermione sighed, but nodded. She knew there was no point in arguing with him when he had come to some decision, not until she had plenty of ammunition to help alter his mind. Standing up on tip toe, she straightened his collar, and he in turn smirked while casting a non-verbal spell to remove the creases from her robes. Once the evidence of their heated *snog* was eradicated from their persons, if not their still impassioned blood, the two walked in what was a surprisingly companionable silence up to the Fat Lady's painting.

Just before she said the password to awaken the dozing portrait, Hermione turned once more to squeeze Severus' hand. She knew that they ran the risk of being seen by any one of the dozing portraits. But Hermione had decided that she would display her friendship with Severus explicitly. Then, if people had anything to say, she could openly counter their claims of impropriety with the frank admission that they were friends and had been friends since the end of the Battle of Hogwarts. That was sure to silence the gossipers, even if it didn't completely halt the suspicious tongues.

He looked at her pointedly, as if to rebuke her for gesture, but she placed her finger on his lips to still his outpouring of words. "Friends, remember, Severus," she said gently. "Friends do occasionally touch each other, even hug." Then, drawing all of her Gryffindor courage together, she leaned forward and kissed him softly on the cheek. "If Luna can kiss you, so can I," she said cheekily.

Severus chuckled. "What have I ever done to deserve such a Gryffindor?" he teased gently.

Hermione smiled. Then, she said sincerely, "You've been the truest of friends." Giving one final squeeze of his hand, which caused Severus to smirk sardonically, she clearly called out, "Harry James Potter," to awaken the Fat Lady.

Severus' smirk turned into a snigger at Hermione's blush at the obviously Gryffindor password. But he did nothing but raise his eyebrow when Hermione turned to look at him in reproach before vanishing into her common room.

It was well past curfew when Hermione entered the common room. Most of the younger students had gone up to bed. It was only Ginny, Romilda Vane and a few of her friends who were seated close to the fire, painting their toe-nails.

Ginny looked pointedly at Hermione when she entered through the portrait-hole. Then, with an evil grin, she said rather loudly to Romilda, "Look, our heroine returns. I bet she's been snogging the resident Death Eater."

Hermione gasped at this audacious comment. She realised that Severus had been right. The castle would make sure that any illicit relationship was immediately brought to light. Doing her best to not react further to the sniggers of her fellow Gryffindors, Hermione quickly made her way upstairs. She was extremely thankful that she was the only returning seventh year. It was heaven-sent to have a room to herself at this juncture, even if the room was tiny in comparison to the larger chambers the other girls shared.

Deciding that she needed advice on the best way to seduce a Slytherin as well as get around the castle enchantments, she turned to what she had always done best, planning and list making. However, a tired yawn that caught her unawares made her realise the lateness of the hour. She had never been one to make the best of decisions when she was tired. Knowing that her planning would be better if done on the morrow, Hermione instead quickly prepared for bed.

The next morning, Hermione woke up bright and early. She had some serious thinking and planning to do. First, she made a list of all the people she could trust to help her with secrecy at Hogwarts. The list was short, but surprising. Besides Luna and Astoria, she came up with the names of three portraits: Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black, the dreaded sorceress Morgan le Fay and the powerful enchantress Arete of Cyrene. Harry, though willing to help, would be of no use, for he had no knowledge of pureblood etiquette. Furthermore, he was too busy in his Auror Training Programme.

However, the portraits would be ideal, for they had plenty of knowledge of the old ways and were so intimately connected with the castle that she could trust them to give her solid advice. Hermione had come to find Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black an interesting and surprisingly steadfast friend since their plotting to clear Severus' name. Indeed, when Hermione had returned his painting to Grimmauld Place, he had asked if she minded keeping him in what would essentially be her room. He had watched in pleased amusement as she had made friends with his great grand-daughter Narcissa, listened and offered his own brand of sage advice to their plans to give the public something to talk about, and had generally done his best to remain involved in the affairs of the Gryffindors. He'd had too much fun and excitement to want to go back to being a quiet portrait living out his days listening to mere family gossip and Slytherin plotting in the Malfoy ballroom or the tedium of administrative discussions and back-biting rampant in the Hogwarts headmaster's office.

Phineas Nigellus, like all good Slytherins, knew how to court someone they felt would be of use to themselves and their plans. Thus, he had made it a point to request for Hermione to come speak with him in his more regal portrait, which was displayed in the Malfoy ballroom when Hermione had come to stay with the Malfoys. Phineas Nigellus, like the other portraits in Malfoy Manor, had listened and gossiped about the growing attachment between the Mudblood and the current Slytherin Headmaster. Lucius had overheard and informed Cissy that Headmaster Black had even defended their latest Gryffindor acquisition from cruel commentary with the snidely delivered verdict that Hermione had more power and magic in her little finger than most of their other pureblood kin of her generation. He had gone on to state that if the current Slytherin Headmaster saw her potential and thereby took it on himself to attach that strength to his own, it could only be to the future and further glory of Slytherin.

This had pleased the Malfoys. Narcissa had found the friendship of her great-grandfather and the young Gryffindor so quaint that when Hermione had packed to return to Hogwarts, she had given Hermione a delicate gold locket that contained the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. The locket had belonged to Narcissa's great-grandmother Ursula and had been unworn for generations.

The dreaded sorceress Morgan le Fay had a long history in secrecy and deception. She had been one of the world's foremost Potions Mistresses, and there was a cruel-looking portrait of her in a fur-lined black cloak close to the Potions classroom entrance, as well a rather erotic painting of her in the Gryffindor reading room, where she lay languid and replete, clothed only in a ruby red silk sheet, discarded parchment and goblet of wine by her side. The reading room was only accessible to seventh years and was especially equipped for students working seriously towards their NEWTs. When Hermione had returned to Hogwarts, she had immediately fallen in love with the room. She wished with all her heart that she had had access to it in her earlier years. The walls were covered with books, low tables holding stationary placed conveniently beside them with comfortable armchairs, sofas and chaise lounges scattered around, allowing students to really study in sumptuous and relaxing surrounds.

The final portrait in her three-pronged portrait arsenal was that of the powerful enchantress Arete of Cyrene. Arete was the world's first Transfiguration Mistress. Hermione had squealed in delight when she had seen a portrait of one of her role models, and the two had immediately got on when Arete learned that Hermione was one of the very few in the recent decades of Gryffindor history to have attempted to read all of her books on philosophy, over forty of them.

Thus, Hermione felt that her council of advisors was strong indeed. Luna and Astoria would not be up this early, but the portraits were available for assistance at any time of the day or night. Thus, Hermione showered, dressed in her school clothes and made her way to the almost unused reading room in the Gryffindor tower. There, she placed the opened locket of Phineas Nigellus and addressed her friends, after ensuring that Privacy and Silencing Charms had been placed on the reading room doorway.

In a clear and as unemotional a manner as was possible for her, Hermione explained how she was deeply attracted to and in love with the Headmaster of Hogwarts. However, she stated that Severus refused to advance their relationship and gentle summer courtship within the walls of the castle due to Hogwarts' enchantments, pointing out dejectedly that he wanted her final year to be about her education and her achievements at the NEWTs. Hermione explained to them that she wanted very much to be with him, that she didn't want to put aside their relationship for a whole year just because he was being noble and honourable.

The three portraits listened to Hermione's explanation with bated breath. In truth, many in the castle's portrait network, especially those in Slytherin or with Slytherin tendencies, had discussed their current headmaster's courtship of the Gryffindor Princess and Muggle-born friend of Harry Potter.

Morgan le Fay, for example, was firmly on the side of the Slytherin headmaster for she had long disliked how Dark magic had been removed from the school's curriculum. She agreed with many in Slytherin that there was nothing that could be strictly called Dark magic, instead, there merely was magic that was stronger than most practitioners, which needed to be approached with knowledge, understanding and reverence lest it control the wielders of its abilities. Thus, the affiliation of Hermione and Headmaster Snape was in their interest, for it would send a sharp message to Dumbledore and the people who still found in the wizard the best way to envision magical society. Many Slytherins wanted things to change. They wanted many of the old ways to be re-established, and though they disliked admitting it, they realised that the Muggle-born friend of the Boy-Who-Lived was the best partner for their own Slytherin head. The combination of the two brilliant minds was sure to help show by example the best direction for the wizarding world that had tottered on the brink of destruction for much of the twentieth century.

Arete was, of course, a romantic behind her armour of philosophical teachings. Hearing of the young woman's love, she decided she would do everything in her power to help Hermione. She'd spent too many years being ignored by the insolent young adults who came to study and fornicate in the reading room. Here was true love, pure, unsullied by mere sexual gratification.

And Phineas Nigellus, well, he was willing to help in any scheme that would at some point infuriate Dumbledore. And if that scheme allowed him to extend his help to the young man that the old man had left to die like so much discarded rubbish, so much the better. For Phineas Nigellus disliked Dumbledore with a passion. All of his advice as former head had been taken as mere biased blabbering. Dumbledore had always felt that he knew more than anyone else. He had never listened to reason, to suggestions of being more cautious in his manipulations. It had broken Phineas Nigellus' heart to see the last of his male heirs used and thrown away so shoddily by Dumbledore. To see the same thing almost happen to the next Slytherin to take the headmaster's chair had been heart-wrenching. Now, if he could help Severus find love, then Phineas Nigellus would do all he could to help.

Slowly, the three questioned Hermione. They were gentle, but very thorough. Indeed, they seemed almost voyeuristic in their desire to know how far the relationship had progressed sexually. "Have you been taken, my dear?" asked the sorceress with interest.

Hermione blushed then. "You ask too much, Madam Morgan."

"Nonsense," said Arete briskly. "Morgan just wants to know if you've had intercourse so she knows which enchantments will be triggered the next time you are together."

"Oh," said Hermione, even more embarrassed. "Well, we've kissed lots, and he's touched me and I've touched him, but we've not really done anything more."

Morgan sighed. "Come child, don't be coy. Has he fucked you with his fingers, or his tongue? Have you pleased him with your mouth?"

Hermione moaned in embarrassment, but seeing the smirking countenance of Phineas Nigellus to this thoroughly female inquisition, she realised that she needed to start acting like an adult if she was going to convince these powerful allies to help her. "No," said Hermione, straightening her spine. Looking Morgan le Fey straight in her eyes, she went on, "He's always the perfect gentleman. Yes, there's some frottage, but nothing more. He's never brought me physically to orgasm or, indeed, touched me without my clothes."

Arete clapped her hands. "Well done, dear child," she said encouragingly. "If you're going to make a man do your bidding sexually, you need to take control of your sexuality. Moreover, you need to be able to speak of your desires like an adult, so you don't trigger the castle's enchantments. They apply specially to those who are sexually immature. If a woman grown were to come be a student, then, although the enchantments would be made aware, they would not need to act protectively, for they would assume that the student knows what he or she is doing."

"Indeed," said Phineas, finally entering the conversation. He had listened to the two sorceresses finding out in intimate detail how far the Snape-Granger relationship had progressed. "Now, young chit, tell me how you want to progress this relationship of yours?"

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione in confusion. She had thought she had made her desire for Severus perfectly obvious.

"I mean," said Phineas Nigellus with a sardonic smirk, "do you want to be bedded, or do you want a proposal? Do you want to be seduced or do you, perchance, want him for all time? Think carefully before you answer, girl, for the castle is listening, even as we speak."

Hermione was alarmed to realise that the conversation she thought was so private was being listened to, perhaps even judged. But she reminded herself that she was a Gryffindor. She was not afraid. "I want him, both in my bed, and for all time," she said clearly. "Don't you get it? I think I've fallen in love with him. I've never been in love before, so I can't say for sure, but this is what I think I'm feeling. I yearn for him every night, and I miss spending time with him."

When she finished speaking, Morgan le Fey asked curiously, "Then what is the problem? If you read Hogwarts legislation, you will find that there is nothing barring a romantic, or indeed a sexual, relationship between a student and a professor, not if that relationship is above board. Why it was so common an occurrence during the fourteenth and fifteenth century that it was almost customary for the brightest and best students to marry their masters. It was the best way to ensure that the power and ability of offspring was preserved."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Severus read the rules. But he doesn't want to make our liaison public knowledge. He's afraid that people will suggest that my grades were because I am involved with him. He wants to spare me from the gossip mongers."

Arete sighed. "It's all so romantic. But you do realise, don't you, that there is nothing stopping you having a secret betrothal that is known among those you know and trust. Perhaps even some members of Hogwarts staff, either past or present. This would allay the fears of the castle that you were being abused, because the relationship would technically be above board, but it would also offer you the comfort of your relationship being out of the public eye."

Hermione nodded. "I hadn't thought of that," she said softly. "I don't think Severus has either. But," and then Hermione grew silent, for she realised that although her feelings for him were strong, she was afraid that it was far too soon to consider being his wife.

"Now we've come to the crux of the matter," said Morgan indelicately. "Don't you want to marry him, girl?"

"Of course, I want to marry him," said Hermione affronted. "But..." she stopped again and chewed her lip in consternation. "My heart says yes to being his wife, but logically, I know I'm too young to consider marriage. It's not done, in my world, the Muggle world, to marry at nineteen, not unless you're pregnant and have no plans for further education or a career, both of which I really want to pursue." Hermione sighed, "I think Severus must have realised the same thing; that's probably why he's has not rushed our courtship with a proposal."

"Foolish chit," said Phineas, not unkindly. "Think for a moment who you're talking about. Headmaster Snape is no Ronald Weasley. He will not impregnate you with his

spawn before you are ready to breed. Moreover, have you learned nothing from your time at the Malfoys'? It is customary to have a long engagement."

Hermione laughed. "Thank you. I know I came across as a silly little girl, but I was just so confused, and I needed some sound advice. It's hard to be rational and logical when it's your heart on the line."

"Think nothing of it," said Arete kindly. "We old paintings have been forgotten for too long. It's nice to be of assistance."

"Speak for yourself," said Phineas Nigellus haughtily.

Hermione laughed. She knew that Headmaster Black loved to pretend that he felt greatly put upon when she approached him for advice or, indeed, even conversation.

Soon after, Hermione retired after thanking the two portraits and putting away the locket with the miniature of the former headmaster. Emboldened by her discussion, Hermione decided that the next chance she got, she was going to bring up the topic of a long betrothal with Severus. She was sure that it would please and excite her taciturn would-be lover.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Birthday Wishes

*Chapter 25 of 40*

Hermione turns nineteen.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the amazing J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this story. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Saturday the nineteenth of September saw Hermione celebrate her nineteenth birthday. Last year, while she had been on the run, Hermione had hoped that she would have been able to rejoice with her parents this year. But it was not to be.

Harry, however, had done his best to be the brother he claimed to be and had sent her a card full of teasing good humour. Together with the card, he had sent her a gift voucher to *Flourish and Blotts* for her to buy any five books she so desired. It was a generous gift, since there was no limit to the amount she could spend, but it was somewhat impersonal. Hermione was tired of being seen as nothing but a walking bookworm. *It would have been nice, she mused, to not get anything book or stationery related for my birthday for once.* Nonetheless, Hermione did realise that Harry was deeply involved in Auror training and had almost no time for a visit or to think of a more original present, especially when he knew how much she really did enjoy books.

A small part of Hermione could not help but feel sad at not receiving any acknowledgement of her birthday from the Weasleys. Ginny had not even glanced at Hermione as she made her way out of the common room.

Luna must have sensed the loneliness that gripped Hermione's heart as she awoke to a bed without its customary pile of presents, for she met Hermione as she made her way down to breakfast with a brightly wrapped parcel and a warm and happy hug. Once again thanking her lucky stars for a perceptive and understanding girl-friend, Hermione joined Luna at the Ravenclaw table, where over her scrambled eggs and toast, she opened her soft and malleable parcel.

"Oh," said Hermione softly when the raspberry pink paper gave way to reveal a beautiful emerald green and gold patterned scarf. Stroking the soft velveteen fabric, she smiled brightly at her friend. "It's gorgeous."

Luna beamed at her vaguely before letting her eyes drift over to the Slytherin table. "The colours are symbolic. They bring the best of Slytherin and Gryffindor together."

Hermione blushed at the pointed reminder of her relationship with Severus but was distracted by Astoria, who came gliding over from the Slytherin table. Not an early riser by any stretch of the imagination, to see Astoria down for breakfast was indeed a bit of a surprise.

"Hello, Madam Snape," said Astoria cheekily.

Hermione gasped. *Is the castle already revealing my plans to the others?* thought Hermione in astonishment. "Really, Astoria," she exclaimed. "What on earth are you on about?"

Astoria merely shrugged her shoulders eloquently and grinned. "I'm just giving you your due title a little in advance. If the way our sexy headmaster is looking at you is any indication, it is unlikely that I am wrong in my prediction of your future name."

Hermione blushed. Quickly looking up at the Head Table she had been deliberately avoiding, she met the intense gaze of Severus, who had his eyes pinned upon her. Smiling shyly, she was astonished to see him raise his eyebrow suggestively at her before turning his attention once more to his plate.

Astoria and Luna both giggled. They had taken to watching the interaction between the couple with glee.

"Will you two quit it," said Hermione in exasperation. "We don't want the entire castle talking about us. Harry and Ron were never this obvious about things. And I can tell you now that they didn't know the first thing about subtlety."

Hermione's prim reprimand brought the two friends up short. Nodding, Astoria instead changed the topic by flourishing from behind her back a long, slim parcel wrapped in silver paper.

"Oh, Astoria," said Hermione. She had seen boxes of that size and nature and knew what it contained. Leaning over to kiss her friend on the cheek, she opened her

present expectantly. She was not disappointed. Astoria had given Hermione a beautiful peacock quill from an albino cock. These quills were a speciality of *Quality Quills and Parchments*. More of an ornament than a practical gift, it was both expensive and tasteful.

The girls finished their breakfast together at the Ravenclaw table, Hermione glancing up occasionally to meet the dark gaze of the headmaster. *God, I want him to ravish me*, thought Hermione. *His gaze is so intense, I feel like he's sliding into me while I sit here.*

Shivering with desire, she once more forced herself to focus on the last of her meal. She didn't want to make her attraction to the headmaster the topic of public discussion if she could help it. She knew how private a person he really was.

Finally, breakfast was over and the three friends quickly made their way out into the courtyard. It was there that Narcissa's elegant, short-eared owl found them. Hermione recognised the owl immediately. Stroking the proud bird gently before taking the missive from its delicately raised foot, she unrolled the scroll with shining eyes. She had not expected her friend to forget, but she had not expected the owl to arrive after breakfast was concluded.

Luna and Astoria peered over Hermione's shoulder as she unrolled the fragrant parchment and read the note.

*My dear Hermione,*

*Felicitations on your birthday! Lucius, Draco and I are delighted to wish you all good fortune today.*

*I have already spoken with Severus and have arranged for you to be released for the day. I shall meet you outside the Main Gates at eleven o'clock for your birthday surprise.*

*Bring your warm cloak.*

*Love and warm wishes,*

*Cissy*

"Oh, how lovely!" exclaimed Astoria.

"Mmm..." said Hermione. She was excited at the prospect of a surprise outing with Cissy. She had been meaning to talk to her friend on the next possible occasion on the discussion she had had with her council of portrait advisers.

Luna surprisingly was the voice of practicality. "You should go get ready, Hermione. You don't want to keep Cissy waiting. Besides, I'm sure Headmaster Snape has his own plans for your birthday. You don't want to keep him waiting either, do you?"

"Severus?" asked Hermione in confusion.

"Yes," said Luna insightfully. "You do realise that he will be at the gates to see you off? A member of staff will have to accompany you to the gates and let you out. I doubt he'll delegate the task to someone else, when he could so easily spend that time with you."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Hermione. "Falling in love is making me foolish," she said with a grin. "All I can think about is Severus and the magnificence of his kisses."

"Too much information," said Luna laughingly, while Astoria only chuckled darkly.

Then, with a very Slytherinesque smirk, Astoria said, "Well, if anyone was suave enough to sweep the Gryffindor Princess off her feet, it has to be a Slytherin. No one else could possibly possess the smarts or the sophistication to be a real equal."

"Thanks, I think," said Hermione.

This brought forth another round of giggles. Finally gaining control of herself, Hermione gave her two friends a beaming hug before departing to prepare for her day out.

Knowing Narcissa, Hermione anticipated a day of either shopping or pampering. Thus, she pulled on her now favourite amber linen dress, but teamed it with a warm pair of cream-coloured tights, a long ivory cardigan and her cloak. Hat, gloves and scarf in case the weather turned chilly, as it often did this time of year in the Scottish Highlands, and Hermione was ready.

As Hermione made her way to the Entrance Hall at a quarter to eleven, she found Severus already there. Dressed in his customary black robes, with his cloak billowing in the non-existent wind, he made a commanding figure. A shiver ran through Hermione at his appearance that had nothing to do with the looming menace he presented to the outside world. Given that it was a weekend, the Entrance Hall would normally have been full of students making their way in or out to the grounds. However, Severus had managed to secure the hallway entirely to himself. Indeed, anyone foolish enough to loiter in his presence had quickly been subjected to a stern glare that had moved them onto safer, Snape-free pastures. Moving closer until she could breathe deeply of his sandalwood and nutmeg scented aroma, she smiled at him and whispered, "Hello, you."

"Hello, Princess," replied Severus in that smoky, seductive voice of his. "Let me wish you sincere and heart-felt felicitations and best wishes on your day of birth."

"Thank you," said Hermione, her eyes darkening with lust at the tone of his voice.

Severus could see her desire for him writ plain on her face. Smirking sardonically, he said, "Come, I shall walk you to the gates."

Hermione nodded. She felt unable to speak. She was desperate to feel his arms around her, feel his passion, which he held so tightly in control, wash over her like a tidal wave. However, Hermione knew that a hundred pairs of eyes, not least of all the castle was watching their interaction. She thus merely followed Severus, who set off for the gates with a swirl of his robes.

As they walked, Severus looking straight ahead so that he would not throw caution to the wind and ravage her with his kiss. "I'm sorry, Princess, that I cannot do anything right now to celebrate your birthday in the castle, but if you will be ready at six o'clock this evening, I have what I hope will be a pleasant surprise planned for you."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione, touched beyond measure. "I can't wait. I'm sure that as long as the surprise promised allows me to have you by my side, that it will be delightful."

It was only his long years as a spy that prevented a pleased blush from gracing his features. Her desire for him, her pleasure in his company warmed the very recesses of his soul.

At the gates, they found Narcissa, resplendent in a dove-grey, silk-lined fur cloak, waiting for them. With a sly smirk at Severus, she took Hermione's arm and said, "Don't worry, Severus. I shall have her back in time for her date."

Hermione grinned. She knew how much Severus would hate having their evening and his surprise reduced to the juvenile terminology of a date. Severus coloured before nodding politely in resignation at his friend's teasing. "Have fun," he said gruffly before walking off towards the Forbidden Forest.

Once alone, the two women giggled before hugging each other warmly. Then, Hermione was kissed on her forehead. Hermione had come to adore the fragrance of Narcissa's signature ylang-ylang perfume. To her it now spoke to friendship and warmth. Breathing in the scent that clung to her friend, she smiled brightly at the Malfoy

matriarch.

"Happy birthday, dearest," said Narcissa in a motherly tone. "I've arranged a session of pampering at the spa in Paris."

"I did think that might be part of the surprise," said Hermione with another bright smile.

"Hmm..." said Narcissa. "Becoming predictable, am I?"

Hermione giggled. "No, I just figured that you would have realised how much I enjoyed our previous visit."

Narcissa smirked. She knew Hermione was trying to make her feel better. "Well, take hold," said the blonde witch briskly, pulling out a delicate silver filigree brooch that was to be their Port-key.

Hermione reached out a finger to touch the beautiful brooch, and soon the two witches were deposited outside the entrance of the magical salon *Comme par enchantement* in Paris. Once again, Hermione was wrapped in the exotically perfumed seaweed which promised to soften her skin so that it felt like rose petals. Then, as she lay supine with a mask upon her face, she had her nails done in soft pearlescent nail polish of shimmering antique gold. After the wrap, the two women were taken to another chamber for a sensual massage.

There as the nymphs worked the perfumed oil into their skin, Narcissa began to speak. "Hermione, my dear, many powerful pure-blood witches and wizards are not ashamed of their sexuality. It is a powerful weapon in our own personal arsenal. Now that you have turned nineteen, it is time that you embrace your own maturing power and potential. You need not fear that all of us in the magical world take a view as Victorian as the Weasleys in their approach to love and sexuality. They, like many who have long wanted to lose the old practices of magic, have forgotten the power of a woman's sexuality. We, the practitioners of the old ways, are not afraid of the power of sex and blood magic. You must use your first time with a man, with Severus, to its full magical potential."

Hermione nodded. She had planned to bring up this very subject with Cissy, but had not got around to it due to the awkwardness of the subject. Now though, the sheer pleasure being generated by the decadent pampering made her feel sensual and indolent. It lessened her embarrassment at discussing something so personal. Her eyes bright with curiosity for more knowledge of old traditions, all virginal shyness forgotten, Hermione said softly, "I've done some reading as to the collection of my blood for potion ingredients, but I couldn't find any other references to a witch's first sexual experience."

Narcissa made a moue of distaste. "Most books don't speak of this kind of thing, my dear. This is female tradition. Men fear to approach such topics for they do not fully understand the power held in the core of all women. In addition, sex and blood magic are in general thought to be Dark, and so only discussed now in books related to the Dark Arts. But the knowledge is still passed down from mother to daughter, especially in old pure-blood families."

Hermione nodded once more. "Tell me what I can do, Cissy. You know I am keen to learn the old ways."

"I know, my dear," said Narcissa gently. "This is why I have brought the topic up, because I know that you will be open to my teaching. When you lie with Severus, do not forget to tell him that you give yourself to him freely. This is important for it strengthens the healing power of your blood. Blood is infused with our magical intentions, so that blood taken by rape, by force is useful for Dark potions that cause death and destruction; however, for healing magic, that which is freely given and freely taken is the most powerful."

Hermione had read of this before. "Yes," she said, "I've read that. What else?"

Narcissa smiled. "When you are done, when you both orgasm, do not let Severus cast the Cleansing Spell to clean your joint emissions. Instead, lick him clean and have him lick you. As you do this, whisper, 'First blood, first pleasure, now I am yours, forever.' This will strengthen, seal and bind your love for each other, for I can see that you love him and, if I am not mistaken, Severus does love you."

Hermione blushed. She found it slightly embarrassing to be speaking of oral sex, or indeed, sex in general with Narcissa, but the thought of it brought a spike of desire to shoot through her core. She wanted so much to make love with Severus. She wanted to give him her maiden's blood, to bind herself to him for all time. "Is there anything else?" asked Hermione.

Narcissa smiled. She could see the colour rise in Hermione's cheeks, but she could also see the desire that the young woman had for Severus. "Nothing else, my dear, but this: speak of your love as you give him your body. Severus needs to hear you say you love him. He has been unloved for a long time. Indeed, I doubt that he has ever really been shown any love at all. Lucius and I have tried, and Draco as a child doted on Severus, but it is hard to express our affection for him because it makes him so uncomfortable and so suspicious. In fact, as soon as we make a move to show him genuine affection, circumstances contrive to push us apart. It is almost as though there is a dark cloud hanging over Severus, preventing him from experiencing the cleansing force of love."

Hermione agreed. For a while now, she had thought the very same thing. This would explain Severus insisting on their distance, just as their relationship was progressing so smoothly.

Once the ladies were massaged to the state of sheer languor, they were wrapped in warm and soft robes of cashmere and allowed to relax in a sumptuous courtyard. Hermione was always astonished at the decadence of pure-blood enclaves. The courtyard had been made to look like a royal Egyptian palace square, with low divans, palm trees and a beautiful magical fountain of golden-hued water that on closer inspection revealed itself to be honey-flavoured ambrosia. There was the strong aroma of frankincense and myrrh in the air, and Hermione felt she'd stepped into a little piece of heaven. Once they'd had time to fully recover from their massage, they were led to the hair dressing salon. There, Narcissa recommended to Hermione, "Why don't you try something different for your birthday?"

Hermione shrugged. "Anything is sure to be an improvement. I've never really managed to do anything with my hair. The few times it's behaved, I've had to spend hours on it."

The French witches twittered at this comment. One particularly haughty-looking beauty with a veritable waterfall of black, silky hair, said insolently, "Mademoiselle, if we cannot make your hair the most gorgeous and sensual part of you, then no one else can. We are ze best in Europe in ze use of magical charms. Let us try some stylez, and once you find something you like, we can make it permanent so that it will stay zhat way until it grows out or until you grow tired of it."

The Malfoy matriarch nodded in agreement. "You know, my dear, that I've never changed my hair style since I first came here just before my betrothal. As a child my hair had been rather unruly, and though I was always a blonde, my hair was not dissimilar to that of Bella in appearance. When I first came here, they gave me the shining curtain of straight hair I now have. I had always adored Lucius' hair, and now I don't have to do anything other than to get it trimmed when it grows too long and have the charms applied as the hair grows out naturally."

Hermione nodded. If Narcissa admitted to having the witches of the salon give her the beautiful head of hair that was part of her signature look, then Hermione was more than willing to try.

Soon the bevy of sophisticated-looking witches were busy working on Hermione. They tried different things, like straightening and changing the colour of her tresses, before settling on giving her luscious dark honey-hued hair with highlights of honey blonde. The colour complimented her colouring and her amber eyes, which the witches all claimed were her most arresting feature. The style started off straight before twisting into large bouncing curls. The look was natural, for which Hermione was enormously grateful, but she could not deny that it was also a style that was very sensual. Moreover, the style was not too dissimilar from her usual hair, just richer and better controlled. The layers cut into it gave her hair movement and body as well as allowing the roots to have more weight, so that they pulled the hair down to straighten the top. At the end of the session, Hermione was forced to admit that the French witches knew what they were doing. She gasped at her appearance in the mirror and said, "I feel like a princess."

The witches all smiled, and the haughty-looking one, who had over the course of the session revealed herself to be Aimee, graciously acknowledged, "Mademoiselle, you look a vision of loveliness. I think we can safely say zhat we have outzhone ourselves."

Narcissa agreed. "Indeed, Hermione, you look beautiful." Then with a wistful sigh, she went on, "Lucius and I have always regretted that we could not have other children. I would so have adored to have had a daughter to dress up. You have made an old lady very happy indeed."

"Nonsense, Cissy," said Hermione reaching out to grasp her friend's hand. "You're not old. You know you are still growing into your magical power."

Narcissa smiled. "Thank you, my dear. I suppose now that Draco is approaching the age of taking a wife and starting his own family that I suddenly feel the onset of middle age. I am no longer the young woman I once was."

Hermione nodded in understanding.

Narcissa went on, "Having you be a part of our lives has made these past few months all the more wonderful. We are very glad that we got to know you, my dear, and that the crazy war that caused so much grief is finally behind us." Then with another sigh, Narcissa changed the subject. Pouting in a sly, Slytherin manner, she complained, "It really is too bad that Astoria is so perfectly turned out. What's more, Callidora is excellent at all of this herself, so there's really no need for me to guide her."

Hermione laughed. She knew first-hand how much the Greengrasses delighted in the beauty and accomplishments of their two girls. Astoria was forever complaining that all her mother thought about was making sure her two daughters were the perfect ladies so that they would attract the most enviable of suitors.

After their visit to the salon, Hermione and Narcissa made their way to a wonderful restaurant in the magical heart of Paris. Surrounded by opulent baroque decor, the food was of the highest standard. Sipping champagne and indulging in wonderful, aromatic seafood, the two friends had a very enjoyable meal. Once dessert was concluded, Hermione gently said, "Cissy, there's something really important I'd like to speak to you about." Looking around discreetly, she requested, "Do you think we could go somewhere private? It's a delicate subject, and I don't want us to be overheard or disturbed."

Narcissa immediately nodded, her face showing her deep curiosity. Reaching out, she touched Hermione's hand that lay on the table and said, "Of course, my dear. Why don't we return now to Malfoy Manor? I know Lucius would love to see you, and then perhaps we can retire to my sitting room for an uninterrupted and private tête-à-tête."

Hermione nodded. It seemed the ideal solution. At Malfoy Manor, Hermione was warmly greeted by Lucius as they entered the foyer. After wishing Hermione a very happy birthday, the Malfoy patriarch led the two women to the library. There, he handed Hermione a small parcel wrapped in green silk.

Hermione blushed and shook her head. "You have given me so much already," she said in embarrassment. "I can't accept more."

"Don't be silly," said Lucius. "You are now part of the family. There is nothing called too much."

Hermione was overcome with emotion. Flinging herself on Narcissa, she hugged her friend fiercely.

Narcissa and Lucius exchanged knowing glances over Hermione's head. They had learned from Severus how Hermione had been an unwanted child, at least on the part of her mother. As Narcissa continued to hug and hold Hermione, Lucius walked to the two women and wrapped his arms around them both. Kissing the top of both their heads, he said gently, "Come now, let's open your present."

Hermione nodded and released her hold on Narcissa. Then blinking back the tears that had formed at the duo's generosity, she sat herself down on the leather sofa, Narcissa by her side. As she looked up to meet the gaze of Lucius, he nodded in encouragement. Slowly, Hermione opened the black satin bow that held the silk fabric together. A whispered spell to release the binding and the silk slithered off the book. Hermione caressed the old brocade covering before reverently opening the cover. She gasped as she read the dedication to what she could now see was a handwritten volume.

*To my beloved daughter Vulpecula,*

*You, my child, are the true blessing of the gods, for there has not been a Malfoy daughter in our line for many a generation. Indeed, a second child is rare in itself for the Malfoy lineage. It is a legend known that we were cursed after the Norman Wars by the Saxon witches for our lusty ways in battle.*

*My daughter, this volume has been put together by your mother and your grandmother. I have written down their desires, for they themselves are illiterate in this modern tongue. This is an ever-expanding collection of spells, charms, rituals and traditions that are part of the Malfoy female legacy. Your mother learned many of these spells when she first came to this land from Siberia to become my wife, and when your brother Ajax marries, his wife will be taught the same. But you, my fair child, will be going soon to the cold regions of Prussia, and your traditions will be those of your new family. But your mother insists that you do not forget your Malfoy name or your rich magical heritage. Be proud of all that you have been taught. Study this volume, and when you are with your new family, do not be ashamed of your Norman and British lineage.*

*Never forget that we love you or that you have forever a home in our hearts.*

*Your loving father,*

*Hektor Aeneas Malfoy*

Hermione began to cry. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she once more turned to embrace Narcissa. For she realised what this volume symbolised: it was the Malfoys' way of letting her know that she was indeed a part of their family. She now occupied the position of their daughter.

"How did this book stay with the Malfoys?" asked Hermione once she had regained control of her emotions. "Didn't Vulpecula take the book with her?"

Lucius replied gravely. "Vulpecula did take the book along with a number of her childhood possessions with her. But she died young, and her in-laws, knowing how precious she had been to her parents, returned some of her personal belongings to her bereaved family. And since her husband Igor did not read or write English, her collection of books and journals was returned in its entirety. This was among the items returned. There has never been another daughter of the Malfoy line to take possession of this book. You are now custodian of this family heirloom. If Draco does indeed have a daughter one day, I beg of you to leave this to her in your will."

"Of course," said Hermione. Standing up, she walked over to Lucius and took his hand. "I promise to look after this book and make sure that it finds its way to the next daughter born of the Malfoy line."

"Good girl," said Narcissa, for she could see that her husband was feeling too emotional to respond to Hermione's earnest and solemn promise.

Not long after, Narcissa said. "Well, my love, I think it is time that we women retire for our afternoon tea. I've promised to have Hermione back at Hogwarts by half past four."

Lucius nodded, his head lost in thought. He was still pondering on the mysteries of life that had forced him to acknowledge a Muggle-born as an honorary member of his family. But he did concede that it was not unheard of within the realms of pure-blood feudal traditions. Indeed, many a time, especially after great wars and upheavals, many pure-blood overlords had taken in Muggle-born children with strong magical signatures for their own. Knowing that he had found a solid justification that would soothe the indignant posturing of his forebears with a demonstrable adherence to pure-blood tradition helped ease some of the worry from Lucius' mind.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.



# Twenty-Six: Tête-à-tête

Chapter 26 of 40

Narcissa and Hermione have a serious discussion. Hermione then speaks to Severus.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the amazing J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this story. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story.
- (iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Leaving Lucius to his thoughts, the two witches adjourned to Narcissa's personal sitting-room. An opulently decorated room, the walls were covered in watered, pale aquamarine blue silk. The ornate Louis XIV style furniture was covered in pale duck egg brocade upholstery with flamboyant mirrors with gilded, antique gold frames on many of the walls. However, the special feature of the room was that it, unlike most of the other rooms in the mansion, did not hold any portraits or paintings. This allowed for complete privacy. Once comfortably seated with a cup of Lady Earl Gray tea and a delectable slice of Sacher Torte, Hermione dived right in with the thoughts that were foremost in her mind.

"Cissy," she said with a deep breath. "I've been thinking and talking to Headmaster Black and a couple of other portraits about this thing that's between me and Severus. Severus is adamant that we can't be together until I'm out of school. He wants my final year to be about my NEWTs, to be about me, not about my relationship with him. And, well," she stopped to drink a sip of her tea before ploughing on with a non sequitur, "did you know that the castle will not allow for a secret relationship between a member of the staff and a student?"

Narcissa had been listening with rapt attention. At the unexpected question, she looked thoughtful for a moment before shaking her head to indicate, "No."

Hermione sighed. "Well, it does. It's meant to be a way of ensuring the protection of the student, so that he or she isn't taken advantage of. But, Cissy, I don't want to wait until the end of the school year. Severus insists that the gossip that we are together will destroy all credibility in my scholastic achievements, and he, therefore, says that he doesn't want us to continue our gradual courtship until I'm done with Hogwarts. But, I think it's sheer foolishness to put things off for a year. We are both quite sure we want to be together. I know I'm not being coerced or forced to be with him in any way, so it seems rather pointless to not carry on as we were in the summer. With that thought in mind, I spoke with the portraits of Headmaster Black, Arete of Cyrene and Morgan le Fey. They advised me to consider a long engagement, one that is known to a discreet few, so that the relationship is still known to people who matter, appeasing the castle requirements, but still keeping it a secret from busybodies who are of no importance and would do nothing but cause us difficulty in the present time."

"Hmm..." said Narcissa thoughtfully. "If my great grand-father has suggested this measure of getting around the castle enchantments, then it must be a plausible solution. What is the problem?"

"You know what the problem is," said Hermione tartly. Then with a sigh she carried on. "Sorry, Cissy. I shouldn't take out my fears and frustrations on you. But you know how Severus is; he's so hard to sway once he's made up his mind. He's never going to want to risk my reputation by agreeing to something like a discreet, long-term engagement. What if the news still gets out? I don't really care about my reputation, but what about his own name? He's spent too many years being hated by the general masses. Now that he finally has the respect and honour he deserves, I don't want to see that tarnished by stupid rumours suggesting that he took advantage of me or something. What if it affects the good name of Hogwarts?"

Narcissa sighed. "Hermione, my dear, you have to discuss these issues with Severus. I agree that you have some valid concerns, but long engagements have been a custom of the wizarding world for generations. Why Lucius and I had our formal engagement when I was sixteen. But we waited until I was nineteen to get married. I wanted to spend a year after Hogwarts at the magical finishing academy in Lucerne, so what you are proposing is nothing new."

Hermione nodded her head. But now her thoughts were focused on the magical finishing school that Narcissa had mentioned. "I've never heard of this institute, Cissy," she said eagerly. "From everything I've read, I've only discovered that you need to apprentice with Masters or Mistresses of specific subjects if you want to continue your education beyond Hogwarts. The other option is to work for the Ministry or St. Mungo's and gradually work your way up through the on-the-job method. Why aren't there more references to places like you mentioned? What do they teach?"

Narcissa laughed. "Trust you, Hermione, to be distracted by a mention of another institute of learning. The school at Lucerne, which is called *Die Komplette Hexe*, is not really attended by very many. They are a very small, private institute that caters to well-brought up witches from around the world. I learned most of my interior decorating, transfiguration, beauty and fashion charms, entertaining and food magic at Lucerne. I was the only witch from the British Isles to attend from my generation, though I think Lucius' great-grandmother went there in her time. Most of the students are normally made up from continental European aristocracy and, of course, the Indian, Chinese and Middle-Eastern princesses, who are keen to learn European magical arts. But I knew that I was marrying into the Malfoy family, and attending the institute seemed like something that would come in use for my future as the next Lady Malfoy, both for the actual skills as well as the life-long friendships I would make. My family could easily afford the cost of sending me there, so when I told Lucius that it was something I wanted to do before we got married, he agreed immediately. He understood how important the knowledge I acquired would be for the Malfoy name."

"Hmm..." said Hermione, though she did not sound convinced. She realised that there were many disadvantages to being a Muggle-born, not least because people like Dumbledore had insisted that it was not important for half-blood and Muggle-born witches and wizards to learn and continue to participate in pureblood customs and society. It pained her to realise that if she had not made friends with the Malfoys that she would have never even heard or tried to understand what drove pureblood traditions, customs, history and institutions of learning. It seemed so unfair to the knowledge-seeking young woman. Nothing should be discarded just because it offered an alternative point of view to that which was deemed to be the correct one. Surely, people should be allowed to decide what was right and wrong for themselves. What Dumbledore had done was in his own way just as high-handed and as biased as that which was proposed by Dark Lords like Grindelwald and Voldemort. He may have supposedly worked for the 'Greater Good', but he had effectively helped further the divide between the old ways and the new. He had played the role of a demi-god and decided that one line of magical theory and thinking was acceptable knowledge and that another one wasn't, simply because it had caused him problems and he had been almost seduced by the Dark.

Hermione sighed. Yet again, speaking with Narcissa had given her much to think about. Forcing herself to focus on the most pressing topic of Severus, Hermione finished her slice of chocolate torte. "You're right, of course," she said presently, laying her now empty plate on the serving tray. "I do need to speak to Severus. The hard part will be finding the right moment to approach him. A part of me wants to rush right in and discuss it with him tonight, but another part of me knows it's best to study the whole subject with greater care before presenting my case. In truth, Cissy, I'm not really sure I'm even ready for the commitment of an engagement. And I do know Severus well enough to realise that he will want the most archaic of soul-bindings. He's not going to agree to a Muggle-style marriage ceremony like that entered into by people like Remus and Tonks, or indeed, Bill and Fleur Weasley."

Narcissa agreed. "True. No one in our circle really marries in that fashion, you know," she added gently. "Hardly any of those who practice pureblood customs marry in haste. It is only the more foolish who take marriage vows without careful thought; sometimes couples or at least their parents insist that there is a consultation of Divination and Arithmancy to ensure compatibility. Have you ever heard of scandals in pureblood circles with rumours of infidelity or even separation?"

Hermione shook her head to signify, "No," though one part of her mind began to work over-time with the implications being suggested.

Narcissa though seemed to understand what was going on in her younger friend's mind. With a smirk, the older woman said, "Hermione, my dear, you really need to read some of my old wizarding romances. Then, this wouldn't come as such a shock to you. You do realise that even your little Miss Brown would know about what I speak of."

Hermione blushed. She did realise that she had completely put aside wizarding fiction in her single-minded pursuit of knowledge. One look at Lavender and Parvati's romance covers with their almost shocking images of large breasted witches being embraced by broadly smirking, obscenely muscled wizards had been more than enough to put the intelligent teen off the idea of reading such sentimental tripe.

Narcissa laughed at the look that Hermione threw at her. "Oh, my dear girl! You are amusing," she said, still laughing. "You must realise that we all make sure we have found partners we can live with our whole life, for in the older forms of marriage, there is no divorce. It is until death us do part. Don't you think we would therefore use every ability at our disposal to make sure we and our children, when it is their turn, do not make unfavourable matches, either in terms of breeding or politics, but also in compatibility?"

Hermione winced. She couldn't believe how blind she had been, for the information had been before her very eyes for years. She had just chosen to ignore it, perhaps because most of the Gryffindors she had always associated with did not pay these skills any heed.

Finally, Hermione sighed and nodded. "I know. I did a bit of research into wizarding marriage practices when Bill and Fleur were getting married. It seemed barbaric at the time to read that the older vows allowed for no disillusion of the union. But now that I've read about the mingling of magic and the sharing of power, as well as the measures it offers for protection and healing, I do understand. It's still hard to grasp though. If it is so sacred and powerful, why is it not more common? Especially when there was a war, shouldn't this kind of union have been more in vogue, especially since it functions on the power of love?"

Narcissa looked sharply at Hermione. "Think, my dear, think. It was and is fear, plain and simple because most of the spells and charms, at least the more traditional ones, used for measuring true compatibility are done using blood magic. Albus Dumbledore and the so-called wizards of the Light were one of the primary reasons why all forms of blood magic, even if it was for something as harmless and beneficial as ensuring a successful marriage, were deemed to be dark and dangerous, taking away the power of true love. True love does grow in marriages that also have compatibility, trust, friendship and all the other qualities that a true union with long-standing pureblood custom decree. Do Lucius and I not support Draco's careful courting of Astoria? But if he was not taking the time to take things slowly, to get to know her in ways other than those of lust and desire, we would insist on a test to ensure that they don't go into the marriage blind."

Hermione had been listening to Narcissa speak silently, but with growing impatience. She was dying to go do more research, to learn more of these topics. "What did you and Lucius use?" asked the girl when Narcissa grew quiet.

"We fell in love when we were children," said Narcissa with a far-off smile. "I remember seeing him for the first time when I was but a little brat of ten, just before I entered Hogwarts, and thought I'd seen a prince, for he was everything I had read about in my books growing up. I was too young to be subtle in my adoration of him, and he always indulged my tendre for him with amusement. We took our blood test when I was fourteen. He had a habit of asking me what I wanted for my birthday and Yule presents each year, and that year, I thought I was old enough to ask him this for my birthday. You can imagine his smirk when he heard my foolish, romantic request. But he indulged me again, possibly because he knew how much I enjoyed reading silly romances at that age, and this was such a common theme in the books I used to read. We were both surprised when the results showed us to be soul-mates. However, I must admit that I felt like I had finally been vindicated, for I had felt like I belonged with him since the first time I saw him. Bella, of course, found it all very funny and teased me mercilessly, but I have never loved or wanted anyone other than Lucius, and I know that Lucius has never really been with anyone other than me either. He may have dabbled with other witches before our engagement, all men need to explore their sexuality, but since the day he formally took me to be his future, on the day of my sixteenth birthday, he has been true to me, and only me. We are so happy together. I think knowing that I was truly his soul-mate made everyone else a waste of time for him."

Hermione had listened to the story of the Malfoy romance with baited breath. "That's such a beautiful story," she said softly. "You're so lucky, Cissy, to have known from such a young age who you were meant to be with. I never thought of Severus as a man until the day we all met in London after the Battle of Hogwarts. But since that day, the way I see him in my mind has changed so drastically." Thoughtfully, she toyed with her new hair, "I suppose when I met him, he was my professor, and all the feelings of safety and security I felt in his presence seemed to be those attached to his station, not to him personally. Besides, he was so hateful to Harry and Ron that, as their best friend, I felt similarly disliked. I couldn't understand how he could be so vindictive. It never even struck me to imagine that he was skilfully playing a role, crafting a persona for when the Dark Lord returned."

Narcissa nodded her head in understanding. She worried about her two friends, and she wanted them to find happiness together. She truly hoped for Severus to bring a wife into his home and heart, and she knew Hermione well enough now to perceive that they would make each other splendidly happy. "I know, my dear," said Narcissa gently. Then, looking over to the clock that lay on the marble-topped table, she said briskly, "Goodness me, look at the time. I promised Severus that I would have you back by half past four, and it is already twenty past the hour. We must dash."

Hermione too had not noticed the time slipping away. Soon, Flitty had gathered all of Hermione's possessions together, along with her birthday presents, into a neat pile. Lucius made a quick Floo-call to Severus' office at Hogwarts to make sure it was safe and appropriate for her to turn up, and Hermione was given one final hug and kiss by her new surrogate parents before being handed a green velvet ribbon Port-key by Narcissa that would take her to the Headmaster's office.

When Hermione landed with a wobble on the Persian carpet in the Headmaster's office, she saw Severus' eyes widen with surprise and desire at her newly styled hair. "Hermione," he said shortly, inclining his head at her graciously.

"Severus," she said softly, pulling herself together while her eyes in turn allowed him to see her pleasure in being in his company.

"I trust you had a good time with Narcissa?" he asked, willing himself to not move away from his seat behind the table to take her in his arms.

"Yes, we had a lovely time. I had tea at the Manor," she said unnecessarily before allowing herself to approach his large table. She watched as Severus' eyebrow rose in warning and in question at her coming closer, especially since he knew she knew they were being watched by all of the past Heads with barely feigned disinterest.

"I wanted to show you this book," she said by way of explanation. "Lucius gave it to me as a birthday present, with the promise that if Draco ever has a daughter, or if there is ever a female of the Malfoy line, I would ensure that it made its way back to her."

This proved too interesting for Severus. Standing up, so that he towered over her, he took the book from her outstretched hand, allowing his fingers to linger against her own for the most fleeting of moments. His heart-beat sped up at their briefest of contacts, but he allowed no emotion to show on his face. Instead, he opened the volume to read the inscription on the front cover page. His eyes widened as he finished reading, and he asked in astonishment, "Do you know what this means? Hermione, did they explain what they have done by giving you this book?"

Hermione had thought she had understood, but she realised from Severus' reaction that it was much more important and significant than her previous assumption. "Not really," she said, "if your reaction is anything to go by."

Severus smirked. "Amazing. Well I'm pleased to see that you still are willing to acknowledge the limitedness of your understanding."

Hermione glared. "Insufferable man, I never said I knew everything; it was you who insisted on calling me a know-it-all and worse."

"Yes, well," said Severus with another smirk. Then, looking down at the book in his grasp, he turned serious once more. "The Malfoys have made you their daughter, not just in terms of the affection they hold for you in their heart, but also in terms of their name and magical standing. If you wanted, you could now call yourself Hermione

Malfoy-Granger, or some such derivation, and the magical artefacts that ascertained your true lineage would accept that name as your true one. This book, Hermione, is an heirloom, a Malfoy inheritance. The value is not just monetary, for its importance is far more precious than something as trite as its worth in gold. This holds the familial magic of the Malfoys, passed down through the generations from mother to daughter-in-law. For generations, this magic has only been used and held by Malfoy women. You, as the only daughter, are the first female of that name being allowed to take the rich Malfoy magical heritage and use it for the benefit of a man who is not a Malfoy by birth. Do you understand? You have been given all of the magic of the Malfoy matrons for your own. You are now, in name and magic, a Malfoy."

Hermione was stunned. She had realised that she had been given an heirloom and a very precious magical gift. However, she had not known the greater significance of such a magical token. The blood rushed to her head, and she felt like she was about to fall down.

Severus realised that Hermione was close to swooning. Rushing around his large table, he helped the dizzy young woman into the armchair close to the large marble fireplace. "Winky," he called sharply.

With a pop, Winky the house-elf appeared. Since the start of the new term, she had been formally accepted into service by Severus, and she now reported and served him primarily as both her personal master and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. "Winky, some tea for Miss Granger if you will, please. And perhaps some for me as well."

"Yes, Headmaster," said Winky, bowing low before popping out again.

Not a moment later, Winky reappeared with a tray of tea and scones laid out neatly. Severus nodded in appreciation before pouring Hermione a cup the way he knew she liked it. A dash of milk and one teaspoon of sugar. Then, he walked over to the side-board and added a splash of brandy to her tea. "I've added a bit of brandy, it will help warm you up. You've had quite a shock."

Hermione nodded, gratefully taking the cup of tea. She wrapped her hands around the delicate cup before taking a bracing gulp and then turning to look up at Severus, who had moved to stand leaning against the fireplace. "Why didn't they tell me what they were doing?" she asked in confusion. "I know Lucius seemed lost in thought after I had accepted the book and promised them both to make sure it made its way back to the next Malfoy female child, but they didn't make this meaning explicit. Will this affect Draco in any way? We've just become friends; I don't want this to affect his inheritance or anything."

Severus shook his head. "You would never make a true Slytherin," he said with a snort. "A Hufflepuff perhaps, but not a Slytherin."

In spite of her shock, Hermione giggled. Only a Slytherin could manage to make the word Hufflepuff sound like the dirtiest of swear words.

Severus smirked. He was glad to see the colour returning to Hermione's pale cheeks. "I do not think Draco would mind. Besides which, I doubt Lucius and Narcissa made this decision without consulting Draco. You are not entitled to his share of the property, but you are now able to access the wealth of knowledge the Malfoys have gathered over the years. But I think more importantly, you now have the ability to use their name if you ever wanted to pursue a more prominent place in pureblood society."

"What does it mean though?" asked Hermione in confusion. She still could not understand the full implications of the so-called adoption, especially in terms of the pureblood creed which Hermione admitted to herself seemed extremely convoluted and complex.

"It means, my dear," said Severus with a sigh, "that if you were to enter any establishment of magical standing that required membership, you would find yourself welcomed with open arms since the Malfoys are members of everything money and power can get them into. You may have been born to Muggles, but you've been formally claimed by the Malfoys. This kind of thing used to happen in the old days, when feudal lords took into their homes and families especially gifted children of Muggle birth. This allows the strengthening of the pureblood bloodlines, and it ensures that the old ways and traditions continue because you are no longer merely a dependent or an ally, you are part of the family. Their concerns are now yours, and your future achievements can count as theirs."

Severus walked over until he was towering over Hermione. Massaging the bridge of his nose, he finally shook his head. "This is a clever move, Hermione, and I'm sure Lucius has given it a lot of thought. The political and social implications of this act will not probably be fully understood until many years into the future. But I can assure you this, you are most fortunate. Even if you gain nothing more than the book that is now in your possession, your access to secretive feminine magic that has been in the Malfoy line through the ages makes you a formidable witch. Learn all it contains and share it with no-one. Keep it safe, and for goodness sakes, do not tell anyone what you have been given. The news that you are now officially a Malfoy will eventually leak out, but allow it to happen organically."

"Of course," said Hermione, slightly annoyed at Severus' overly cautious manner. "I'm not going to go blab about something this personal and important. I will tell Harry, he is like a brother, and he deserves to know, but I won't put it in a letter or anything foolish like that. I'll tell him when I see him. He's sure to come see me one of these weekends when he's not so busy with Auror training."

Severus sighed. He realised he had upset Hermione, but he did not apologise. This was too important to not make it explicit. "Potter you may tell. Even, if I may be so bold to suggest it, Miss Lovegood. She knows how to keep her wits about her. Astoria will probably hear about it from Draco anyway, so I think she is safe enough as well. But no one else." Then, as if realising that Hermione didn't really associate with any other people in the castle, he gentled his tone. "I don't mean to be harsh, but we do not want you to have more trouble than necessary. It will make the *Daily Prophet* eventually anyway, so give yourself time to start understanding some of the implications of this move."

Hermione now sighed. She realised that Severus was right, as usual. Nodding her head, she said softly, "You're absolutely right, of course. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone just yet. I'll let it sink in, study the book and then perhaps talk to Luna and Astoria."

Severus gave her a tiny smile. "Right, then. Off with you. I've got work to finish before this evening. I shall see you by the front doors at six o'clock."

Hermione smiled brightly at him, collected the precious book that lay on Severus' table and left. Slipping the book into her beaded purse which she had taken with her, she made her way thoughtfully to the Gryffindor Common room. The first person she encountered as she stepped through the portrait hole was Ginny, who was once again holding court with Romilda Vane and her friends. As their gazes met, Ginny glared jealously at Hermione's new look and whispered in a carrying tone to Romilda, "And here comes our very own Slytherin tart." This caused the girls surrounding Ginny to break into peals of laughter.

Hermione just smiled at them before making her way to her solitary chamber. *If only they knew*, thought Hermione in amusement. She realised that Ginny and her friends would be flabbergasted to know that Hermione was now officially a Malfoy with all of the political and social standing that entailed.

Once in her room, she placed her heirloom in her bedside table drawer for safekeeping. Once it was placed inside the drawer, Hermione cast a few strong, yet obscure, spells to ward the drawer from pilfering or tampering. These were followed by some clever charms to make the table itself look uninteresting and benign. Hermione realised that she had no friends in Gryffindor tower, so she was taking no chances with her precious possession. Then, Hermione finally looked at the time. She was startled to realise that it was nearly a quarter past five. She was supposed to meet Severus at six. Grateful for the fact that she did not have to do anything complicated to ready herself, she simply slipped into the simple dress she had worn to Draco's dinner party. Hermione knew that Severus loved seeing her in this dress. However, once she had put it on, she felt she needed to do something more. She clearly remembered Narcissa explaining that she should not get into a rut by wearing her favourites time and time again. Thinking for a moment, she Transfigured it into a becoming shade of emerald green that made her look youthful but very sexy. Smiling at herself for her almost Slytherinesque choice of colours, she pulled her school robes over the dress and wrapped her new scarf around her neck. A lick of lip gloss, a smear of mascara and she was ready.

Once she was dressed, she carefully prepared to make her way through the Common Room. Even though she was not doing anything wrong, she didn't want a confrontation with Ginny. She wanted to leave in a good mood. Thus, she cast a Disillusion Charm over herself, as well as a Silencing Charm on her feet to disguise her footsteps. Slowly, carefully, she made her way down the staircase and across the Common Room floor before slipping out of the portrait hole. Once outside, she removed the spells from her person and made her way to the Entrance Hall. Here, she found Severus looming just as he had been in the morning. She tried to smile brightly at him, but he just raised his eyebrow in warning and set off without a greeting. Realising that something must be up, she followed him without a word.

Soon, they were moving swiftly through the grounds towards the Gates. Hermione was nearly jogging to keep up with his long strides and brisk pace. She was really glad that she had worn her magically charmed golden stiletto shoes from Antonio's since she knew she would have suffered a sprain at the fast pace Severus was setting. She

tried to get him to stop by reaching for his arm, but he just shrugged it off. He didn't say a word or let up until they finally, at long last, reached the main Gates. By this time, Hermione was panting and had a stitch in her side. Once outside the Gates, Severus took hold of Hermione by pulling her roughly to his side and Apparating away.

They landed with a crack in what appeared to be a grotty side street. Before Hermione could even open her mouth to ask what was going on, Severus began casting charms to ensure their privacy and absolute silence. It was only then that he pulled her back roughly into his arms and kissed her.

Hermione was stunned at Severus' actions, but feeling his lips ravage her made her almost insensate with need. Giving in to her own desperate desire for him, she kissed him back passionately.

Feeling Hermione return his passion was Severus' undoing. Groaning with desire, he ground himself against her before plundering the warm depths of her mouth repeatedly. Their tongues met and duelled as they tried to convey how much they had both missed the other. Finally, with a gasp, Severus wrenched his mouth away from hers and peppered her face with gentle kisses.

Hermione allowed her frantically racing heart to slow down and stroked her hands soothingly against Severus' back. Feeling more in control, she asked softly, "What was all that about?"

Severus grunted. "I've been dying to kiss you since our last meeting on Tuesday night. I've not been able to think of anything but your mouth, your kisses. Speaking to you within Hogwarts today was torture. I wanted to rip your clothes off and just take you against the nearest wall or surface. I could hardly think straight."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione tenderly. Stroking his cheek gently, she said lovingly, "I could feel it."

He raised his head to look at her and raised his eyebrow in enquiry.

Hermione smiled. "This morning at breakfast, you were staring at me so intently. I could almost feel you sliding into me." She blushed furiously before continuing honestly. "I loved it. I thought I was going to come just by the intensity of your gaze."

Severus shuddered. Tightening his hold around her waist, he murmured, "You are a vision of loveliness. I seem incapable of rational thought when I see you, and it only gets worse when I come close to you."

Hermione blushed deeply at his compliment.

Severus smirked in amusement. He wondered if anyone had bothered to tell her how very lovely she was. Lowering his head, he spoke seductively into her ear, "You are utterly delectable, Hermione. You drive me mad with desire, even when you do absolutely nothing at all."

Hermione moaned softly as his voice caressed her heated flesh. She could feel his hard erection pressing into her, and she wanted nothing more than to have him take her. All her fears of not being ready for a commitment vanished in the face of her sheer desire for him. Now she realised why Cissy had spoken of the need to take time. Lust could and probably often did cloud the brain and did not help ensure long-term compatibility of a relationship.

Severus slowly released his hold on Hermione. "Come," he said tenderly, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. "I've got a reservation for dinner at seven, and I thought a stroll along the Thames would be ideal to give you a bit of an appetite."

Hermione beamed at him. She loved visiting London. She and her parents had come here for many of their celebratory dinners since Strood, Rochester, where she had lived, was not too far away from the metropolis.

Away from Hogwarts and the wizarding world, Severus seemed a different man. After a quick Transfiguration of their cloaks and robes into suitable Muggle attire, Hermione's into a warm autumn coat to complement her dress, and Severus' into a Muggle-style evening suit and trench coat, the couple made their way to London Bridge. The September evening was warm. The city seemed peaceful and calm, as though it were having a bit of a rest before the hectic night out began for its inhabitants.

Hermione enjoyed being able to slip her arm through Severus' and walk along the embankment without a care about who they might see or meet. Severus too seemed more relaxed away from the constant gaze of curious folk. They walked in companionable silence, enjoying each others' company. Soon, however, their steps began to slow, and Severus led Hermione to a secluded bench. Once seated, he again cast a few spells to ensure their privacy before pulling her onto his lap and holding her close. He loved having her in his arms. He realised he was going to find being without her extraordinarily difficult if he could hardly go a few short days without savaging her with his kisses.

Hermione snuggled into Severus' embrace. She loved the feeling of security she got when she was wrapped in his arms. She allowed her fingers to slide into his slick locks that felt like the softest of silk. She smiled to herself when Severus seemed to unconsciously incline his head so that her fingers caressed his head where he seemed to need it the most. They sat like that in peaceful silence for a long while, merely soaking in their physical proximity. Finally, Severus seemed to rouse himself and pulled out his pocket watch to look at the time. "I hope you are hungry," he said with a smirk. "I've made reservations at a tiny Muggle restaurant. I thought you might enjoy being away from the Magical world for an evening."

Hermione smiled happily at him before allowing her face to grow pensive. "My parents used to bring me to London every May so that we could go out and explore a different type of exotic cuisine on my mother's birthday. We've done all kinds of restaurants from the more common, like Sushi and Lebanese, to Sri Lankan and our last, Vietnamese."

Severus inclined his head. He did not know what to say.

Hermione did not seem to require a response. "We never could do anything special for my birthdays since it always fell once school had started. I think I've only ever had one birthday party, and that was when I was seven. It was a disaster. My cousin threw up after eating too much chocolate cake, and my grandfather got drunk on my dad's best whiskey. We never tried that again."

Severus smirked. "I'm sure tonight will be an improvement then."

Hermione giggled. "It's already an improvement, Severus. In truth, this birthday has been one of the happiest of my life, though this morning I thought I was going to feel melancholy and alone."

"Good," said Severus decisively. "Now, it is time we left for our meal." Standing up, he kept his hold on Hermione's waist and with a swift spin, Apparated them to a side street in Camden.

Hermione gasped at the unexpected location. She had not thought that Severus would take her to such a place. Beaming with happiness, she allowed him to escort her to a very small family run Italian Restaurant.

Once they were seated at a secluded corner table with the bottle of champagne he had pre-ordered, Severus toasted her graciously. "Let me wish you happy birthday once again, my dear," he said teasingly.

Hermione blushed at his teasing. "Thank you, kind sir," she said in reply.

Severus smirked. He was about to tease her some more when their food arrived. The sight and aroma of the food drove all thoughts of teasing from both of their minds. Conversation was limited as they did justice to the excellent cuisine. Once dinner was over, they lingered over their pudding, enjoying the wonderful tiramisu.

After their wonderful meal, Severus took Hermione for a late night cruise along the Thames. She was enchanted with his surprise. She had known that Severus was courting her, but this utterly romantic evening was unlike any she had thought she would encounter with Severus. She had always seen him as her dark lover. This

sophisticated and urbane man who was so comfortable in the Muggle world was another facet to his personality that she had not envisioned. She realised now how truly diverse he was.

"I've had a wonderful time, Severus," said Hermione tenderly. Leaning over she kissed him softly on his mouth.

Severus smirked but he did not push her away. However, he seemed to have gained control of his emotions after his outburst of passion earlier in the evening and did not do too much to pull her to him either. Hermione decided to take the initiative. Had she not been told by him previously that he liked being claimed by her? She was determined to move their sexual relationship forward. She was tired of tip toeing around their mutual desire. Remembering the passion that he ignited within her on her first visit to Lestrage Manor, she deepened the kiss and slid her hands into his hair.

Severus groaned. He had wanted to take things slow now that they were both back to being pupil and Headmaster. But Hermione's untutored yet determined assault was driving him wild. Unable to stop himself, he drew her to him so that she was almost straddling him. Sliding his hands under her bottom, he drew her even closer to where he needed her most. As their kisses deepened, he thrust his erection against her waiting heat. Hermione moaned at the intimate contact. Even through the many layers that separated them, she could feel the heat, the need radiating off him.

Severus pulled out his wand that was tucked into his sleeve and cast a Notice-Me-Not and Muffliato spell. He did not want them to be disturbed by some curious Muggles. Then, he slid his hands up to cup her breasts. Hermione arched into his touch, wanting, needed more. Hesitant but determined, she parted his coat and began to unbutton his jacket.

Severus took that as a sign that he too could begin to explore her body further. With expert skill, he reached around her back and began to unbutton the row of tiny buttons that held up the strapless dress.

Soon, Hermione had undone his jacket and had begun working on the buttons of his waist coat. She paused though, when Severus pushed down her bodice to feast his eyes on her finally bared breasts. Hermione knew she should perhaps feel some sense of embarrassment, for this was the first time that a man had looked upon her nakedness in this manner. But all she felt was womanly pride at the blatant lust that was so openly displayed on Severus' face. She was so very glad that she wore no bra, for the dress was designed so that it needed no undergarments.

"You're so lovely," groaned Severus as he lowered his mouth to kiss and worship her breasts.

Hermione moaned at the sensual contact. She had never been touched so intimately, but with Severus, it felt right. She slid her hands into his hair and held his head close to her breasts as he continued to suckle, to nip and lave her nipples. Finally, he drew his head away from her now rigid peaks and kissed her ravenously on the mouth.

"We can't do this here," said Severus gruffly. "However strong my spells, I do not want to expose us accidentally." He knew he was very close to losing all control over himself. He wanted her desperately, and he was almost at the point of no return.

Hermione nodded. She had not planned on this happening. She had only wanted to kiss him a little, to once again feel like a woman in his arms.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Twenty-Seven: The Castle Speaks

*Chapter 27 of 40*

The Dark Veela curse has its revenge and pushes Hermione and Severus apart.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the amazing J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this story. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars. You have been the sweetest and best friend through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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Disillusioning them, Severus quickly guided Hermione to an even more deserted part of the barge. From there, he Apparated them back to Hogwarts.

Seeing the gates before her made Hermione furious with thwarted passion. Pulling herself out of his embrace, she stared at him in anger. She had thought he was taking her back to Lestrage Manor. This was not where she wanted to be.

"Severus," she started in exasperation. "Why are we here? I thought you wanted me."

Severus knew that Hermione would not be pleased at being brought back to the castle. But in the few moments that it took to dress and Apparate, he had come to his senses. He could not ravish her with impunity. She was now a Malfoy, and for all intents and purposes, the right thing to do was to wait until they were formally engaged. Never mind that Severus knew that Lucius and Narcissa would not disapprove of their match or, indeed, blame him for taking her. But something in him protested the claiming of Hermione. He thought it was his honour; he did not realise that it was the Dark Veela curse using every possible weapon in its insidious arsenal to prevent the expression of their love for each other.

Severus sighed and tried to pull Hermione back into his arms. "My love, I do want you, but I won't lose control of my emotions. You will not rush me on this. Your first time must be prepared for."

"Bollocks," said Hermione in anger. "You're just being a coward. If you are afraid of being in a relationship, say so. Don't jerk me around."

"I am not a coward," hissed Severus in anger. He was now as livid as she was. He did not realise how demented he looked.

"You are a coward," screamed Hermione, her own darkness rising like an insidious tide. "You could have made me yours just now, but you keep pushing me away. I know I won't be able to replace Lily Potter, but I love you. All of you." By the end of the speech, Hermione was sobbing, but not in agony, no, now she was furious.

"What's Lily got to do with how I feel for you?" asked Severus in annoyance. "Look, I'm the adult in this relationship. I am not going to ravish you on a whim because I've lost control of my passions. When we are together, it will be done properly."

"Bollocks," said Hermione again. "You're very sure of yourself. What if I decide I'm tired of you pussy-footing around? What if I decide I want to become a woman and take another lover because you're too afraid to commit to being with me?"

"That is entirely your choice," said Severus coldly. Ice seemed to drip from his tone, and Hermione realised instantly that she had gone too far.

"Severus," she began before coming to a halt. She had too much pride to keep throwing herself at him. If he didn't want her but she knew that wasn't true either. He did want her; he was just being bloody-minded about it. Besides, he had said he was the adult in their relationship. Did that mean that to him, despite their explosive passion, that he still saw her as a child?

Severus too was feeling raw and hurt. *Are all women like Lily?* wondered Severus in painful rejection. *Perhaps all women are capricious. If one man does not give them what they desire, they move on to the next one. Lily definitely had.* He had thought Hermione was different. But if she wanted another lover, someone who would take her with no thought to her place in society, her worth, then she was not the woman who he wanted to be with. But even as those thoughts buzzed through his mind, he knew she was not like Lily at all. Hermione was special, unique, and different. However, the Dark Veela curse pushed him to not apologise or explain further. Instead, he felt compelled to say harshly, "I wish you success in your future sexual exploits, Miss Granger-Malfoy. Come this way, please." With that, he opened the gates and waited until she had followed him inside before closing them firmly behind her. Then, without speaking a word, he marched back towards the castle, only slowing down occasionally so that Hermione could keep up breathlessly behind him. Once at the main doors, he again waited until she was safely inside before bowing stiffly despite his anger and taking his leave silently.

Hermione was too stunned at the turn of events to try to mend their breach. Moreover, the insult of his final words still rang in her ears. "Your future sexual exploits," he had said, as though he had completely ended their tentative relationship. And what on earth did he mean by referring to her as Miss Granger-Malfoy?

It was a chastised, hurt, angry and thoroughly confused Hermione that retired to her bed that night. How could a night that had been going so wonderfully well end so abruptly? Sure, Hermione agreed, she should not have called him a coward. She had learned from Harry how much that infuriated Severus. Neither should she have brought out the possibility another man into their argument given his history with Lily Potter. But was there any reason why they had not been able to make up? Deciding that if he thought she was a child and not what he wanted, then she too would try to put things behind her; Hermione vowed to focus on her NEWTs. Wasn't that why she had returned, to learn, to grow and to figure out what she wanted? But it seemed to her a hollow thing now. She wanted Severus. For him, she knew she would give up everything and everyone. She wanted nothing but to be with him.

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful, but to Hermione, it seemed a mockery when her heart seemed bruised and broken. However, she knew there was no point in hiding in her dormitory. In spite of the almost sleepless night, she realised that she would have to face Severus at some point. Dragging on her old, comfortable pair of brown cord trousers and an even older cream sweater over her favourite Arsenal t-shirt, her father's football team, she made her way down to breakfast. Luna looked at her expectantly, hoping perhaps to hear news of her evening away. But Hermione shook her head in warning. She didn't want anyone to hear about what had happened.

Luna nodded in response and continued to eat her breakfast with a thoughtful frown on her face. Hermione could not know it, but Luna could detect the aura of pain and sorrow that clung to Hermione, dulling her normally vibrant azure glow.

Not long after, the newspapers were brought in a flurry of wings. Hermione sighed and picked up her paper after feeding the delivery owl a bit of toast. The headlines were boring, filled with Ministry happenings. But as she began scanning the paper, her heart stopped abruptly. The first bit of news in the society pages was the heading, *The Malfoys Adopt*. Hermione's eyes swiftly lifted up to meet those of Luna. She, of course, did not subscribe to the *Prophet*.

As Luna left her breakfast and drifted over to Hermione, Hermione continued to glance at the bold headline. A part of her had expected some sort of formal announcement, but she had not expected to see the news of her adoption so publicly in the news.

Sitting down uninvited, Luna began reading the paper. Hermione, nonplussed, began to read the article too. She could guess what it contained, but it would be prudent to know what was being circulated.

The article had thankfully not been written by Rita Skeeter. However, the new society reporter was just as likely to write sheer nonsense, for it was none other than Lavender Brown. It read:

*In a stunning move that is sure to set the wizarding world ablaze following the speculations of Hermione Granger being Lord Lucius Malfoy's love-child, this reporter has the pleasure of stating that Lord and Lady Malfoy have officially adopted the Gryffindor Muggle-born.*

*Lady Malfoy, who was gracious enough to grant this reporter an interview last evening in the beautifully appointed drawing-room of Malfoy Manor said, "Lucius and I have come to love and adore dear Hermione. She is the daughter we have always wanted, intelligent, kind, brave and beautiful. We are moved beyond measure that she has accepted us as her adopted parents. We both look forward to not only introducing her formally into pureblood society on the completion of her education at Hogwarts, but also perhaps assisting her in her future educational endeavours. I am, after all, the only living witch in Britain today who has attended the select institute known as Die Komplette Hexe, which is based in Lucerne. Anyone who knows Hermione will attest to the fact that she will thrive in such an erudite and specialised educational institute."*

*This reporter can verify the Gryffindor Muggle-born's love of learning, having spent many years sharing a dorm-room with who was then known as Hermione Granger, now of course, Hermione Granger-Malfoy. She was always buried in books, and had an almost unnatural passion for learning. That she would now agree to be adopted by the Malfoys, known supporters of pureblood supremacist ideology, to gain entrance into one of the magical world's premier and exclusive institutions of learning is not impossible to imagine. The young, influence-hungry lady has been known to do everything in her power to steal the limelight from appearing as the then Bulgarian seeker Victor Krum's date at the Triwizard Tournament Yule Ball, to flaunting shamelessly with the celebrated ex-spy and intelligence operative of the Order of Phoenix and Headmaster of Hogwarts, Order of Merlin, first class, Potions Master Severus Snape. This move is therefore nothing unusual in her quest to enter the higher echelons of wizarding society. That the Malfoys, long known for their breeding and position in society, may have finally allowed the instigator of their downfall into their midst is a cause for concern. Surely, a Muggle-born social climber cannot advance their own powerful presence.*

*When this point was raised to Lady Malfoy, she was quick to indicate that Hermione Granger-Malfoy is the best friend of Harry Potter, and that along with the Saviour of the wizarding world, their adopted daughter was integral to the fight against You-know-who. When questioned, Lady Malfoy stated, "We, of course, owe a huge debt of gratitude to Hermione and her friends for freeing us all from the tyranny of the Dark Lord. It is therefore our pride and privilege to welcome Hermione into our family."*

Luna laughed as she finished reading Lavender's rather petty piece. But she could see that Hermione was visibly shaken. Slipping her arm around her friend, Luna said placidly, "Well, I'm sure it could be worse. At least everyone knows that the Malfoys love and adore you. Besides, if you get to go to *Die Komplette Hexe*, then what does it matter what they say? Getting in is virtually impossible. The cost for one thing is princely. Besides which, you can only get in if you are vouched for by at least five previous students. It's very much a pureblood club. But if Mrs. Malfoy is going to be your patron, then she will have her friends vouch for you too, which should make the way clear."

Hermione nodded. She tried to look on the bright side. She had been fascinated by Cissy's disclosure of a school for ladies that gave one more instruction in European magical culture and custom. Since she had no idea which field she wanted to go into, this seemed like a wonderful thing to embark upon until she did. But she hadn't known at that time that she was being adopted legally. She had thought that it was a mere gesture. On learning of what had transpired from Severus, a part of her had felt, and still felt as though she had been manipulated into it. She felt used, but she could not deny the love and adoration the Malfoys felt for her. She knew that in their mind, they were doing what they thought was best, not only for their family, but also for her. They were offering her a home, a family. Moreover, she understood that her dear friend Cissy was trying to replace or at least mitigate the pain caused by the loss of her own parents. Still, Hermione felt like this was far too much, coming as it did following last night's dreadful culmination. Wasn't it only yesterday morning that she had turned nineteen and spent the day in the spa with Cissy? Today she had been acknowledged in

the media as a Malfoy.

Hermione raised her head to look at Severus, but he was looking determinedly ahead of him. He did not even seem to hear Minerva, who was sitting beside him and trying rather unsuccessfully to capture his attention. Sighing, Hermione turned to Luna. "I didn't even know I was being adopted when it happened. Let's go somewhere we can talk. I have much to tell you."

Luna nodded. "Let me make something to take with us," she said as she made herself a sandwich with ham, cheese and scrambled egg.

Hermione laughed despite the pain, discomfort and confusion she was feeling. She knew now that Luna loved to make sandwiches with interesting fillings.

Once Luna's thick sandwich was made, she made another one for Hermione. Then, wrapping them both in a napkin, she put two apples into her pocket and led the way to the courtyard.

Hermione could not help but recall once more that this was where she had sat at almost the exact same time yesterday with her two friends reading Cissy's invitation. How could things have changed so quickly? In her heart she did not doubt the sincerity of the Malfoy adoption, but she realised that she had been manoeuvred into it.

Once they were seated, Luna became very silent. When Hermione tried to speak, she was shushed swiftly. "Sh... the castle is speaking. Listen."

Hermione tried, but she could hear nothing but the wind.

Finally, as if satisfied, Luna laid out the napkin and picked up her sandwich. "Eat. Astoria is on her way. Once she comes, you can do all the talking."

Hermione did not feel like eating, but she forced herself to take a bite of her own breakfast. It tasted rich and satisfying, but it felt like a stone as it went down her throat. "Luna," she tried to speak again, but again, Luna raised her hand and demanded silence.

Hermione sighed quietly but waited. She had learned over the summer and indeed, since they had returned to Hogwarts that Luna needed silence if there was something going on. She was so very aware of things that speech made too much clutter in her inner mind.

About three or four minutes later, Astoria found them in the courtyard. She too seemed to have come out with her breakfast, but the Slytherin carried a smart little basket that was brimming with croissants. Laying her own repast on the bench, she said without preamble, "Good morning, Miss Granger-Malfoy."

Hermione could not help but blush at the ridiculous surname. "Astoria...", she started, just to be cut off by her friend's uproarious giggle.

"Draco sent me a beautiful letter last night," said Astoria. "He explained everything. I thought you'd like to read it."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, please. I've been trying to tell Luna. I didn't know they were adopting me when they adopted me."

Astoria giggled. "Yes," she said in acknowledgement. "I suppose you had no idea about that part of old tradition. It was quite common in the old days, of course, though it's not been done for centuries. No need you see, the magical population has grown big enough to make it unnecessary, and of course, schools like Hogwarts and Freya have been taking in all the children born with magical ability who fall within their jurisdiction." Then, the Slytherin beauty passed her letter to Hermione.

Again, in what felt like a parody of yesterday, Hermione read a letter penned on Malfoy stationery while Luna read over her shoulder.

*My dearest Astoria, my own sweet love,*

*Mother and father have, with my knowledge, decided to make Hermione my adopted sister. Mother is, at present, breaking the news to a reporter of the Daily Prophet. Since I continue to hope that one day you will be part of the Malfoy clan, I felt it important that you be made aware of this addition to our happy family.*

*Pray assure my new sister how welcome she is. Do your best to encourage her to take every advantage of the Malfoy name. I am sure this letter will be seen by her at some point. I know how close the two of you are. Mother is so very glad to have a daughter. She has always wanted one to spoil with clothes and jewels. I think she has grown tired of waiting for our engagement and marriage. I know I am impatient to make you my own, forever.*

*Do not let Hermione think badly of us. We felt that if we had laid the proposition frankly before her that she would have found some foolish and honourable reason to refuse. Having a Gryffindor in the family is going to be a trial. I can already foresee us being bullied into being more upright citizens. In any case, father decided that given our Hermione's disposition that fait accompli seemed the best way forward. It is, after all, the Slytherin way.*

*All my love, always,*

*Your devoted servant and future lover,*

*Draco*

Hermione and Luna could not help but laugh at Draco's tone, which was arrogant, chauvinistic and somehow adorable and earnest at the same time. Nor could Hermione disagree with his statement that she would have refused. She would have. She would have fought on the grounds that there was no need, that she knew they loved her already, that she already felt that Malfoy Manor was her home. But she also realised that they didn't want her to ever feel like she was an outsider or that she was beholden to them for their generosity. Now she was, and would remain a part of their family for the rest of her days.

At least last night's debacle had allowed Hermione to understand the finality and the reasons behind the adoption. Unable to sleep due to the pain and confusion over the abrupt end to last night's outing, Hermione had taken solace as she normally did in reading. She had spent most of the night studying and trying to understand the meaning behind her Malfoy inheritance. She knew from the first few pages that the Malfoy home and all their many properties were now forever a refuge to her. Her magic would strengthen and shape the Malfoy properties, and in return, she would grow from the collective strength of the Malfoy name. Moreover, she now had access to a large amount of wealth, and indeed, all of the Malfoy connections were now formally hers.

The hand written book had not ended with Hektor's entries. No, the new bride had also added what she had learned on her journey to her new home in the journal, as had other Malfoy brides over the years. The last entry had been made by Narcissa. She had explained all that was to be Hermione's, from the many pieces of jewellery to the numerous clubs, societies and magical establishments that were patronised by the Malfoys, to her now vastly extravagant monthly allowance.

Hermione felt like she had aged a hundred years. She realised now that Severus would have expected his public acknowledgement of her Malfoy connections. Had he not thrown the name Granger-Malfoy at her? No wonder he did not want to rush into sex. He realised that she too was now bound by stricter pureblood custom since she was a young maiden. Feeling even more foolish than before, she decided that she really had to beg for forgiveness. It would not be easy. She knew how difficult Severus was when he felt he had been insulted. She only hoped it wouldn't take her years to get through his bloody prickly defences. She recalled how Remus had tried for years to apologise for his part in the Marauder torments. But although Severus had forgiven and accepted his apology, no doubt due to Dumbledore's influence, and shaken his hand, he had never forgotten.

A little while later, Astoria departed to finish her homework for the coming week. Their seventh year workload was considerable. Hermione, of course, had finished everything by Friday night. She was not one to let homework pile up. But she knew that Luna would want time to work on her own ongoing charms experiments, so she allowed her friends to drift away, assuring them that she was coping.

"Don't worry," said Hermione. "I'm fine."

She knew that Luna thought that her melancholia was due to the adoption. She had not even been able to tell her friends about the disaster of the night before. Her outing with Severus had been pushed aside with this major occurrence. Hermione was glad. She was not looking forward to explaining to her friends that she feared that she and Severus were no longer together because she had been impatient for a bedding. It sounded foolish, even to her own ears.

Making her way to the Gryffindor common-room, she was met by absolute silence on her entrance. Cursing herself silently for not casting a charm to disillusion herself, she pulled her Gryffindor courage together. She was not going to let a roomful of people intimidate her. She had faced down Bellatrix Lestrange. What were these children going to do?

Looking complacently and haughtily around her like she had seen Astoria and Cissy do on numerous occasions, she waited for them to speak. Perhaps it was the icy Malfoy look, perhaps it was the fact that she did not look afraid, but no one challenged her, not until Ginny Weasley made her way down from the girls' dormitories.

"Slytherin whore," she said. "Why are you here? Shouldn't you be fucking your little Slytherin friends down in the dungeons?"

Hermione wanted to cringe at the crudeness of Ginny's words. Instead, she silently reminded herself that she was a Gryffindor and now a Malfoy. Had Draco's letter not said that she should take every advantage that the name offered her?

"Just because I've been adopted as the daughter of Lord and Lady Malfoy does not make me a Slytherin whore, Ginevra," she said as coldly as she could. "A whore is a woman who spreads her legs to any man who wants her, much like yourself and your multitude of lovers. I am a virgin. I am saving myself for my marriage bed. If you had paid any attention to custom and tradition, or indeed potions, you would know that it is High Magic indeed when a virgin's blood is spilled on her wedding night. Clearly then, I am not a whore. Furthermore, I am a Gryffindor. In fact, I have been a Gryffindor longer than you have. So both your assumptions about me are wrong. Now, I suggest you stop acting like a spiteful little girl and learn to behave like a lady, if you possibly can. Since my adopted parents are indeed, Lord and Lady Malfoy, that makes me Lady Hermione Granger-Malfoy."

That said, Hermione went up to her room. Inside, she was quaking in her shoes, but she knew that Draco, Lucius and Cissy would be applauding her behaviour. Suddenly, she realised what she had said. Saving her virginity for marriage, saving herself for her marriage bed. Was that what Severus was trying to do, perform High Magic? No wonder he had said there were rites. Feeling even more foolish now that she had realized how Severus, as a Potions Master, would see the taking of her virginity, she felt even more in the wrong. She called him a coward and a hypocrite when he was just being himself. Thoughtful, rational. He had never claimed to be good with words. She should have paid more attention to his actions.

She would have loved to have narrated her performance to Severus. How he would have laughed to hear of how she had cut Ginny to size. Calling her by her full name had been the icing on the cake. She knew how the red-head hated being called by her full name.

Up in her room, Hermione vowed to do everything possible to beg Severus' forgiveness. If she had to once again use Slytherin tactics to get him to listen, then that was what she would do.

The days passed in painful silence. She hardly saw Severus except for meal times when he would eat and gaze out on the student body without ever meeting her searching eyes. Luna and Astoria tried to understand the sudden chill that had taken hold of the very potent relationship, but they failed to get any meaningful answers from Hermione. Severus himself seemed to have reverted to the cold, unfeeling bastard of the war years. He was harsh with people and spent time alone buried in making Hogwarts the envy of all magical institutions of learning.

Headmaster Black reported that Severus seemed to spend the time not spent working on paperwork and reorganisation of the school buried deep in Potions research. It seemed as though he had completely shut out all contact with people and emotion.

As October approached, Luna began to learn Mermish. She had made it her final year project since she stated that she wanted to become a Magizoologist and travel the world. With the help of Hagrid and Professor Flitwick, she had been taken to meet the queen of the mer-people. The chieftain's wife had agreed to let the earth child spend a few hours every week under careful supervision to learn to speak their language.

As the girls became more involved in their studies, Hermione into the mysteries of the castle and Luna into the magical creatures of the world, they started spending more time apart. Hermione could not blame her friends. She had turned once again to finding solace in books since Severus had done his best to freeze her out of his life. Besides, the book given to her on her birthday was proving to be incredibly fascinating, and there was a lot to learn both in terms of magical theory, as well as in family obligations and spell craft. Furthermore, every time she had attempted to corner Severus when she saw him somewhere along the corridors, he would just freeze her with his completely impersonal stare and stride swiftly away.

The trio's friendship was not falling apart, of course, nor were they growing distant, but it was their NEWTs year, and they were all busy. Besides being piled with ridiculous levels of homework and assignments as well as their individual final year projects, Astoria had begun to plan her betrothal to Draco. The two sets of parents had drawn up a contract, and the date for their official engagement was set for the summer solstice once school came to a close. It made Hermione laugh to see the meticulous preparations being made. She couldn't help but think that there was still so much time. But another part of Hermione was also slightly jealous. She wanted to be planning her own engagement, not to be totally swamped with Astoria's paraphernalia of design books and colour schemes.

Hermione had finally settled on a Charms final year project because she wanted to understand the many enchantments that were built into the castle. Professor Flitwick had gazed at her when she had submitted her proposal and had told her that most of the records were inaccessible. Only the founders really knew what their original enchantments included. But the castle itself had been built on an old Druid site that in itself held unknown magical enchantments, wards and workings. It was, thus, going to be part of Hermione's project to try and tease out and pin point what constituted some of the many layers of enchantments. Present knowledge clearly indicated that each Headmaster or Headmistress added his or her own signature to the wards and enchantments. Hence, the school's defences grew stronger with each successive generation. From the late sixteenth century, a concerted effort had been made to keep accurate records of all wards and magics used to protect the castle and its surroundings, not only from other magical attack, but also Muggle attention. Dumbledore himself had worked tirelessly to discover some of the older enchantments and had added significantly to the defences of the school following the rise of Voldemort. However, Hermione was adamant and said that if she could even uncover some of the unknown charms and enchantments, that in itself would be an achievement. Professor Flitwick could not disagree, for he too had always wondered about the many enchantments. He, like Dumbledore and Luna, knew that the castle was sentient, and it would be extremely interesting to see what had given rise to such a manifestation. Many magical properties had personalities, but there was none like Hogwarts that could self repair and heal itself with human assistance.

Once the project had been approved, Hermione approached Luna about learning to listen to the castle. Her friend, of course, had joyously agreed to help Hermione communicate with Hogwarts.

"Of course, I'll help," said Luna with a bright smile. "I promised soon after the battle, and I don't not keep my promises."

Hermione nodded. "I know," she said trying to be cheerful.

Luna looked at Hermione while her friend gazed silently out of the library window. Almost flippantly, Luna said, "Headmaster Snape is really sad."

"I don't want to know," said Hermione wearily. They had tried to make her talk about what had happened between him and her for weeks now, and she really was not looking forward to avoiding the issue again. Hermione knew rationally that something beyond the obvious had happened, but she couldn't understand why he wouldn't let her apologise. Hermione did realise that Luna, if no one else, with her insights into auras could understand what had happened, but examining her own behaviour was painful. Hermione did not want to analyse too deeply how she had let herself be so cruel or hurtful. She was not a fool. She knew how archaic pureblood traditions were. She knew, especially now after having read more of the book she had been entrusted by the Malfoys, the place she occupied in society. She could understand Severus' reluctance to take her virginity without care and preparation. He would have wanted to purify them both, to perform rites to ensure her virgin blood was correctly collected if nothing else. Even if he had chosen not to wait for their wedding night, to perform High Magic, he would have wanted to make it as close to ritualistic as possible. He was that kind of man.

Luna sighed. It was most unlike her to sigh, but Hermione was being rather stubborn. "Look, if you want to learn about the castle, you must learn about him. As the



Headmaster, he and his emotions are integral to its being. When the castle speaks, it speaks of its inhabitants."

"Oh," said Hermione. She felt foolish once again. She could not understand how her vaunted intelligence had failed her again and again. First, she had not thought of the implications of Malfoys' generosity, and then, she had not thought through her words to Severus. Now, she had failed to fully grasp the reality of how integral Severus was to the castle and its core emotions and harmonies. She should have realised the fact that delving into the feelings of the castle would also include understanding its Lord, which meant the Headmaster. The castle was over a thousand years old. It was built just before the Norman invasions, to keep out both the Viking hordes that were trying to infiltrate the baron-held lands, as well as the Saxon overlords from infringing up the few remaining Celtic domains. It was blatantly obvious therefore that the present Headmaster as the acknowledged Lord of the Keep would be the foremost harmonic resonance and constitute the pulse of the castle's personality.

Luna nodded. "Never mind. As you close your eyes and allow your aura to blend with that of the castle, let your skin make contact with some part of the castle, preferably something old like the walls. Allow your inner being to open and let the castle in."

Hermione tried over and over again, but for the first few days, she could hear nothing but an insistent buzz. Luna insisted that it was nothing to be alarmed about. Hermione was just hearing the general chatter of all the inhabitants. However, she advised Hermione to keep trying. "The more you listen, the more you will hear. Open your mind, Hermione. Forget your ears, use your soul."

One night, a couple of days before Halloween, Hermione was up in her tiny bedroom. Luna was away in Sweden. Her cousin Gustav had taken gravely ill, and her father had rushed her away for the week. Astoria was once again trying to complete her piling homework, for she had been spending too much time during the day dreaming about Draco. Hermione found it funny, yet painful, to listen to the girl go on about her love. She had insisted that they not talk about what was going on with Severus, so she was forced to listen to Astoria plan, discuss and dream about her future life with Draco.

That night, therefore, Hermione was alone. The library had been cold and draughty, so Hermione, not having homework to do, had returned to her room. She had spent some time reading her heirloom, but now she turned her attention to her attempt to listen to the castle. Over the last few days, she had begun to hear a bit more than buzzing. Sometimes she heard low crooning that was, according to Luna, Professor Sprout singing to her plants. Once, she had heard the clutter of pots and pans, even though they were far away from the kitchens, and Luna had confirmed Hermione's suspicion that it was the house-elves being busy. But tonight, so close to Halloween, felt different. There was something in the air, something even more magical, more powerful than before. Hermione felt certain that today she would make a more thorough break-through.

Having read that meditation might allow her to clear her mind and her aura sufficiently to allow the castle to speak, Hermione closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on nothing but the feel of the stone of the window ledge on which she sat. Looking inward to the stone walls, she allowed her mind to clear and drift. In drips and drabs, she started to feel the emotions of the castle. It, like her, was melancholy. As Hermione tapped into the potent feeling of abandonment, of betrayal, her heart began to beat impossibly fast, for what Hermione heard frightened her. Because the Headmaster was an integral part of the school, and because she was so aware of Severus physically and emotionally, when she listened closely, the most intense feeling that she heard was his childhood pain, his lack of true love. She realised that, although he appeared to have completely cut her off from his life, he was in great pain. He felt that she had abandoned him when he wanted nothing but the best for her. He felt that she had been unable to accept his heartfelt devotion and respect for her. Saddened, desolate that she had caused him to feel so much anguish, Hermione listened and without realising it, asked the castle how she could help. Surprisingly, the castle began to speak to her. It had wanted to communicate with the one person it knew could reach the Headmaster's almost frozen core. It insisted that she must mend the break with Severus. She was instructed to reach his aching heart, his slowly dying soul.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: Hermione Granger-Malfoy

*Chapter 28 of 40*

Hermione talks to Professor McGonagall.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.
- (iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, *Queen\_of\_Stars*. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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After paying close attention to the castle, Hermione was once again determined to break through Severus' defences. For the last few weeks, she had almost given up. She hadn't until that moment really realised how much of a part pride and fear played in her behaviour.

She had rationalised her not doing anything further with thoughts that ran along lines that questioned how long she was expected to keep trying to get through Severus' walls when it was more than clear that the hard-headed bastard wanted nothing to do with her. But learning from the castle itself motivated her to keep trying. She realised that he was just that much better than she had previously assumed at hiding and possibly even rejecting his emotions.

This should not have surprised Hermione. If she had been thinking logically, she would have known that as the strongest practitioner of Occlumency in the British Isles, if not the western world, Severus was more than expert at totally clamping down on all of his emotions. It was only because the castle was so closely connected to him that she had been able to learn of his hidden grief. But her own darkness, which she had as yet faced full-on, was coming to bare upon her thinking.

But after her conversation with the castle the Gryffindor Princess began once more to plot. For one really important thing had happened, over the course of the weeks since her birthday, she had come to accept that she was now a part of the Malfoy family. She had been inundated with almost daily letters from Cissy, Lucius and Draco, and she had been made to realise how much they wanted her to be comfortable in their family. Furthermore, she had been told that there was no shame in enjoying the Slytherin aspects of her personality, for now, as a Malfoy, she could finally give full range to her non-Gryffindor traits. This advice, of course, had followed her disclosure via Floo-call to Cissy about what had happened with Ginny once the *Prophet* had broken the news of her adoption.

Now that she was a Malfoy, she had been sent one of a pair of ornate, magical mirrors. Like the two-way mirror that had been gifted to Harry by Sirius, this one allowed Hermione to speak with Cissy whenever she desired. It had become a marvellous way for the two women to communicate, and they seemed to have established a little ritual, not unlike the one Cissy had had with Draco when he was at Hogwarts, of having a cosy chat before bed. It was safer and more private than Flooing and allowed the

two women to see each other face to face. On some nights, Lucius and Draco joined Cissy as she chatted to Hermione. Never before had Hermione felt so loved, so wanted. She realised that the Malfoys, despite all their manipulation and manoeuvring for social and political standing, did in actual fact intend to be more than figure-head parents. They wanted and were planning on being real parents to her.

Hermione, who had never been the beneficiary of such utter doting and adoration by her own parents, was overwhelmed and pleased. She had never been able to speak to her own mother with the same level of honesty. Firstly, because her mother could not understand or comprehend what was going on in the magical world. Secondly, Hermione now realised, because her mother had not really wanted to be a mother and therefore had very little maternal love to give. She had been willing to provide moral guidance and advice, but not motherly support and love. The difference, in comparison to Cissy's maternal adoration, was startling. Narcissa was born to be a mother, and with Hermione, finally, after the end of the fear of Voldemort, the proud Slytherin could give in to all of her tender sensibilities.

After having spoken to Headmaster Black to confirm that he would speak to some of his other colleagues in the Headmaster's Office to garner their support, Hermione decided to approach Professor McGonagall. Her Head of House had asked Hermione at the start of term to please come see her if she needed anything. Now, Hermione realised that she needed support if she was to somehow get through to Severus. She knew he was shunning all contact with the outside world. The only way that Hermione could get him to listen was through Lucius and Narcissa. If they cornered him in public, he could not easily get away. Needing to arrange a way for the Malfoys to be invited to Hogwarts in a public setting, Hermione decided that a Hogwarts' Feast would be the perfect excuse.

Thus, on the Thursday before Halloween, Hermione popped into her Head of House's office. She knew very few students actually visited their professors during their office hours. It was only closer to the time of final exams that their professors were inundated with students becoming more and more desperate.

Minerva, of course, was delighted to see Hermione. "I'm so glad you dropped by, lass. It's been ages since we've had a good chat. How are you?"

Hermione smiled at the warm welcome and happily sat herself down on the tartan covered armchair reserved for the more favoured visitors. "I'm doing fine, Professor. I'm sorry that I didn't take you up on your offer for tea and a chat before, but things have been so rushed lately. I needed to settle in with the workload, and then, the adoption made coming to see you more difficult."

Hermione boldly mentioned the pink elephant in the room. She knew the staff and student body were dying to know some of the details about the adoption, and she knew that Professor McGonagall did not know how to approach the issue. It was, after all, a personal matter and of no direct bearing on the school since it did not in any way affect her scholastic performance. Other than for the confrontation with Ginny in the common-room, which had become public knowledge by the time Hermione had made her way down for lunch, nothing had been said about her change of status. Hermione had waited for questions to be put to her, but surprisingly, no one dared question a Malfoy. Now, she could understand more fully the deference and position that had been granted Draco. No wonder he had been such a snotty nosed brat for so long.

Minerva's eyes widened noticeably at Hermione's bringing up the topic that was foremost on everyone's minds. There had been much speculation as to why the adoption had taken place and what it meant for the Gryffindor's future place in society. Minerva, despite knowing nothing of the circumstances of the adoption, had defended Hermione by saying that the Malfoys were to be commended for doing their best to fill in the gap caused by the loss of Hermione's own parents.

None of the staff had been able to miss the closeness that had sprung up over the summer between Hermione, Luna and Astoria or the fact that Hermione seemed to have few friends within Gryffindor Tower. But the Malfoy adoption had stunned everyone. Hermione's friendship with the well-heeled Slytherins had in itself been a surprise, but the adoption had taken everyone completely out of the blue.

Hermione noted Professor McGonagall's surprise at her bringing up the adoption and couldn't resist a grin. Wanting to explain the adoption in terms that would make the most sense to her Head of House, she said, "I know my adoption must have been a surprise. It was a surprise for me as well when Lucius and Narcissa said they wanted me to be a part of their family. But I think they wanted to do what they could to compensate for the loss of my own parents. I think it's their way of making restitution for their years as Death Eaters. Nothing shows their commitment more to moving beyond pureblood rhetoric than to take a Muggle-born into their home and into their family."

Minerva nodded her head slowly. She had, of course, assumed that this was much the case, but hearing Hermione put her thoughts into words allowed the older witch to ease her concern. "As long as you are happy, lass, with the way things are going forward, I have no issue with your new family."

Hermione smiled. "Of all the things that have happened since the end of the war, this is one of the nicest. Lucius, Cissy and Draco are being wonderful. I know you don't know them, and they do come across as cold, arrogant people to those who don't know them well, but to me, now that I've gone beyond the tough, icy Slytherin exterior, they are everything that I could have ever wanted in a family. Draco has changed so much since the war, I can't believe sometimes that he is the same person who made my life such a trial while we were both at Hogwarts. And Lucius and Cissy, they are so warm, so caring. They'll always be Slytherins, but they mean well. They want the best for me. I may not always agree to the way they get things done, but underneath their conniving, opportunistic, manoeuvring behaviour are hearts of pure gold."

Minerva laughed. She had worried that Hermione had not known what she was getting into. But hearing her young cub articulate the Malfoy traits while speaking of their more hidden qualities did much to appease her sense of concern. "Then I am pleased," said the Transfiguration professor simply. "But if you ever need anything, lass, don't hesitate to ask."

Hermione's eyes misted in gratitude. "Thank you, Professor," she said softly. "I won't forget."

Minerva too felt moisture begin to gather in her eyes. Blinking rapidly to prevent them spilling over, for she did not want their tea to turn into a crying session, she changed the topic briskly. "Well, lass, I think I've been Professor McGonagall for long enough. When we are not in class, you may call me Minerva. We've been through enough to dispense with the formalities."

Hermione smiled. Trying out her professor's name, she said, "Thank you, Minerva." Then, Hermione giggled. It had taken her ages to get used to calling Severus by his first name too. "It might take me a while, Minerva," said Hermione still smiling.

The older witch smiled too. It did her heart glad to see Hermione acting like a teenager for once in her presence. Minerva had long observed the serious manner in which Hermione approached life. She had always been an adult, even from her very first days in Hogwarts.

After finishing their tea, the two women relaxed into cosy comfort. Into the restful silence, Hermione finally brought up the topic that had led her to her Head of House's office.

"Minerva," she said cautiously, "I've been thinking. Are we doing anything special to celebrate Halloween this weekend? I know we always have a feast each year for the students and the faculty, but don't you think it would be good if we also invited some of our alumni this time around? It would be a simple and effective way to show the world how Hogwarts has united and maybe also demonstrate the fact that the castle's been completely rebuilt."

Minerva's eyes widened thoughtfully at Hermione's suggestion. She had been exposed to Dumbledore's manipulations for long enough to realise that the proposition for a Halloween Feast had more, unvoiced reasons too. Pouring Hermione another cup of tea and pushing a plate of shortbread towards her favourite student, Minerva nodded. "Well, yes, I must agree. We, I mean the staff, did think we should do something special to celebrate the opening of the school, but we had thought to wait until Yule, and have a ball like the one we held during the Triwizard Tournament. But a Halloween Feast, that sounds like a good idea too. And it would not, of course, interfere with the plans already being made for a possible Yule Ball."

Hermione smiled and tried to appear interested at the prospect of a Yule Ball. "That sounds nice," she said at last.

"What made you think of a Halloween Feast?" probed Minerva curiously.

"Well," said Hermione hesitantly, wondering how much to actually tell her Head of House, "you know that I've been investigating the enchantments of the castle for my final year project with Professor Flitwick?"

"Yes," said Minerva, her mouth pursed in disapproval. "I had always thought you would attempt Animagus Transfiguration as your final year project, myself."

Hermione realised that her chosen topic had displeased her mentor. She had not given it that much thought. Moving quickly to placate her teacher, she said, "I do want to learn to become an Animagus, but, well, I thought it could be more of a private project. This, well, this I can only learn while I'm at Hogwarts. Animagus training can be done over the summer once I finish my NEWTs or something."

"Hmm...", said Minerva. She did not seem satisfied.

Hermione laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood. "I could always take on another project, Professor. You know me and my love for extra projects. If you have time, that is?"

Minerva seemed to be suitably mollified. "Well, if you really want to, I could give you a reading list, and we could arrange to meet once a week every Thursday afternoon. You know I have no teaching on Thursdays."

"Brilliant," said Hermione with a genuine grin. She couldn't wait to get started.

Hermione's clear enthusiasm finally melted all reservations from Minerva's mind. "So a feast, hmm... It does sound like a good idea. Now tell me why you thought of it, and please, Hermione, the truth. I may not be Dumbledore, but I've spent enough time with the wily old fox to know when there's more to something than meets the eye."

Hermione blushed. She had thought of withholding information, but she realised that if she was seriously going to take on Severus that she would need allies. "Well," said Hermione cautiously, "I've been learning how to listen to the castle. You know it's sentient, right?"

At Minerva's raised eyebrows, Hermione pushed onwards. "Well, one of the things I've heard by listening to the castle is the state of Headmaster Snape's heart. You know we had grown close over the summer. We were on the verge of becoming a proper couple when I decided to return to complete my final year instead of sitting for my NEWTs with Draco. Since I've returned, he's insisted that we remain only friends. He doesn't want my being with him to distract me from my scholastic achievements. I disagreed, and we fought over it on my birthday. He's not spoken to me since."

Minerva had involuntarily leaned forward as Hermione had begun to speak of Severus' heart and their tentative steps towards a relationship. When Hermione came to a stop, the older witch raised her wand and stoked the fire. She was deep in thought. Finally, with a sigh, she said, "Hermione, lass, I may be old, but I haven't forgotten the first flush of love and passion. If Severus is doing his best to halt the progression of your relationship, it must mean that it has already gone too far in his mind. He is the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and despite the clearing of his name, there is still, and will always be, a dark cloud of suspicion hanging over him. There was plenty of talk in the media about the two of you after the Order of Merlin Award Ceremony. If he is now being careful, he has good reason to be. It is not just your reputation or his that is at stake, but also that of Hogwarts."

Hermione nodded her head. "I know. At first, it was anger that made me want to pursue a sexual relationship with him because I thought his rejection of me was because he found me lacking. Then, I thought it was because he didn't want to commit to a serious relationship that would be required if we were to continue within the walls of Hogwarts. But I've had enough time to think, and I do realise that Severus and his reasons are never simple. He's thinking of my new family name, of possibly performing High Magic when we come together, of Hogwarts, of our reputations, and of a million other things that I'm sure I've not even thought of yet."

Minerva sighed. "All of that and more, lass. No one but Severus could find so many reasons both right and wrong to reject his emotions. He's been alone for so long. I think a large part of that is because he is very aware that being in a relationship makes not only him, but also his partner vulnerable. Lily's death hurt him. He had never seen up close how vulnerable love made someone. She died for Harry, but so did James, who gladly died for both his wife and child. I think in a deep part of him, it was then that he understood what love meant, and it possibly frightened him. He's never really known love. I've known him my whole life, and much to my shame, I've not been a good friend to him. I did nothing to defend him from the Marauders; I never stood up for him, even when he joined the Order. I could have silenced Alastor and Sirius when they spoke up to always call him the traitor. But I did nothing."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I understand. I think that's why Severus was so willing to do everything in his power to protect Draco. He finally must have understood what Lily felt when she put her life on the line for Harry."

Minerva sighed. "There's no good that can come of bringing all of this up, lass. What is it that you want to achieve from the Halloween Feast?"

Hermione blushed. The time for lies was truly over. "I want Lucius and Cissy to come for the Feast. I think it will help Severus if he was forced to see them. He's not spoken to them since my birthday, not really. He's avoiding everyone and has buried himself with work. His soul is in agony. The castle is almost as worried as I am. We must do all that we can to reach him. If he can't forgive me for doubting his honour and his word, I can understand that, but I can't bear the thought that Severus, who was finally embracing life after the war, has gone back into his shell. It's not good for him. It's destroying his soul. Someone must reach him, make him see sense. I think the Malfoys might be able to, since they know how I feel already."

Minerva frowned thoughtfully. "We need Slytherin cunning. If I bring up the idea of a feast to Severus, he will disagree immediately. But if I first speak to Pomona and Filius and then put it to Severus, he will find it harder to refuse. I shall do so after dinner tonight. I'll insist that we invite members of the Order and other important members of the *wizarding world*, including the Malfoys, for the Feast. I'll have Kingsley's secretary send out invitations first thing tomorrow. It is a bit short notice, since Halloween is on Sunday, but I doubt any of the alumni would miss a Hogwarts Feast if they can help it. Do you mind me involving Kingsley? If you are going to pursue Severus, you will need all the help you can get."

Hermione blushed. Kingsley would surely give her one of his all-knowing looks once Minerva told him what was going on. But she realised that they, Minerva and Kingsley, had already supported Severus and herself after Ron's boorish behaviour at the Victory Ball. She knew she could rely on them to help, if not to get her together with Severus, at least to pull him out of the deep hole he had disappeared into. "Thank you, Minerva," she said earnestly. "I think it is better that Kingsley knows. I think some of my need to have Severus acknowledge and, indeed, advance our relationship into the sexual may have been a result of my own maturing, perhaps even darkened magic. The old Hermione would have understood the need for caution and would have tried harder to comprehend Severus' reticence. The present me has not been acting rationally. It took Severus halting all ties between us for me to finally be able to see reason. I hurt him myself with my refusal to understand that he was acting with our best interests at heart. I should have trusted him more. He understands wizarding society better than I do."

Minerva sighed. But she felt for her cub. Had she not been at fault herself for her lack of trust of the dark man? "What's done is done. But it is a step in the right direction that you have come to understand what's going on with your own magic. Knowledge is power, nowhere more so than when faced with the Dark Arts."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Halloween Feast

Halloween is a time of change, a time to be reborn. Hermione is not the only one to benefit from the Feast at Hogwarts.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going, but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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The Great Hall on the night of the Halloween Feast had been decorated with magnificent splendour. Magical lanterns in the shape of pumpkins carved in intricate designs were placed in the middle of all the tables. Iridescent mist seemed to cling to the upper part of the hall while the ceiling resembled the starry sky outside. The students were awed to see the glittering invitees, and Ginny preened to be seen publicly among her school mates with the Saviour of the Wizarding World. The youngest Weasley had done her best to dress as provocatively as was possible for a school feast and did not hesitate to drape herself all over Harry. She did so while periodically shooting obviously venomous glances at Hermione, who had chosen to sit at the Slytherin table with Draco, Astoria and the older Malfoys.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, had finally come to a decision. He had stayed away from Hogwarts deliberately, avoiding as much as possible being alone with Ginny. He knew that his avoidance of Hogsmeade and Hogwarts had hurt Hermione, but he knew that she would manage with the company of Luna and Astoria. Meanwhile, the Saviour of the Wizarding World had been using his time at Auror Training to think. He realised that as an Auror, he would never achieve the glamour and fame that were needed to satisfy Ginny in the long term. For the moment, he was lauded because he was the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice. Soon, however, other stars would immerge, and when Harry did nothing but continue to work as an Auror, living the life he desired with a quiet family far away from the glare of the media and the present adoration he enjoyed, Ginny's affection would soon enough turn into nagging revulsion. He could see that the life he wanted was very different from the one she envisioned them living. He wanted peace and quiet. She wanted fame, fortune and the status of a trendsetting glitterati. With that in mind, Harry allowed Ginny to flaunt her affair with him for the final time. He was going to take her for a walk after the Feast and finally bring their relationship to a close. He didn't know who would come into his life next, but he knew he wanted someone who saw him for who he was, not for what he had done. Hermione saw beyond the name of Harry Potter into his inner soul. He hoped that he would find the same honesty of feeling in the woman who would eventually share his life.

The three Malfoys had known in advance that Hermione wanted them to speak with Severus. The new family had put their heads together and had decided that if given the opportunity, Lucius would bring up the topic of a mutually beneficial marriage contract between Severus and Hermione. It went against everything Hermione had been brought up to believe in, indeed, it seemed archaic to have her father-figure approach the man she loved on her behalf, but Cissy had rightly pointed out that it would suit Severus' more traditional nature. This way, there could be no doubt as to the intentions of the couple. Moreover, it was more than proper given the Malfoy name that Lucius as the head of his family desired a joining with Severus. They shared strong ties of friendship, and it would be perfectly acceptable in the context of pureblood customs.

Draco, on the other hand, wanted nothing more than to slip into a quiet alcove with Astoria. He could not believe that he had failed to notice her while at school. He had always been blinded by Pansy's more flaunted charms. He had not spent quality time alone with his fiancée since the start of term. Hogsmeade was no place for a proper courtship.

Once dinner was concluded, the junior students retired for the evening. Only the seventh-year students had been permitted to remain for the dancing and socialising that was to follow. Thus, as soon as the tables were cleared, Astoria and Draco slipped quietly away into the rose garden, the usual haunt of lovers. Harry, too, was seen leading Ginny away into the privacy of the grounds. Hermione wondered at the grim expression on Harry's face as she watched him lead Ginny away.

The Weasleys had, for the most part, pretended they hadn't seen her, although Bill, Percy and Arthur made it a point after the feast to walk across the Great Hall to the Slytherin table to greet the Malfoys and speak to Hermione. Molly's face darkened ominously as she watched her husband and two sons cross over to what she considered the evil side, though Hermione was delighted. She had always been fond of Percy. For all his pompous airs and attitudes, he had been one of the few people who had helped her when she had first arrived at Hogwarts. He had lent a hand with tips on how to get around the library during the first few weeks at school before she had been befriended by Harry and Ron. He had even, on more than one occasion, shown her how to understand the very convoluted filing system of the library catalogues. Bill, too, had been a kind and interesting presence during her growing years, as had, of course, Mr. Weasley.

Ginny had beamed when Harry had quietly suggested a walk after dinner. She had missed him, and she knew her friends, especially Romilda, were watching the two of them with covetous attention. Thus, she winked at her friend before allowing Harry to lead her outside. Ginny knew Romilda would soon have informed all of the remaining seventh-years of their acquaintance that Ginny had disappeared on the arm of Harry. There could be no doubt in anyone's mind what two teenagers were doing in the dark.

However, Ginny's confusion was apparent when Harry did not lead her into the rose garden. Instead, he seemed on a mission to walk towards the even more secluded greenhouses. Once there, he did not pull her into his arms, even though she did her best to twine herself around him. Instead, he firmly held her arms and said, "Ginny, please, sit down. I need to speak to you seriously."

Ginny Weasley's heart nearly stopped beating. Now sure that her boyfriend was about to propose, she sat down with a demure, if practiced, smile and awaited her proposal.

Harry was no fool. He realised what Ginny expected of him. But he forced himself to remain true to his plan. "Ginny," he said as gently as he could, "tell me truthfully, what do you see as our life being if we were to marry?"

This was not how Ginny expected her proposal to go, but she had given enough and more thought to the life she wanted. Thinking that Harry was trying to sound her out, she rushed immediately into her narration. "I see us in a large house, possibly Grimmauld Place, but hopefully something far grander, enjoying being part of society. I want to play Quidditch professionally or model, or both really. I've been told I look really good in and out of clothes, and I think I'd make an excellent model. I know mum would not really approve, but she would come around if I was to become really famous. And as your wife, every classy magazine will be gagging to have me on their front page. I see us being invited to the best and biggest parties, of having a really good time."

Harry nodded. He had been distracted by the thought of Ginny nude, but he knew a diversionary tactic when it was thrown at him. Holding on to his will with determination, he did not move away from his plan. He knew that Ginny had always wanted to be famous. These dreams were not new. She had always been ambitious and had always wanted to play professional Quidditch. The modelling was something new, but Harry realised that her few moments of fame following the recent media hype had given her a taste for what she wanted. "Ginny, love," said Harry softly. "Can I tell you what I want out of life?"

Ginny beamed at him and nodded. *Here it comes, she thought happily. Finally, I will be able to say I'm to be the future Mrs. Harry Potter.*

"Ginny, I see myself as finishing Auror Training and becoming an Auror. I see myself as living a quiet life, with my wife and children, far from the eyes of the media. I don't want a big, fancy house. I want a loving home. I don't really want my wife to work, and if she does decide to work, I want her to do something that is meaningful. I don't want her to be focused on fame and fortune. I want peace and quiet. I hate being photographed or being forced to go out and talk to people who don't really know or care who I am inside."

Ginny gaped at Harry. She could not understand what he was on about. "But Harry. You're famous. You can party with anyone you want. Even the Malfoys seem to like you. I know I can't stand them myself, but they know everyone in society, and well...." Ginny's voiced trailed off as she realised what was happening.

Harry knelt down before her and took her hands. Anyone coming upon them would have assumed that he was proposing. "Ginny, I do love you. But you are not the woman I want as my wife. The life you desire and the life I desire are very different. I can't be the man you want me to be. I will always love you as the younger sister I never had. But I don't think we should marry. I'm not looking for the best parties or to be part of the right set of people. I want a quiet life. My whole life since the day I entered the wizarding world has been lived under the beady eye of the media. Now I just want to be an Auror."

"What are you saying?" screeched Ginny in outrage, letting go of his hands abruptly. "How can you throw this chance away? You could do anything you wanted; you could even be Minister if you wanted. Why are you settling for being a bloody Auror? They don't even get paid that much."

"I know," said Harry as gently as he could. "Ginny, I'm saying that I no longer want to be your boyfriend. I know you don't understand what I'm saying right now, but it is for the best. I hope that you can forgive me and continue to be my friend, if not now, then once your anger at my behaviour has subsided. But, Ginny...." He reached for her hands again, but she pushed him aside to stand up.

"You're a fool, Harry Potter," screamed Ginny. "You've got the whole world eating out of your hands, and you want to be an Auror and live in peace and quiet."

"Yes," said Harry, decisively. "I want peace and quiet. Not glory. Not fame. Not media attention." He sighed. "Listen, Ginny. I don't know if I'll always be an Auror, but I do know that I want to finish Auror training. Then, we'll see. I might just retire and live in some tiny village somewhere and make soup. The Order of Merlin pension is enough to ensure that I never have to work if I live frugally. It's all I want."

Ginny nodded absentmindedly. She could not understand how all of her dreams and plans were crumbling around her. She had been convinced that Harry would never leave her. Playing her last card, she said, "You know, Harry, my family has been expecting you to propose for months now. If we break up, you'll never be invited to the Burrow again. You'll be cast out like that Slytherin whore, Hermione."

Harry felt his darkness rise as Ginny insulted Hermione, but he clamped down on his emotions brutally. He had worked hard to ensure that he said all he had wanted to. He had expected this from Ginny. "I know," he said simply. "I don't expect your mother to forgive me for disappointing your expectations. But one day, Ginny, you'll thank me for this. We want different things from life, and if we did marry, we would grow to hate each other with a vengeance."

"Well, I hate you now," said Ginny viciously. "You're a fool and a coward, Harry Potter."

"Ginny," said Harry trying to placate the now quivering red-head.

"Don't Ginny me, you worm," Ginny screeched. "We are over, are we? Well then, fuck you, Harry Potter. Fuck you!"

Ginny stormed off. She was furious. How dare the spineless wonder break up with her! She was beautiful, glorious and desirable. She could have any man she wanted, and she had almost thrown herself away on a foolish idiot who wanted to make soup while buried in a nondescript village. Bloody Hell!

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Meanwhile, in the Great Hall, Hermione and the two older Malfoys could be found in discussion with three Weasley males. Bill and Percy hugged Hermione, while Arthur shook Lucius' hand and then bravely kissed Narcissa on her cheek. The two older Malfoys were obviously discomforted by the greeting, but Arthur seemed well in control of the meeting.

"Cousin Cissy," said Arthur addressing Narcissa courteously. "It has been too long since we have spoken in a manner befitting our complicated family connections. Now that Hermione has joined your family, my sons and I would officially like to ask your forgiveness for the distance and breach in our relationship."

Narcissa Malfoy was obviously shocked. In truth, it had been her family that had cut all contact with the Weasleys for their support of Mudbloods. Her aunt had even removed the Weasley name from the Black family tree. The scorch mark had been clearly visible on the tapestry that had hung in Grimmauld Place. "Arthur," said Narcissa equally grave. "The breach and distance have been of our making, not yours. It is I and my husband who must beg your forgiveness for our past behaviour. I thank you for your graciousness in extending your hand in friendship."

"Indeed," added Lucius frigidly. Then, with a sigh of defeat, he visibly relaxed the icy demeanour Hermione had come to note he wore when confronted by those not of his inner circle. "Cissy is right. The coldness that has for so long been a part of our association has been partly of our own doing. We are grateful that you are willing to let bygones be bygones."

Arthur nodded. Then, gesturing to Bill and Percy who were standing tall beside him, he said formally, "These are my sons, William and Percival. Bill, Percy, this is your cousin Narcissa and her husband Lucius."

Bill smiled charmingly and shook Lucius' hand. Then, with a saucy wink at Hermione, he kissed Narcissa three times on her cheeks in the French manner enthusiastically.

Cissy blushed at Bill's antics, but the mood had been lightened. Percy followed his brother with a much more formal handshake and bow.

Once the formal introductions had been made, Arthur turned his smile on Hermione. "My dear," he said warmly. "I'm so pleased to have you join our family. The connection with Narcissa is not at the first glance a very close one, but there are a number of ways in which our bloodlines interconnect, so in truth, we are closer than most distant cousins."

Hermione beamed. She had not really given much thought to the fact that almost all purebloods were connected in a myriad of ways. She realised suddenly that she was now related to a large number of people. "I hadn't really thought of that," said Hermione truthfully. "But I'm glad to be your cousin. My mother was an only child of only children, and my dad's family have always been distant. I'm going to enjoy having more family."

Bill laughed. "Well, Mione, I don't know how much you're going to enjoy having George and Ronnikins as cousins, but Perce and I will take care of you. Fleur too. She is the one who insisted I speak to dad about mending the breach. She would have been here today, but she's not feeling too good at the moment. Her pregnancy is difficult, and she seems to spend most of her time being sick or feeling horrid."

Hermione smiled. Then, impulsively, she threw her arms around Bill and Percy. The Weasleys laughed at her exuberance, and the Malfoys chuckled.

Ronald, Molly and George watched the three older Weasley men interacting with the Malfoys with various reactions. Ron and Molly were furious at the publicly done reunion, but George had a thoughtful frown on his face. Then, when he realised that his mother and younger brother were not going to join his father, Bill and Percy in mending the family connections, he slowly began to cross the floor.

Ron gasped in shocked anger. "Traitor," he hissed at his brother. "Have you forgotten that those bastards are responsible for the death of Fred? How can you?"

George paused and turned to look at his brother. "Voldemort was responsible for Fred's death. Thicknesse cast the curse that killed him. The Malfoys were guilty of many things, I agree. I have not and will not forget. But they are making an active effort to change their behaviour. If we refuse to accept their honest or even politically motivated change of heart, we condemn them once more to the fringes from where they have no option but to be our enemies. If we are willing to forgive, to listen, we are more likely to avoid another Voldemort making use of our weaknesses against us."

"Are you mad?" asked Ron. It was obvious that he had not understood anything that George had said.

Molly, too, looked at her son with astonishment. She could not grasp what George was saying. "So you are going to grovel before the Malfoys?" she screeched. "They killed my brothers. They have blood on their hands. You go speak to them and you are no son of mine."

"Then so be it," said George with quiet conviction. "But mum, I think you should realise that if you continue to act like this, you will lose not just me, but also Bill, Fleur,

Percy and Dad. Do you really want your jealousy, anger and hatred to result in the further breaking up of your family?"

Molly gasped. She could not think. Her mind and judgement were clouded by a darkness so dense she could not see beyond it. All she could do was stand red-faced and silent as George, with one final look, joined his father and two brothers on the other side of the Hall.

Arthur's eyes widened when he saw George approaching them. But before he could speak, George said jovially, "Not fair, dad. You take Bill and Percy to speak to the two prettiest ladies in the Hall and leave me behind. I really must protest."

Cissy giggled girlishly. She was charmed by the Weasleys' sense of humour. Hermione, too, grinned and gladly submitted to the warm hug bestowed upon her by George. It did seem as though the reunion had been a success. As the four Weasleys and the three Malfoys continued to exchange pleasantries, it was clear to all present that the families had officially buried their deep mistrust and enmity.

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Minerva watched the Weasleys crossing over to the Slytherin table with tense curiosity. She knew that Arthur was a sensible man, as were Bill and Percy, but she worried as to Molly and the younger Weasleys' reactions. A quick glance helped assure her that Ginny, the most volatile in her opinion, was not in the Hall. Minerva knew enough of her Gryffindors to know that Ron and Molly were not brave enough to confront the Malfoys on their own. She watched, extraordinarily pleased, as George, too, eventually joined the Slytherin table. This was, in her mind, a very positive step. It was imperative that old hurts were forgiven and put to rest.

Severus, too, had observed the reunion of the Malfoys and Weasleys from his place at the Head Table. As George joined the group, he turned curiously to look at Minerva, who had sighed audibly.

Minerva turned to look at Severus when she felt his eyes upon her. "Thank the Goddess," she said with feeling. "It is nice to see that some people have at least come to their senses."

Severus nodded. He had not expected such a public show of unity. Kingsley and Andromeda were one thing, but the Weasleys, they were hot-heads and had a much longer and deeper cause for animosity. Their going over was definitely a victory for the Malfoys, but also, Severus realised, as he observed the animated conversation, a victory for the Weasleys and wizarding Britain as a whole.

As Severus continued to gaze at the Malfoys and Weasleys, his eyes met Lucius' keen stare. Unable to ignore his old friend, he nodded his head in acknowledgement. He was surprised, though, when Lucius did not merely return his greeting but rather left the people he was with and made his way to the Head Table.

Bowing courteously to Minerva, he kissed her hand graciously. Then, turning to Severus, he asked, "Fancy a walk in the fresh air?"

Severus glared suspiciously at Lucius. He wanted very much to ignore his friend and refuse. But he realised that Lucius wanted a word in private. With a growl, he pushed back his chair. "If we must."

Minerva chuckled at Severus' behaviour and laughed when she caught Lucius' eye. A smirk and wink from the Malfoy patriarch was more than she had expected, but it made her realise that Hermione had indeed been right when she had spoken of the Malfoys' warmth and love. Minerva realised that Hermione had revealed to her new parents her involvement with Kingsley in the furthering of their plan.

Lucius followed Severus, who was setting a brisk pace, as he made his way with purpose into the rose garden. Severus seemed to be in a foul mood, and he glared at students and deducted ridiculous amounts of house points as he finally reached the inner courtyard. It was thankfully deserted. Taking a seat on the magically heated bench, Severus frowned at Lucius. "What is so important that you had to bring me out here for a private meeting?"

Severus was in no mood for polite conversation. Indeed, he had not been in the mood for any type of conversation since the nineteenth of September. His heart still ached for Hermione, and he cursed himself for his weakness. He wanted her still. He knew that if he allowed himself to let her apologise, he would ravish her with no care for the consequences of his actions.

Lucius sat down beside Severus with studied calm. Opening his robe jacket, he pulled out his cigar case and offered his friend one. Severus was in no mood for the civilities and brushed Lucius' offer aside. Lucius sighed softly, but did not allow himself to be rushed. He knew how to play the game. He would draw this out and allow Severus to work himself out of his snit. Lighting a cigar, he took a long drag before turning to look at Severus. "You look like shit. Everything that you achieved over the summer seems to have gone down the drain. What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

Severus groaned. "Must you play the urbane gentleman, Lucius? I'm really not in the mood for your games." Then, with a sigh, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and said, "I've been working."

"So I hear. Hermione is most upset that you don't even have time to meet her for a cup of tea. I thought you were friends?" Lucius waited patiently after his question. He wanted to see how Severus would react.

As expected, Severus frowned at the mention of Hermione's name. "She is too young to be my friend. It is better that we don't meet," he said finally.

"What utter nonsense," said Lucius in amusement. Deliberately he pulled a drag on his cigar and leisurely blew out a complicated smoke ring. Then, looking at Severus, who looked furious at Lucius' delaying tactics, remarked casually, "I thought you were well on the way to bedding her, man, and now you say you're too old to be her friend. Have you lost your mind? A young, delectable female is never too young for a grown man."

"You are one to talk," said Severus suspiciously. Then, glaring at Lucius, he asked, "Shouldn't you be a bit more careful about your daughter's virtue? You know what we did under the auspices of the Dark Lord, Lucius. How can you, if you really care for the girl, want her to have anything to do with me?"

Lucius looked appraisingly at Severus. "It is because of our long history and association that I encourage the match, Severus. You are the brother I never had. Despite our shaky beginnings, we have grown over the years to become comrades in arms, allies, even dare I say it, friends. I would like you to be a part of my family. If I had had a sister, I would have done my best to throw her your way. Now that I have a daughter, who is happily head over heels in love with you, I see no reason to not push for a formal match. I think we should draw up a formal betrothal contract. Hermione is young. A long engagement such as the one I have arranged for Draco should suit the two of you until she is done with school. Then, as with Astoria, a marriage can be arranged at your convenience."

Severus was visibly floored. He had not expected Lucius to suggest a betrothal contract in keeping with the most traditional of pureblood customs. This was wholly beyond his wildest dreams. Doing his best to keep track of what was going on, he finally asked, "You want me to marry your daughter?"

"Yes," said Lucius simply. "She loves you. Cissy adores you. I think it is high time you became a part of the Malfoys."

Severus did not know how to respond. He could not deny his desire for Hermione. A formal betrothal would ensure all proper procedure was followed, including, for women, an examination to confirm their virtue. It was the old way. Astoria had been checked by a medi-witch as a part of her contract. It was seen to add to a woman's worth, for it showed that she had a strong control over her magic and her body. Moreover, a formal betrothal contract would ensure that Hermione's chastity was publicly demonstrated. It would remove all taint, all hint of scandal, from her if she was worthy of a formal contract. But even as these thoughts whirled in his mind, he acknowledged that he was shying away from thinking of Lucius' words that spoke of Hermione's love for him. She had never said the words to him herself, so it could be that Lucius was mistaken. But if he wasn't, oh, Merlin, thought Severus in agitation, it would mean the very great possibility of the breaking of the curse. He realised that he could not refuse Lucius' offer. Not only because he truly did not want to, but because he could not throw away his friendship with the Malfoys. He was not a fool. Rejecting the Malfoys' daughter would most certainly cause a breach in their friendship.

Lucius watched the emotions play across over Severus' face. It made the Malfoy patriarch realise how much trust his old friend instinctively now placed upon him. The old Severus from the war years would never have allowed himself to be so unguarded, so vulnerable.

Finally, it looked as though Severus had come to a decision. He visibly pulled himself together and met Lucius' gaze. "I care for Hermione. I have deep affection for you and your family. I would be honoured to join my name to that of your daughter's. I accept. I will prepare an account of my finances and holdings for your perusal."

Lucius stood up. He stubbed out the end of his cigar and vanished it with a swish of his wand. Looking directly at Severus, he said, "I am pleased, Severus, more than I can say. I know Hermione will be ecstatic. Please do not avoid her now. Once the contract is signed, there is no reason for your two to remain estranged."

Severus nodded. He did not know what to say. But inside, his heart sang with unfettered joy. He was going to marry his beautiful Hermione. He realised that it would not be easy to apologise for his recent distance. But she had been his student for long enough to know what his personality was like. If his temper was going to push her away, it would have done so by now. Severus was smart enough to realise that Hermione had asked Lucius to make the offer. This was not something that had been done without the Gryffindor's approval. Indeed, the very manner of its handling smacked of Gryffindor forthrightness. With a smirk, Severus got to his feet. As he walked beside Lucius towards the castle, he remarked sardonically, "I see that Hermione has already been successful in turning you into a Gryffindor. That was most unlike your usual negotiations, Lucius."

Lucius laughed. It pleased him to see the black cloud that had hung around Severus lift enough for the Slytherin to partake of teasing. His shark's grin firmly in place, Lucius said mockingly, "Ah, Severus. It is yet another great advantage of adopting Hermione. I can now, when necessary, act completely unlike myself and blame it entirely on my daughter. Fellow Slytherins will be appalled and intrigued, Gryffindors will be enchanted and delighted, Ravenclaws will be suspicious and curious while the Hufflepuffs will be filled with the joy of human kindness. It is an entirely win-win situation."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty: Halloween Results

*Chapter 30 of 40*

Severus and Hermione finally have their long overdue talk. Molly, Ginny and Ron come to another wrong conclusion.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going, but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

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Lucius and Severus returned to the Great Hall just as Ginny stormed in through the student entrance. She looked like a Valkyrie on the prowl for a brave soul to take with her back to Valhalla as she marched over to her mother and began speaking furiously. Lucius could not help but motion to the blazing redhead and murmur, "Splendid, don't you think, old chap?"

Severus merely groaned. "I've had more than enough of the bloody Weasley brats to last me a lifetime. I do hope I'm no longer Headmaster when the next batch arrives. The lot of them are nothing more than hot-headed, impetuous and completely lacking in all sense."

Lucius threw back his head and laughed. "You're so droll, Severus. Arthur isn't all that bad, really. Utterly mollycoddled by Molly, of course," here, Lucius smirked at his own clever pun before continuing, "and his three sons Bill, Percy and George didn't seem too bad when they came over to mend the family breach."

Severus huffed, "I suppose. Bill was never that much of a bother, and Percy, though a pompous arse, wasn't an annoyance to teach. Quite a good student actually. And I suppose George, without the influence of his much more mischievous twin, is probably maturing somewhat. But that youngest brat, she is the worst of the lot. I've never seen such a vindictive shrew, not even Bella was that bad at her age."

Lucius shuddered at the mention of Bella. Then, trying to recapture his earlier sense of joviality, he murmured sardonically, "Still, old chap, I bet she'll be a pleasure to tame, eh? All of that fire and passion, just waiting for a strong hand."

Severus laughed. He knew what his old friend was up to. Doing his best to not get wound up but to play along to the teasing, he said, "Yes, well, old chap, you're an old married man, and I'm soon to be. I'm thankful that Draco is safely tied to Astoria. Let some other brave fool take on the spitfire."

Lucius chuckled. It pleased him to know that he could soften his friend up with just a few chosen words. Lucius was very observant, and he could see the change that their conversation and agreement had wrought on the countenance of his dark companion. Before, Severus had looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders; now, he looked years younger almost returned to his summertime conviviality, in fact.

Leading Severus to Narcissa, he took his wife's hand in his. "I have wonderful news, my dear, Severus has stated his agreement to the betrothal contract with our beloved Hermione."

"Oh, Severus!" exclaimed Narcissa, standing up on tip toe to kiss his cheek fondly. "Welcome to the family."

Severus' colour rose visibly. He was not one prone to blushing, so seeing the heightened colour in his cheeks was a rarity. "Thank you, Cissy." Then, striving for levity, he murmured, "Does that mean I have to start calling you both mum and dad?"

Lucius chuckled darkly and Cissy giggled. Hermione though did nothing but blush furiously. She had encouraged and pushed for this outcome, but now that it had been arranged, she felt suddenly tongue tied. By allowing her new father to initiate a betrothal contract, she had clearly indicated her feelings for Severus and her commitment to wanting a permanent relationship with him. She did not know how he really felt at her cunning manipulation. She had gone through Lucius and had avoided forcing him into a confrontation. She hoped against hope that her Slytherin tactic did not backfire against her.

Severus was achingly aware of Hermione. He had done everything in his power to avoid being in her presence. He had thwarted her every attempt at apology and had watched as she had slowly become more and more inward-looking as their estrangement lengthened. He had also, he could admit it to himself, gratefully noted that she

had not turned to any other boy in her disappointment. Indeed, he would, if pressed, almost be able to swear that she had regretted her harsh words almost as soon as she had said them out loud. Undeniably, when not in a state of abject misery, he could even rationalise that her illogical behaviour was the result of either the Dark Veela curse, her own inherent darkness that had emerged following the Battle or even some kind of lingering effect of his Veela allure. It was laughable given his reputation for sheer unpleasantness and unpalatability, but the very strength of people's dislike for him was a result of the force of his Veela taint. If he had not been a Dark Veela, he would most probably have had encountered plenty of cases of sensible people acting like village idiots in the presence of his Veela magnetism. He may not have been built in the mould of a conventional Veela, but when he had learned of his Veela ancestors, research had shown the physical traits he had inherited. If what Hermione felt was genuine affection for him, then the Dark Veela power would begin to lose its affect on the way she saw him. The Dark Veela curse would be muted, altered and transformed. Thankfully, he had also learned that in the face of true love, not only would the Dark Veela curse be broken, but so would the ordinarily encountered Veela charm. Love seemed to have the ability to render the beloved immune to all Veela manifestations, so that she would never be enthralled by him like others who saw nothing but his outer shell. The others would probably only see his restored Veela magnetism, but she, she would see him for the man, the wizard he truly was.

As Hermione and Severus stood stiffly together, the silence between them grew and stretched. Narcissa and Lucius soon realised that, despite Severus accepting Narcissa's felicitations, he had yet to acknowledge Hermione. Seeing the look on the younger woman's face, Narcissa slipped her arm through Lucius' and said, "Ah, Lucius, I must go and say hello to Andromeda. I've not spoken to her in days." With a knowing raising of her eyebrow at Hermione, the Slytherin drew her husband tactfully away.

Severus frowned at the retreating Malfoy couple. This wasn't the first time that they had deliberately manoeuvred Hermione and himself together. It was disconcerting for the master spy and manipulator to be so effectively handled. Standing alone with Hermione, Severus felt tongue-tied. He knew he had to say something, but he felt extremely discomfited.

Hermione, too, felt the weight of their long silence. But she was ultimately a Gryffindor. Tentatively, she said, "Hello, Severus." It was neutral, noncombative.

Latching on to the general greeting, Severus politely inclined his head and said, "Hello, Hermione."

Silence reigned once more. Hermione was growing impatient. She did not have the Slytherin quality of being able to wait for something to happen. "This is ridiculous," she said finally in a huff. "We've never been unable to talk."

Severus' lips twitched. Hermione was so gloriously predictable. It was one of her most charming traits.

Seeing the slight softening of Severus' expression, Hermione swiftly pushed her advantage. "You were right. I was wrong. I apologise. Can we please be friends again? I've missed you."

Hermione's less than gracious, yet utterly earnest, apology brought a real smirk onto Severus' countenance. His eyes almost twinkling with mirth, he said, "Thank you for your gracious apology. It is always pleasurable to hear that I was right." Then, more seriously, he reached out to take her hand. Kissing her fingers tenderly, he said, "I've missed you too. Beyond reason, beyond anything I can properly express."

"Oh, Severus," murmured Hermione. She knew how much it must have cost the taciturn man to admit to his weakness for her. "I really want to talk to you properly," she said softly. "I want to feel your arms around me, to know really and truly that all is well between us."

Severus' eyes darkened further with passion. "And I want to hold you, Hermione. But you know how things stand. Once the betrothal contract is signed and our relationship is made more formal, we will be allowed greater freedom, but not till then."

Hermione nodded. "I know. I promise to be more rational about things. I don't know what's gotten into me. When I'm with you, all my thought processes seem to turn to mush."

Severus smirked. "I'm glad I'm not the only one suffering a loss of good sense," he said teasingly.

Hermione pouted. Immediately, she observed the further darkening of Severus' eyes. She realised that he was burning with passion for her. This urbane pretence at socialising was as difficult for him as it was for her. Taking strength in the palpable desire emanating from Severus, Hermione murmured softly, "At least you seem to outwardly demonstrate good sense. I've acted like a right fool on more than one occasion."

Severus gently placed her arm within his and indicated that they begin strolling around the room. Standing in one place was driving him to distraction. He needed to move to avoid doing something utterly foolish like picking her up and taking her swiftly to his bed chamber. Once they had begun to weave their way around the gathered guests, he said quietly, "Hermione, I've spent more than twenty years as a spy. If I can't manage to at least outwardly portray a demeanour of sense and reason, then I'd probably have died long ago."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "I know. I'm sorry. I just can't think when I'm with you."

Severus chuckled, which raised the immediate attention of the group of people they were just passing which happened to hold Neville Longbottom and his grandmother. "I can't say that I am honestly unhappy. I like to know that I have some affect on you."

"Beast," said Hermione with a grin. She was over the moon that they seemed to have resumed their friendship. But she wanted to make sure though that he was not displeased with Lucius' proposal. "Severus," she said finally, "I know you'll tell me I'm being silly, but are you really okay with Lucius' initiation of the betrothal contract? I know you'd never have agreed to it if it was something you didn't feel was right, but I don't want you to agree because you feel pressured in any way. It just seemed, once Cissy explained to me what it entailed, that the contract was the best way to make you see that I wanted to be with you in the long-term and that I was serious in my feelings for you. It also seemed like the best way to force you to acknowledge me again, if it was only to have you yell at me."

Severus squeezed her hand that was on his arm. "Silly girl, indeed. Hermione, you know I would never have agreed if it was something I didn't want. It was one of the reasons why I was being so insistent on us not falling into bed. I wanted to do things right. The Snapes may have been working class louts, but my mother came from one of the wizarding world's best families. The Princes have excellent connections. I wanted to honour you with a proper marriage proposal. One that I felt I would eventually deliver once you had done with your education."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione, her eyes moist with tears of joy. "Thank you. I'm so glad you still want me."

"Foolish know-it-all," growled Severus. "Want you, woman? I want you so much that if we weren't in this damned castle, surrounded by these damned people, I'd say to hell with convention, custom and tradition and take you right this very minute."

Hermione turned so that her eyes met his heated gaze. As they looked into each others' eyes, all that needed to be said was said, silently. In that moment, no one and nothing mattered. They pledged their love for each other. The curse was not yet broken, but it was now merely a matter of time.

Somehow, that meeting of the eyes between Severus and herself did more than assure Hermione of their shared affection and passion. It also helped lift the fear she had not even known she had possessed of being truly alone in the world. It was not surprising really when she thought about it. She had always thought that she, Ron and Harry would stay together. But Ron's behaviour immediately after the Battle of Hogwarts really shook Hermione's confidence. She had buried it beneath her quest to clear Severus' name and in trying to come to grips with their altered world. But it had awakened in her an old fear, one that stemmed from being a mostly unwanted child and friendless goody-two-shoes from primary school. When Severus and the Malfoys had extended their support, she had not questioned their motives too closely. She didn't really care at that point what they wanted; she just wanted to belong. Now though, as she gazed into the eyes of the man she had come to love beyond all sense and reason, she realised that she would have to finally grow up. No longer could she just go with the flow. She could not let herself be pushed around and manipulated. Dumbledore had done it for most of her school years by controlling the information she possessed. If she was to prevent the Malfoys from doing the same thing, she would truthfully have to take charge of her own future and destiny. It shocked her how suddenly clarity seemed to dawn upon her with the confirmation that she was loved and wanted for herself alone.



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Ginny was so angry and disappointed with Harry's behaviour that she was shaking. She left him in the rose garden and stormed into the Great Hall. Going straight to her mother, she said furiously, "I don't know how that cow managed it, but she's done something to Harry, and he's broken up with me. It has to be her bloody influence. No one else has the ability to make him think things through, and no one hates me as much as she does. The bloody Slytherin whore."

Molly stared in shock and agony as Ginny finished her tirade. "Harry's broken up with you? Are you sure?"

Ginny was livid. "Of course I'm sure! He says he wants a quiet life. He wants to apparently at some point move to the country and make SOUP for Merlin's sake. I don't know what's going on, mum." Then, looking around the hall, she asked curiously, "Where's dad?"

Molly's face darkened even further. "I don't know what's gotten into people today," she said with a frown. "Your dad had the foolish notion to take Bill and Percy and go apologise to the Malfoys. When George saw them do it, he joined them. Only my dear Ron had the sense to stay with me. Everyone seems hell-bent on sucking up to the Slytherins. It is as if there's some geis in place to make people be nice to the Malfoys."

Ginny's eyes widened. "It wouldn't surprise me if they've cast a dark hex or enchantment. You know what they are like."

Molly, too, seemed stunned at her realisation. "We need to do something, Ginny. If you're father's under it, why Harry could be too. This would explain everything."

Ginny nodded. It would indeed explain what was going on. "Who should we tell? What should we do?" she asked excitedly. She was not known for her clear-sighted skills in planning but for immediate action.

Molly, too, was not by any stretch of the imagination a natural planner. "Minerva," she said at last. "We can't trust Kingsley, we know he's been spending time with them and with Andromeda."

Ginny frowned. She didn't particularly like her Head of House. But she could not deny that Professor McGonagall was an excellent witch. "I'm not sure, mum. I think Professor McGonagall might be tainted too. She's always been partial to the Slytherin whore."

Molly frowned. "I don't think the Malfoys have had the opportunity to speak to Minerva and do something to her. They could have slipped something past your dad at work, and the same could have been done to Percy and Bill. But Minerva's too sharp to have been hexed without her knowing it."

Ginny could not refute this claim. Nodding, she said, "Right, mum. We better go speak to Professor McGonagall."

Molly agreed. She collected Ron, who was locked in Lavender's arms, and walked swiftly up to Minerva, who was still seated behind the Head Table.

Minerva's eyebrows rose as she watched the approach of Molly, Ron and Ginny. Wondering what was going on, she immediately searched for Severus and Filius. She could feel the energy emanating off the three Weasleys. She needed backup. The war had taught her enough to realise not to take on a volatile force alone. Unfortunately, Severus was deep in conversation with Hermione. They seemed lost to the world, so deep was their concentration upon the other. Even as her lips twitched with suppressed joy at seeing them finally speaking to each other, her eyes scanned the room for another source of help. Filius was speaking to Kingsley, and even though Minerva tried valiantly to attract their attention, both seemed too engrossed to notice her subtle beckoning. With a sigh, Minerva tried to gather herself for the approaching storm. Help arrived, however, from an unexpected source.

Pomona Sprout and Poppy Pomfrey had been seated a couple of seats down from Minerva at the end of Head Table. They had been discussing the implications of the Weasley-Malfoy reunion when they heard Minerva's audible sigh. Seeing her steeling herself for the three Weasleys, whose approach was obvious, the two witches quickly realised that something was afoot. It would have been impossible, indeed, to miss the serious looks on the faces of the approaching trio. Not wasting a moment, the two women moved to sit on either side of Minerva.

Minerva started as she noticed the two women taking their places beside her. Turning to look at Pomona, she was stunned to see the Hufflepuff wink at her. A quick glance at Poppy confirmed to Minerva that she had found allies. Her eyes twinkling in gratitude, she allowed herself to relax ever so slightly. She was not alone. Whatever was about to occur would not have to be dealt with alone.

Molly, Ron and Ginny were so focused on their mission that they had not really noticed the looks they were getting as they made their way over to the Head Table. But, as they reached Minerva, they found Poppy and Pomona beside her. Ron and Ginny would perhaps have, if they were alone, desisted in their plans at that point. But Molly only found Minerva being with the two other witches a plus point. No way could she think that Pomona and Poppy would be partial to the Malfoys. Feeling that her mission would be all the more likely to succeed due to the presence of the two witches, Molly immediately spoke. "Minerva, I'm so glad to see you with Poppy and Pomona. Ginny's just made me realise that something strange is going on."

Minerva's face became instantly serious. With a frown, she asked, "Something strange? What have you noticed, Molly?"

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty-One: Manoeuvring

*Chapter 31 of 40*

Molly, Ginny and Ron attempt to convince Minerva of the Malfoys' nefarious plot to take over the wizarding world via the corruption of Harry Potter. Questions are asked, but answers aren't really provided. Ron finally begins to act a little more sensibly.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

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Molly froze. She had not expected to have any difficulty in explaining herself to Minerva, but something made her stop before blurting out her realisation. Frowning, in what seemed like painful concentration, she said, "Ginny thinks that Harry, and possibly Kingsley and Andromeda, too, are under some kind of dark geis. Harry's just broken up with Ginny. He wouldn't have done it if he didn't have good reason."

Minerva nodded. She could easily guess the reasons behind Harry's actions. She'd seen Harry, the confused teenager, emerge from his cocoon to become a young man with deep compassion and understanding. She could not forget how he had taken Dumbledore to task after the Battle of Hogwarts. Never would she be able to erase from her mind the way in which he had defended Severus and fought for what he knew was right. If he had ended his relationship with the youngest Weasley, then it was because he could see clearly that they were ill-suited. However, Minerva did not, by either word or deed, allow her feelings to show. Wanting to understand and handle the situation that she could see before her, she merely waited patiently for Molly to continue.

Ginny, however, did not seem to have any such compulsions. Impatient with her mother's approach, and wanting desperately to make her point heard, she heedlessly jumped right into the conversation. "Harry said he wants to retire to some village and make soup. He doesn't want to take an active role in society. He said that we want different things in life. Even when I reminded him that he wouldn't be welcome at the Burrow if we broke up, he didn't seem to mind. He seemed convinced that he was doing the right thing. That sounds very wrong when up to this point, he's always been more than happy to be in the spotlight. Why else would he have agreed to an interview when he was in school with Rita Skeeter for *The Quibbler*? How could he manage without us? He's always spent every holiday since he started Hogwarts with us. He wouldn't give up his connection with our family if he didn't feel compelled to do so. He must be under some kind of spell. And we all know what or should I say who is likely to have cast a spell to force Harry to do her bidding."

Minerva listened to Ginny's irrational rant with patience. She could see clearly that the young Gryffindor was utterly blind to her ex-boyfriend's obviously clear reasons for his action.

When Minerva did not speak, but continued to wait after Ginny's tirade, Ron spoke. "Ginny's right. But I don't think the geis is only on Harry, Kingsley and Andromeda. I think even 'Mione's affected."

At Ginny's exasperated huff, Ron shook his head. "No, listen will you? 'Mione went to retrieve Snape's body. She went alone, with the Malfoys. Couldn't they have done something to her then? Wouldn't that explain why she and Harry had the whole press conference thing without us?"

Molly seemed to find this believable. Nodding her head in agreement, she said, "Yes, I couldn't believe it when I heard them all on the wireless. Why on earth would they not include Ron and Ginny? They should have been there, together, not alone with Luna. She's a lovely girl, but she's nothing compared to my Ginny."

Minerva frowned. She didn't know how to respond, not because she didn't know how to refute and reject their claims, but because she didn't know how to do it tactfully. She didn't want the trio before her to do something to further tarnish the reputation of the Order of Phoenix. She was more than glad that they had approached her instead of going off half cocked to make some grandiose statement to the press. Inwardly grimacing, she thought sarcastically, *another evil Death Eater scandal is all the Order needs right now.*

Poppy Pomfrey had no such compulsions. The older witch could clearly see the position her friend was in, but she was not part of the Order. She could speak her mind. Not knowing what had gone on with the press conference, the medi-witch instead responded to what she did know. Looking directly at Molly, who the witch realised was the weakest link of the trio, she said, "Do you think that Kingsley, as an Auror and now the acting Minister for Magic, would not be able to see if a geis was placed on him? That there are no routine checks being carried out on important figures following the Death Eaters placing the Imperious on Thicknesse to make sure something of that nature does not occur again?"

Molly hadn't thought of that. Frowning, she asked, "Are there?"

Poppy nodded. "There are. I've been working closely with St. Mungo's to ensure that all figures in positions of authority are regularly and routinely checked to see if they are being controlled by Dark Hexes and Spells."

The wind was taken out of Molly's sails. "Oh," she said stupidly.

Ginny was not so easily defeated. "Maybe Kingsley isn't under it then, but he could be being blackmailed or persuaded by some other means. Why else would he be spending so much time with Andromeda? And why did Andromeda make up with the Malfoys when they've not spoken to each other for years?" It was obvious that to her, something as simple as love could not be the reason.

Pomona Sprout tittered. The sound was utterly incongruous with the serious discussion being held. Everyone's attention turned towards her. "What?" she asked, continuing to laugh. "It's obvious, really. Kingsley's always been sweet on Andromeda. Now that poor Ted's no more, he's taken it upon himself to care for and protect her. I doubt Andromeda is ready for any serious commitment, but she's bringing up Teddy all alone. I'm sure she's more than grateful to have a true friend, one who is and will always be faithful to her, to be a part of her life now."

Ginny continued to frown. All the explanations being given to her seemed too pat. She could not dismiss her conviction that there was something foul at play. She wanted, needed, Hermione to be seen and recognised as an evil, controlling bitch. She needed Lucius Malfoy and his family to be thrown into the pits of hell. She could never forgive them for what they had done to her. Being possessed by Tom Riddle had changed her life.

Poppy nodded. "Indeed. And of course, now that You-Know-Who's gone, why should Narcissa and Andromeda not do their best to rebuild their relationship? Andromeda has no other family besides Teddy. She will make use of all the family she has to make sure that he does not miss out on the love a big family can provide. The same is true for Narcissa. She's alone now that Bella is gone. Other than for Andromeda, there are no other Blacks left." Wanting to make sure the Weasley trio understood, the matron gentled her tone. "You are all so fortunate to have family around you. But they've lost everyone. Is it, therefore, such a surprise if they are willing to forgive and cling to the family they have left? Blood is thicker than water."

Molly could see the sense of the arguments being presented to her. She nodded her head. But Ron and Ginny were still not convinced.

"What about Harry though?" asked Ginny. "Why did he break-up with me?"

Acting in the capacity of the Gryffindor Head of House, Minerva asked, "What did he say?"

Wrinkling her nose in disgust, Ginny responded, "He said we wanted different things in life. That I would thank him for it later. He wants to make soup in some hellish backwater."

Minerva allowed the silence to stretch once Ginny stopped speaking. Then, she asked softly, "And you don't want to live in some small village, do you?"

"Heavens, no," said Ginny with feeling. "I want to be famous. I want to be rich and successful." Then, looking at her mother, she said, "I want to model, to play Quidditch and travel the world. I've even been offered a contract by *Witch Weekly* to be their centrefold once I'm done with school."

Molly's eyes widened with shock. "Over my dead body, Ginevra."

Ginny realised she'd revealed a little too much to her mother. Everyone knew that the *Witch Weekly* centrefold generally wore very little or nothing at all. It was one of the few reasons why the magazine was popular with both men as well as women. The women gazed jealously at the models while the men, especially boys like Ron, used it for more lascivious purposes. "I didn't say I'm going to do it, did I mum?" asked Ginny plaintively.

Ron's eyes had goggled at the thought of his sister as the centrefold of *Witch Weekly*. "Blimey, Ginny, I don't think I'd like seeing you displayed on the centrefold. I'm sure Dad would agree."

Ginny scoffed. "Dad doesn't know anything about *Witch Weekly*."

Molly glared. "I've read that magazine for years now, and your father uses it to buy me presents. He knows I enjoy reading the books on their best seller list. I'm sure he's not failed to notice the centrefold. So never you think that he doesn't know what's going on in the world around him."

Ginny blushed. She hadn't really thought of how it would make her father feel to see her displayed in all her glory in the magazines. "Yes, well, like I said, mum, I've not agreed to do it, have I? I just said it's something I'd like to do someday."

Molly nodded. She wasn't convinced, but she was appeased for the moment. However, she had not forgotten the reason they had approached Minerva. Much to the Gryffindor Head's dismay, she turned once more to the trio of older witches.

"Ginny's future plans are all well and good, but what about the geis we brought up? Don't you think it makes sense as to why my husband has taken my sons to go make up with the Malfoys? You know it was the Blacks who cut all connections with us. They murdered my brothers, but now my husband's kissing Narcissa's hand and visiting in public with the Malfoys. It's not right. Even George joined them. I thought he'd at least stand by me given that they are responsible for Fred's death."

Minerva sighed audibly. "Molly, the Malfoys didn't kill Fred; it was Voldemort. You know that."

"But they were Death Eaters. They agreed to his violence and evil. How can you all forgive and forget?" Molly was furious and hurt. She really could not understand what was going on, why everyone was willing to look the other way.

Minerva looked appraisingly at Molly. Then, she turned to include Ron and Ginny in her stare. "No one has forgotten what has taken place. But we are doing what we think is best for the future. Do you really believe that the Order of Phoenix will allow former Death Eaters to escape without paying for what they have done? Do you really think Severus, Kingsley and I will ever allow them to wiggle out without paying for their sins? Really, Molly, you should know us better than that."

Molly shook her head. She didn't know what the three lead members of the Order of Phoenix had done. She had never been more than an ordinary member.

Minerva sighed. "I can't go into detail without Kingsley and Severus' opinion. But if you really have serious doubts, we must have them addressed. You have all been affected, seriously, by the actions of the Malfoys and the remaining Death Eaters."

Pomona and Poppy had never been members of the Order, though they had been clearly sympathetic to the cause. They, too, were now openly curious.

Minerva sighed again. "I suppose it's too late to ask you both to leave us and to forget what you've heard?"

Poppy spoke for them both. "Don't be absurd, Minnie. We've always been in the background, it is true, but you know we aren't going to fade away now. I know I stood back for too long. Now, if there's anything I can do, I'm going to do it."

Pomona nodded her head in agreement. "Yes, I should have insisted that Albus include me in all plans a long time ago. When I think of the way in which we failed to aid Severus, I could weep. Now, we are all in this together."

Minerva nodded. Turning once more to look at Poppy, she asked, "Can you call Kingsley and Severus, please?"

Poppy nodded and immediately stood up. "I shan't be a minute."

While Ron and Ginny stood with ill-disguised impatience, Poppy swiftly moved to collect Kingsley, who was standing with his back to the Head Table speaking with Andromeda. Message delivered, she approached Severus, who was deep in conversation with Hermione. Soon, Kingsley and Severus were approaching the Head Table, but they did not come alone. Both Andromeda and Hermione joined their male escorts.

Molly sighed. She could feel her darkness rising within her as her rationality slipped away. She didn't like the time it was taking to sort this problem out. It was clear to her now that there was an insidious darkness at work. Why else would Poppy and Pomona also take the Malfoys' side?

As Poppy returned to take her place beside Minerva, Kingsley and Andromeda came to stand beside Ron and Molly. Ginny stood as she had been between her mother and brother. Hermione and Severus moved to stand behind Minerva's chair. For anyone watching, they presented a picture of concerted strength, Minerva at the centre, protected and flanked by a wall of support.

Arthur had been quietly speaking to Augusta Longbottom. They had been discussing the changes the last months had made in their children. Augusta was praising her grandson, Neville, who had matured into a steadfast, sensible young man, one who had taken on the responsibility of being the dominant male and patriarch of the Longbottom clan, despite his quiet and retiring demeanour.

But Arthur's attention had been disturbed when, from the corner of his eye, he had seen Poppy coming to fetch Kingsley. Not one to miss the tension in the medi-witch's features, he immediately watched to see what was going on.

Augusta, too, raised her gaze to observe what was going on. She had not missed Arthur's attention moving away from her. Decisively, the older witch tapped Arthur with her fan. "I think we need to go see what's going on, Arthur. It looks like your wife and children are causing a bit of a problem."

Arthur sighed. He had been surprised that Molly had not approached him as soon as he had left the company of the Malfoys. But she had been deep in conversation with Ron. He had thought he had avoided a confrontation in public. Realising it was not to be, he nodded his head. "I agree," he said in resignation.

They, too, joined the group that was now gathered around the Head Table.

Minerva's eyes widened as she noticed the new additions to the group. "Well," she said finally, "it looks like we are having an impromptu Order meeting, given that so many of you have turned up without a thought to how it must seem to the rest of our guests."

Kingsley chuckled. "Yes, I'm sure before long Miss Brown will be part of the group, and our conversation will be published in the *Daily Prophet*."

Indeed, even as Kingsley finished speaking, Lavender slipped in and twined herself around Ron.

Ron blinked. He was many things, but he was not entirely stupid. The discussion they were about to have, the explanations they were about to hear, were important and not to be bandied about in public. He had learned a healthy respect for the importance of keeping his mouth shut at Auror Training. And despite his more aggressive tendencies, he was not yet sunk deep enough into his inner darkness to not know what a gossip Lavender was. With an inward sigh, he tightened his arm around Lavender. "It was lovely seeing you again, Professor McGonagall," he said. "But now that Lavender's finished catching up with her friends, I'm sure she'd love to dance."

It was clear that Ron did not want to leave. But it was also clear that he did not want Lavender to catch a whiff of what was going on.

Minerva's eyes twinkled with approval at his manful handling of the situation.

Even as Ron led Lavender off to the dance floor, the others could hear her asking him what they were all discussing so intently. Everyone strained to hear his response, and a grin broke over Kingsley's face when they heard Ron reply that they were thinking about how to accommodate all the former students who wanted to come see the next Gryffindor Quidditch match.

"He's really coming along nicely," said Kingsley with obvious approval. Nodding at Arthur, he said, "Auror Training really has helped him to think even more strategically. That was a good save."

Molly, who had been really annoyed at the way everyone seemed to have gathered to stand against her and youngest two children, was mollified at this obvious approval of Ron's behaviour. "He's a good boy; he's always been sharp," she said fondly.

"Indeed," said Minerva quickly. She knew they needed to move the group out of the situation it was in. It was attracting too much attention as it was. "Ronald's strategic skills were apparent from the time he was a first-year when he defeated the Transfigured giant chessmen."

Molly was further appeased at this bit of praise. Feeling much more pleased, she did not raise any protest when Arthur, with a significant look at Minerva, slipped his arm around her and began to draw her away.

Minerva watched them go. However, she was not ignorant of the fact that their most difficult hurdle still stood petulantly before them. Suppressing an inward sigh ... she had had too many causes to sigh this evening ... she turned to look at Ginny. "You have raised an important issue, Ginevra. Once I speak with Kingsley, I'm sure a general Order meeting for all those concerned will be held. You will have your answers."

Ginny was not mollified. She still felt angry, enraged. But she could not deny that her feelings of importance were appeased by the serious tone of Professor McGonagall's response. Her thoughts and comments were going to be considered, discussed. She was not being ignored. She had wanted action, resolution, but she knew that older people always moved in painfully slow ways. With a frown and a sigh, she nodded her head. "Soon, though," she added petulantly.

"Soon," said Minerva in agreement.

Ginny could do no more. With a deep look of disgust at this development, which had seen no clear resolution to what she saw as an obvious explanation, she moved away. Not in all the time she had stood in front of Minerva had she looked at Severus, Hermione or Andromeda.

Once Ginny departed, Augusta and Andromeda moved away, too.

Hermione could see the tension emanating from Severus and realised that he wanted to speak with Minerva and Kingsley. Tactfully, she said, "I think I'll go speak to Neville. I've not got a chance to catch up with him yet."

Severus inclined his head. He could guess the heightened curiosity that was consuming Hermione. That she was willing to not press the issue when it would be obviously out of place for a student to be seen spending so long with him and the Deputy Head was very forward thinking of her. "Thank you," he said softly. "I'm sure you'll hear what it's all about very soon."

Hermione smiled. She was dying to know what had been said and what the others were now obviously going to discuss. But she also knew that this was not the time or the place. They had already drawn too much attention. With another smile at the group and a heated meeting of the eyes with Severus, she drifted away to speak with Neville, who was surrounded by Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot.

Once Hermione had departed, Kingsley and Severus helped Poppy and Pomona rise before taking the two chairs the older witches had vacated. As there was nothing unusual in Minerva and Severus sitting together with Kingsley, attention eventually faded. It looked to all observers that nothing of significance had happened, despite the earlier suggestion of urgency.

Once it was clear by Kingsley's chuckles and Severus' smirk that the conversation had moved to less serious matters, the attention their gathering had caused eventually died. It was only then that Minerva quickly explained what had transpired.

Kingsley swore furiously while his face continued to display a happy smile. "The inner darkness of those three really needs to be addressed. I'm surprised Ron and Molly were able to be subdued so easily. But that young woman needs watching. What do you suggest?"

Severus sighed. "Minerva's right. We'll have to call an Order Meeting. We have much to discuss. How about this Sunday? I think the sooner we address this matter the better. We don't really want Miss Weasley to grow impatient and blurt out her theory to the press. That is all we need. They will have a field day, and all of us will be bombarded with more ridiculous headaches."

"My thoughts exactly," said Kingsley gravely. "I'll speak to Percy. He's good with logistical matters, and since it's his family that's causing this particular problem, I'm sure he'll be happy to act as Order Secretary."

Silence reined as the trio considered the pressing matter before them. Into the lengthy silence, Severus spoke carefully, "I've just agreed to a betrothal contract with Lucius for Hermione's hand. I'll be sending my financial statements and affairs for his perusal as soon as it can all be arranged."

A moment's silence greeted this quietly dropped tit bit. Then, Minerva beamed with joy. "Congratulations," she said, squeezing his hand that lay on the table. "I'm so glad."

Kingsley, too, smiled with open delight. "This is a much anticipated development," he said with a grin. With a sly look at Severus, he teased, "Indeed, something I had expected since the evening of the Victory Ball."

Severus chuckled darkly at the open teasing. "If only I knew then what I know now," he started with a smirk, "I'd have put on an even greater show."

Kingsley threw back his head and roared with laughter. "This bit of news was just what I needed to help ease the headache the Weasley trio was bringing on."

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When Hermione joined Neville, Hannah and Susan, an embarrassed silence fell on their conversation. They were all a little discomfited at her having so openly become one of the Malfoys. But Neville's brand of charm soon came to the fore. With a chuckle, he hugged his friend before making her a courtly bow. "Welcome to our humble circle, Lady Hermione," he intoned gallantly.

Hermione punched him lightly in the arm and laughed. "Idiot!"

The other two girls relaxed at this teasing. They were relieved to note that Hermione had not changed. They had been friends during their time in Dumbledore's Army, and although they had not been particularly close, the two Hufflepuffs had always found the intelligent Gryffindor a kind and patient teacher when explaining spells and defence tactics. They had always respected Hermione's skill, but more importantly for them, her Hufflepuffian commitment to hard work, dedication and tenacity had made them consider her a somewhat honorary Hufflepuff.

Hermione next turned her smile to include Susan and Hannah. "How are you both? Sorry I've not really kept in touch, but finding my feet after the war and coming back to school has been hectic."

Susan smiled. "It's okay. We've been doing okay. Getting on, you know. How are you?" Then, bravely, the curious witch asked, "How's it being a Malfoy?" Her aunt Amelia Bones had been murdered by the Death Eaters, as had, of course, her grandparents.

"It's fine. They are fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine," said Hermione, slightly annoyed at the obvious question. Then, seeing the truly concerned expression in Susan's eyes, she said, thinking, "They are trying their best to mend their errors. Adopting me was a way of showing they had no more hard feelings towards Muggle-borns. I think I'm even slowly changing their hearts and minds, not just their politically motivated actions about Muggles and Muggle-borns."

Susan nodded. She was an intelligent girl. "Education and understanding are the key ingredients in making genuine change in attitudes and behaviour. My aunt always

insisted that knowledge was the key. I'm glad you're settling in okay."

Hannah nodded in agreement, too. Then, with typical Hufflepuff candour and compassion, she asked, "Are they nice to you? They don't bully you, do they?"

Hermione smiled and reached out to squeeze Hannah's shoulder. "No, they don't. They are really nice. Cissy has become a real friend to me, as has the Ferret. We all actually get along very well. Even Lucius."

"Well," said Neville, "if ever you need someone, don't be a stranger, okay? We all care about you."

"Oh, Neville," said Hermione, hugging her friend again. "Thank you. It's really lovely of you to say so."

Hannah reached out and put her arm around the two friends. "Neville's right. We do care about you."

Hermione's eyes widened as she disengaged from the group hug. Looking at Hannah and Neville, she said, "Is there something I should know about?"

Neville grinned and took hold of Hannah's hand. "We've been seeing a lot of each other lately."

As Hermione's expression of surprise turned to one of knowing, Susan giggled.

"Wow," said Hermione. "Congratulations, you guys. I had no idea you were close."

Hannah blushed. "It was at the Malfoy picnic that we really became close. Susan didn't come. She didn't want to be in the presence of the Malfoys. So I was kind of alone, and Neville took care of me." She looked lovingly into Neville's eyes. "He's always been there to help me when I needed it."

Neville coloured bashfully, but then slipped his arm around his girlfriend. "We look after each other."

Hermione was so happy for her friends. "Well, good for you both. I've got news, too. But it's still kind of a secret, so please don't tell anyone else. I've not even had a chance to tell Harry yet."

Susan's eyes widened in curiosity. Neville and Hannah leaned closer to hear the news.

Making sure they were not being overheard, Hermione said, "Lucius asked Severus tonight if he would be willing to enter into a betrothal contract with him for my hand in marriage. Severus agreed. The paperwork and other procedures still need to be done, but once all the details are sorted out, we are going to be engaged."

"Oh. My. God," said Susan. "You and Headmaster Snape. I can't believe it."

Neville chuckled. "Well, I can. I remember seeing the two of you waltz at one of the parties we went to over the summer. You were both lost in each other's eyes."

Hannah was stunned into silence. She kept looking from Hermione to Severus who was sitting with Kingsley and Minerva. Finally, she said a quiet, "Wow."

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Ronald Weasley frowned in thoughtful silence into Lavender Brown's hair. Even as he allowed the young woman to wrap herself around him as they moved slowly on the dance floor, his mind raced with numerous thoughts. The first thoughts centred around Lavender. He had not liked the way she had insinuated herself in what was obviously a private Order discussion. He had known for years that she was a horrendous gossip, but for the first time, he truly saw her for what she was. An attention seeking tittle-tattle. Turning her so that she faced away from the Head Table, his eyes scanned the action taking place. He watched Hermione tactfully depart, as did Augusta and Andromeda. Then, he observed Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey meander off into the crowd. He was not foolish enough to miss how they all immediately joined other groups, groups likely to wonder about what had taken place. He could well imagine that they were carrying out exercises in drawing away speculation on the nature of the gathering.

Ron had been told, of course, about the darkness that had manifested within them. But, like his mother and sister, he had paid little attention to what had been said. His time at Auror Training had, of course, made him realise that he had been somewhat touched by the dark, but he had never realised how quickly he was willing to let irrational emotions and thoughts obscure his thinking. He thought hard on what he had learned. Even though they hadn't been given clear information on the price the Malfoys had paid in restitution, he could well imagine that Kingsley and Professor McGonagall had not gone easy on the Slytherins. He next thought about George, Percy, Bill and his dad going over to make up with the Malfoys. He pondered again the meaning behind George's words. Were the actions of his mother, Ginny and himself responsible for the breaking up of his family? He'd always considered Harry another brother, one that was going to eventually become a Weasley by marriage. But if Harry had broken off with Ginny, despite her telling him that he would no longer be allowed into the Burrow, what did that mean for their friendship? He, Harry and Hermione had been friends for much longer than Ginny and Harry had been a couple. Should her hurt feelings, therefore, result in him losing his friend? Despite the darkness brought about by seeing what he felt was the defection to the Slytherins, he could not bear to lose more of his kin. George without the company of Fred was a serious and sober man. Percy seemed focused on nothing but work and doing what was right, and Harry, well, Harry kept saying how he wanted to retire somewhere for a quiet, peaceful life. He could well understand Ginny not wanting to be a part of that scheme. She was like him; she longed just as he did to live in a fancy house in the fashionable part of London. She, like him, wanted fame, fortune and glory. Could this really be the reason why Harry had broken up with Ginny? Could he really have thought and seen how ill-suited their goals and aspirations for the future were?

And Hermione. Despite his behaviour prior to their break up, he did realise deep inside of him that he had not acted well. He had left her alone to be rescued by the Malfoys and Snape. No wonder then that she had clung to them from then on. His behaviour had made it impossible for her to come to the Burrow. That his mother and sister had condoned and furthered the breach in their friendship could not be ignored. They, too, must be touched by the dark. Why else would his mother not pull him up for his ungentlemanly behaviour? She may have always disliked Hermione, but she had always insisted on good manners. What he had done was not, by any stretch of the imagination, well mannered.

Ron realised that he would have to speak to Harry. Then, once he made sure his oldest friend had been informed of his support and understanding, he would have to try to patch things up further with Hermione. She might never again be his best friend, but if they could go back to being on the level of comfortable house-mates, he would consider himself fortunate. As for the Malfoys, well, he couldn't be as magnanimous as his brothers and father, but he could, he supposed, stop treating them like dirt under his shoes. With an inward sigh, Ronald Weasley accepted that it was time that he grew up. Harry, Hermione, even Neville and the Ferret seemed to have done so. Now it was his turn.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty-Two: Covert Meetings

Ron and Harry have a serious talk. Ron apologises to Hermione. Draco and Astoria join some of the DA in the Room of Requirement for a strategy meeting.

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(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going, but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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When the song came to an end, Ron softly kissed Lavender on her forehead. 'I need to go talk to Harry, Lav. I've not had a moment with him all evening. Do you want to go join Padma and Parvati?'

Lavender looked unhappy with the suggestion, but she allowed herself to be walked to her group of friends. She wanted to rip into Ron, but something stopped her from making a scene. She didn't want Ron to accuse her of embarrassing him in public. She knew enough about how jealous her friends were to see her get back together with Ron to give them more room to gloat about her quarrelling with her lover in public.

Once there, Ron did his best to appear still enamoured with the blonde, even while a little voice in his head insisted that the biggest mistake he had ever made was getting involved with her again. Ron couldn't understand how things suddenly seemed so much clearer. Watching the way Hermione and Snape had interacted had hurt him. However, it seemed the hurt had somehow managed to break through his armour of blinkeredness and vindictiveness to allow him to see where his duty and loyalty lay. Hearing Ginny's reasons for why Harry had broken up with her had despite Ron's best intentions rung true in accordance with his innate sense of strategic thinking. If it had been a game of chess, he would have been able to clearly see that his sister and best friend were not meant for each other. But, blinded by anger, hate, hurt and mistrust, he had allowed his sense of honour and loyalty to fall by the wayside.

After leaving Lavender with a gentle kiss on her cheek, Ron wandered around looking for Harry. Not being able to find him anywhere in the Great Hall, Ron scratched his head before heading out to the Quidditch pitch. As expected, Harry was flying around on one of the school's Cleansweep 2000s. Ron grabbed a broom from the shed before joining his friend in the air.

Harry grimaced as Ron joined him. 'I guess you heard, then?' he asked pointedly.

'Yes, mate, Ginny said,' responded Ron. Then, in a move that completely surprised Harry, Ron asked, 'You okay?'

Harry stared, before nodding his head. 'I guess so. It wasn't easy, but I had to do it, Ron. It was for the best. Ginny and I want completely different things, and I realised that although I do love her, I'm no longer in love with her. You know, it's something that's taken me a long time to understand. But,' Harry stopped speaking and sighed. 'Have you ever really looked at Severus and Hermione together?' he asked, changing tact completely.

Ron frowned. 'I've tried to avoid it whenever possible,' he finally said morosely.

Harry grinned. 'Yes, but you know what I mean. When they dance together, they focus entirely on each other. They have eyes for no one but each other. It's like the rest of the world fades away. When I'm dancing with Ginny, I'm always aware of other people, and I know she is constantly watching the crowd, the press and our audience. We don't get lost in each others' eyes.'

Ron's gaze narrowed. Finally, he frowned mightily before nodding his head. 'I see what you mean. But why, Harry? I just can't see it. The Greasy Git and our 'Mione?'

Harry shrugged. 'Love's weird. You weren't around though. I remember the first time she spent the afternoon with the Malfoys and Severus. When she came back home, she was glowing. And after their first date, I thought she was going to burst from happiness. I used to feel that way about Ginny, way back in sixth year. But something changed after the war. I grew up. I guess, I was no longer a part of Voldemort, and losing him made me become more my own man. That man wants nothing of fame, glory or prestige. He, I mean I, wants a quiet life. I want children. I want to work with my hands, like Neville does. I only just realised how much I enjoy cooking and working in the garden.'

Ron threw back his head and laughed. 'Ginny would hate your kind of ideal life. She hates the thought of spending even a moment in the kitchen. She wants to eat at all the expensive restaurants and be seen in the most exclusive of dresses.'

'Don't I know it,' said Harry. 'That's why I broke it off, mate. I knew we would not make each other happy in the long run. She needs someone like Malfoy.'

Ron gasped. 'You take that back, Harry. My sister's not going to go out with the Ferret; I don't care what you think.'

'Listen to yourself, Ron,' said Harry laughing. 'I didn't say she was going to go out with Malfoy. He's so madly in love with his fiancée that he doesn't seem to see any other woman. I said she needs someone *like* him. Someone with money, someone who loves the good life. She needs a pureblood. Not me. I'll never be prominent in society. My position is through luck, not through desire.'

Sighing, Ron nodded. 'I guess. But, mate, it's going to be really tough at home.' Then, grimacing, he said, 'There's something I need to tell you. Something happened in the Great Hall while you were away.'

As Ron narrated the situation, Harry's eyes widened first in anger, then in shock. Finally, he grasped Ron by the shoulders and shook him roughly. 'Idiot!' he yelled loudly. 'Can you hear yourself?' Harry released Ron in a disgusted shove and began to pace.

Ron sighed. He did not move to defend himself. Listening to himself relate Ginny's suspicions and his mother's emphatic agreement to a dark geis sounded foolish beyond belief. Raking his fingers through his thick red hair, he growled loudly, 'I know, mate, I know. I was blinded by anger, by this bloody dark magic that's swirling through my head. Now, when I think of it, I can see how unlikely it is that 'Mione or the Malfoys would do something so utterly obvious. If they wanted to control us, they would blackmail Kingsley or something. I know. That's why I did all I could to remove Lavender from the crowd gathered in front of the Head Table. That's why I came to tell you. I know.'

Harry stopped pacing as he listened to Ron's earnest and sincere speech. 'Alright, mate, I believe you. But we need to do something to stop Ginny from spilling all of this to her little group of friends, or worse, the *Prophet*. Can you imagine the shit that will hit the fan if this gets out?'

Ron grimaced. 'My mother's likely to talk, too. Though I guess Dad will be able to keep her grounded. Right, I'll talk to Ginny. I want you to speak to Dad and Bill. But first, we need to speak to 'Mione. I need to apologise and get her input on all of this.'

Harry smiled. It was good to see Ron wanting to include Hermione in their plan.

The two boys made their way back to the Great Hall via the student entrance. Thankfully, Hermione was easy enough to spot. She was standing with Neville, Susan and Hannah.

Ron blushed and did his best to prepare himself for his well deserved punch in the face. He knew he'd treated her appallingly.

Harry quickly hid the grin that was on his face. Ron didn't need to know he was looking forward to Hermione's reaction. Approaching the group, he smiled in greeting. Then, he said, "Mione, Ron has something he wants to say to you."

Hermione frowned but turned her curious stare to meet Ron's suddenly rather mature gaze. She wondered what on earth Ron wanted to tell her, especially in front of an audience. Hannah, Susan and Neville were watching the expressions of the Golden Trio like spectators at Wimbledon.

Ron, though, didn't seem to mind the others who were observing the interaction. Indeed, he took strength from their presence, for he knew 'Mione wouldn't do anything too drastic with their friends watching the confrontation. Clearing his throat nervously, he said, "Mione, I'm sorry. I've been a complete arse and a prat. I want to apologise."

Hermione had expected something significant, even an apology, but she hadn't expected such obvious and heartfelt regret to colour Ronald's speech. Indeed, she had thought that if the red head was apologising as Harry's introduction had prepared her to expect, it was something engineered by her dark-haired friend. Her heart melting at the clear note of honest and earnest contrition, she flung her arms around Ron. She had, despite all the grief he had put her through, missed him. Laughing, all she could say was an exasperated, 'Oh, Ron!'

Harry laughed and joined his two best friends in a group hug. Neville, Susan and Hannah beamed at the display of teenage joy and joined the collective hug. Soon, all six of them were laughing as they renewed their bond of friendship. Finally, breaking up from the embrace, Harry spoke quietly. 'We've got stuff to talk about. Meet me in the Room of Requirement in twenty minutes. Make sure you're not followed.'

Everyone in the group nodded. They realised that their reunion had garnered plenty of attention. The evening had been filled with reunions and intriguing gatherings. Much gossip had been generated. If they all suddenly vanished, there was no telling what trouble people like Lavender Brown or Pansy Parkinson could cause.

Parting from the group first, Ron made his way back to Lavender, Padma and Parvati, who he knew would be dying to know what was going on. Sliding his arms around the busty blonde, he buried his nose in her hair. 'You smell so good,' said Ron in greeting. He knew sex was the best way to distract Lavender, and his open adoration of his girlfriend would immediately put the twins off the scent too.

Lavender preened under Ron's attention. Smiling at her friends, she licked her lips in invitation and asked seductively, 'What was all that about?'

Ron did his best to not let his annoyance show. 'Oh, just Harry wanting to see us try to be friends. I didn't want to hurt him. You know what he's like. He hates it that I'm no longer blinded to what's going on.' Ron had not spoken a lie; he truly was no longer blind to what had been going on under his nose.

Lavender, of course, took his words to mean something completely different. 'You're too nice, Ron. Hugging that jumped-up tart. Did you see the way she was dancing with Snape? He may have been cleared of Dumbledore's murder, but he still killed him.'

Ron frowned. The darkness was rising within him once again. But he did his best to tame the beast within his chest and look at what Lavender was saying as though it was a mere game plan on the chess board. When looking at Dumbledore's death on that front, he could see the strategic importance of Snape's placement within the heart of the Death Eaters with an unquestionable position of loyalty to Voldemort. 'Mmm... you're right, of course, Lav,' said Ron softly. 'But can we not talk about them?' Turning his attention to the twins, he asked jovially, 'Why are you two beauties standing around, hmm...? Are the rest of the blokes too blind to see how good you both look?'

Parvati seemed to glow at the compliment, though Lavender's eyes darkened in jealousy. She's always known her friend had fancied Ron. Padma, though, just smiled and said teasingly, 'Well, all the handsome men are taken, so we are stuck being wall flowers.'

Ron laughed. 'Come on, ladies, we guys aren't that dumb.' Leading Lavender to the dance floor, he threw over his shoulder, 'Maybe you need to show them your moves and give them a reason to join us on the dance floor.'

Lavender frowned jealously, but she could not really complain when Ron gathered her into his arms. Pouting, she whispered, 'I don't want to share you.'

Ron stroked her back and looked at the clock. Ten minutes before he needed to meet the others. 'Don't be like that, babe. You know you want them to have a good time.'

Lavender pouted, but soon the three friends were engaged in a battle to see who could dance the most provocatively. Ron smiled in satisfaction at his ploy and left the trio with a wink. 'I'll just get myself a drink and watch you from the sidelines.'

Lavender nodded. She was having fun, and she could see clearly the admiring glances some of the other men were giving her. Compared to Padma and Parvati who were dressed in brightly shimmering saris, she was displayed in all of her voluptuous glory in a tiny miniskirt and halter-necked top.

Ron silently moved out of the crowd and made his way via a circular route to the seventh floor. He knew it was likely there were students still out of bed despite curfew. He didn't want to be spotted, especially not so close to the Gryffindor common room. There was no telling what would get back to Ginny.

Harry, meanwhile, silently nodded to Neville once Ron had left their group, and the two young men meandered towards the drinks table. Chatting to people they met along the way, they leaned against the wall and pretended to watch the crowd and the dancing. By standing around doing nothing, the interest surrounding them slowly faded away. It was obvious to any casual observer that the boys were doing nothing but talking. Anyone listening would have heard them discuss Quidditch. Eventually, after about fifteen minutes of idleness, the two left the hall via the entrance leading out towards the Quidditch pitch. Anyone who was observing them would assume they had just strolled out for a breath of fresh air.

Augusta Longbottom, though, was not the usual dim-witted observer. She knew her grandson well and could immediately see that his act of casual nonchalance was clearly that, an act. She could well imagine that he was being informed by Potter of what was going on. Preening with pride at this clear yet discreet sign of how closely her grandson was trusted by the Saviour of the Wizarding World, she redoubled her efforts to distract anyone who she could see paying extra close attention to the boys. She had seen how Kingsley, Minerva and Severus had done the same thing up at the Head Table. The sight of the three of them laughing and relaxing had done much to dispel the curiosity that had arisen at the ominous gathering not long ago.

Susan and Hannah, as Hufflepuffs, were never really seen as being important. To the curious onlookers, they appeared nothing but ciphers, hangers on. Squeezing Hermione's hand, Susan said softly, 'We'll go and prepare the room for our meeting. Do you want us to collect anyone else on the way?'

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment. Then, shaking her head, she murmured quietly, 'I don't think so. If any one else from the DA disappears, people will definitely know something is up. Besides which, the others don't really know anything of what's going on. Let us keep this quiet for the moment. If we need more back up, we can always let the others know later.'

Hannah nodded. 'Okay. We'll see you in a bit then. Good luck.'

The three girls exchanged smiles before parting ways. Hannah and Susan casually headed off toward the loos while Hermione rejoined the two senior Malfoys who were holding court with other influential Slytherins. She knew it caused disquiet amongst people like Pansy and Clarissa Nott that she, the Mudblood, was now not only a celebrated heroine but also a Malfoy with all of the position it awarded her in pureblood circles. No one dared snub her, for it would be their social demise if the senior Malfoys decided to cut them publicly.

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow when Hermione joined their circle. The two Malfoys were not blind and had not missed anything that had taken place in the Great Hall.

Hermione smiled and winked discreetly at Narcissa. Hermione had learned from Lucius and Severus that the best way of distracting people was by telling them what they wanted to hear. If they felt they were being given the truth, they would not bother to look for the truth. 'You wouldn't believe how much people have to say now that I'm a Malfoy,' said Hermione quietly. She'd pitched her voice so that it appeared as though she was whispering, but everyone in the circle heard her. Pretending that she had not wanted anyone to pick up on going on, she went on whispering in her carrying tone, 'Kingsley and Severus were needed to help calm Molly down. She wouldn't listen to reason when Minerva explained that me being a Malfoy meant that I was due special privileges.'

Lucius' lips twitched at his adopted daughter's clever ploy. He was not fooled for a moment. He had seen the tension in Kingsley's stance, and even Severus had looked concerned for a moment before his mask of boredom had fallen into place. Whatever was going on was serious. But he realised that Hermione was doing her best to distract everyone who had watched the confrontation with the Weasley trio. In a bored drawl, Lucius said disdainfully, 'Most people are fools, my dear. They aren't willing to accept that things are now different. It is only the smart who can change with the times, who will continue to lead society. Malfoys have always been the most influential of society. The fall of the Dark Lord has not changed that. That is why, my dear, we are so proud to have you, the unquestionable genius of the Golden Trio as our daughter. There is none better to carry the Malfoy name than the one person who stood by Harry through thick and thin.'

The listening circle of people could not deny the social cache gained by the Malfoys in having secured the celebrated heroine as part of their family. Indeed, as Slytherins one and all, they envied the brilliance and ingenuity of Lucius for not only surviving the Dark Lord's demise with all of his family out of Azkaban, but also guaranteeing his close association with the new movers and shakers within the Ministry. They had not been slow in seeing that Arthur Weasley approached the Malfoys. It had made them all aware that the Malfoys were firmly accepted by the victors of the Battle of Hogwarts.

Not long after, Hermione and Lucius took to the dance floor. There, in the relative privacy of the crowd, she explained to him that she was meeting her friends to discuss what had taken place at the Head Table. 'Cover for me, please?'

'Of course,' said Lucius. 'But do you know what's going on?'

'Not entirely,' said Hermione, looking around to make sure no one was paying them more than the usual attention. 'But Ron was there from the start, and Harry is somehow involved. So I'll know once we've had a chance to meet without an audience. Do you know where Draco is? It might be useful if he came along.'

Lucius frowned. 'I'm not sure. I think he and Astoria are in the rose garden.'

Hermione nodded her head. 'I'll see if I can find them both. I wish Luna were here. She's very resourceful and excellent in thinking outside the box. I hate it that she is always being taken away by her father.'

Lucius inclined his head in agreement. 'Lovegood has never really been a strong man. I think Azkaban hurt him gravely. You mustn't begrudge him Luna's presence. I think it must be the only thing in the world that gives him comfort right now.' He sighed quietly before saying deliberately, 'My family was the only thing that kept me sane when I was in Azkaban. I focused on Draco and Cissy. On how much I wanted to see them again. If it wasn't for them, I would have been completely destroyed.'

Hermione had never heard Lucius speak of his dark days as a prisoner in Azkaban. She realised it was a mark of how much he had come to care for her that he was able to bare his soul so intimately. Standing on tip toe, she kissed him on his cheek.

Lucius patted her hand in response. 'Off you go now. But keep us informed if you need anything.'

'I will. Thank you, Lucius. You have no idea how much I appreciate having you and Cissy in my life. I can't believe how things have changed in a few short months. This time last year....' She broke off, not being able to continue.

'I know,' said Lucius. 'We feel the same. Cissy and I can't believe how easily we allowed ourselves to be blinded, how foolish we were to allow empty talk to convince us the Dark Lord was our only alternative. But the past is behind us. You, Severus, Draco, your lives, your triumphs are our future.'

Hermione squeezed the strong hand that held her before leaving the embrace of her adopted father. She still found it hard to believe that they genuinely cared for her. She kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. She understood that Lucius and Cissy were using her to shore up their position politically and socially, but she'd realised that was part of being a Slytherin. Their affection for her, however, was real as well.

Hermione left the dance floor and made her way towards the Head Table. Severus was seated alone, looking out onto the crowd that was slowly starting to thin. She smiled as she approached, and he responded with a quick curl of his lips. In this setting, he was ever cautious.

'I'm going upstairs to meet with the gang,' said Hermione by way of explanation. 'If I don't get a chance to talk to you later, can we arrange for a meeting soon?'

'Why don't you join Minerva and me for tea?' asked Severus. 'We can compare notes. And as long as we meet with a suitable chaperone, the castle has nothing to complain about. I've told her about accepting the betrothal contract.'

Hermione smiled. 'Excellent. I'll come by your office at four. Is that alright?'

'Yes, four is fine,' agreed Severus. He didn't want her to go. He wanted to speak to her, to hold her in his arms, to bury himself in her warmth. But he knew it was impossible.

With a last loving glance, Hermione slipped out of the Great Hall. She was cutting it rather fine, but she knew the others would wait for her. Luckily, just as she was leaving the Great Hall, she saw a beaming Draco and a flustered Astoria returning arm in arm from the rose garden.

With a sigh of gratitude, Hermione rushed to them. 'Thank goodness I didn't have to go looking for you two. Something's happened while you two were away. I'm about to go meet with some of the DA and find out what's going on. Do you want to come?'

Astoria was the first to answer. 'Of course. As long as they don't mind us being there.'

Draco nodded. 'Potter seems to have chilled out, but I don't think Weaselbee will be all that happy to see us.'

Hermione growled. 'Well if he's going to be my friend, then he will have to learn to accept my annoying monster of a brother. Now, come on, the others are waiting.'

Draco laughed. 'This I've got to see. Weaselbee's going to throw a wobbly.'

Astoria joined Draco in his laughter.

Hermione's lips twitched as she watched the two laugh, but she felt compelled to admonish Draco. 'Play nice, Ferret.'

Astoria laughed even harder at Draco's expression at the moniker. With a wink at Hermione, she slipped her arm through Draco's. 'Oh, this is going to be good.'

Hermione finally allowed her laughter to emerge. 'Mmm.... I think so too. But this is serious, Draco. Please, please don't antagonise him. It's hard enough getting him to see reason when it comes to me. Ron's not going to like having to deal with you when you're being an irritating git. Even if it is funny later, we can't allow pettiness to get in the way.'

'Okay, okay,' said Draco raising his hands in surrender. 'I'll play nice. I won't insult your precious Gryffindors, and I'll even wait until they hex before retaliating.'

Hermione glared, but she could not ask for more.

The others had all entered the Room of Requirement by the time Hermione reached the door. 'Wait here,' she said to Draco and Astoria. 'I'll go prepare them.'



Draco raised a sardonic eyebrow, but Astoria nodded in agreement.

Hermione sighed. She was starting to doubt the wisdom of asking the two Slytherins to join her, but she felt that they would be instrumental in helping settle whatever was going on. Pushing the door open, she entered the room that had been provided. It looked like a cosy mix between the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor common rooms. Not surprising given the mix of people and the fact Susan and Hannah had been the first to arrive.

As soon as Hermione entered, Ron spoke up. 'Good, now you're here, let's start. I can't stay too long.'

But before he could start explaining what was going on, Hermione raised her hand. 'Just a minute, Ron. I know you don't have much time, but Draco and Astoria are outside. I think they should join us.'

'No way,' said Ron in anger. 'I don't want the ferret here. What were you thinking?'

Hermione glared. 'I was thinking that my brother and one of my new best friends might be able to give a different perspective on the problem, whatever it is. That you might be willing to listen, to give them a chance.'

Ron opened his mouth to argue further, but Harry grabbed him by the arm. 'It can't hurt, mate,' said Harry. 'Come on, we don't have time for this.'

Ron looked like he was going to push Harry off, but finally he just shrugged out of Harry's grip and threw himself into an arm chair. 'Whatever.'

Hermione quickly made her way to the door and opened it. 'Come in.'

The two Slytherins walked in like they owned the place. Their heads held high, they inclined their heads regally to the others who were watching them with curious expressions on their faces. Harry, though, came forward. He realised the benefit of having the Slytherin presence. Magnanimously, he extended his hand to Draco, who looked at it for a moment before shaking it. Then, Harry smiled and invited Astoria to sit.

She smiled her warm smile at Harry, and then she left Draco's side to sit beside Susan on one of the sofas. Draco took the armchair furthest away from Ron.

Hermione grimaced. She really hoped she had not made things worse. However, it was too late now. Taking a deep breath, she sat down next to Astoria. Once she was seated, Harry plonked himself next to her.

'Right,' said Harry, 'I've got some news. I broke up with Ginny this evening.'

His news was met with a hushed silence. Hermione's eyes widened. She hadn't known he was thinking of breaking up with Ginny. Susan and Hannah, too, looked startled. Neville nodded as though he had been expecting it, but the most overt reaction came from Draco. He began to applaud.

Ron began to stand up, but seemed to decide it wasn't worth the effort and settled back down again. He threw a dirty look at Draco though.

Draco, however, didn't seem to mind. With a cheeky grin that was sure to rub Ron the wrong way, he said, 'Give the man an award. He finally saw the light.'

Susan looked rather alarmed. It was as though she expected Ron to attack Draco.

Hannah, though, began to laugh. She was soon joined by Astoria, and the mood lightened significantly.

Harry frowned initially, but then he grinned at the Slytherin's ironic humour. It had multiple meanings, but he was coming to learn through his association with Severus that most things Slytherins did involved a myriad of meanings. Shaking his head at Draco, Harry continued. 'Anyway, when I broke up with Ginny, she went to Molly. They both decided that it was because I was being manipulated by Hermione and the Malfoys. They think I'm under some kind of geis, as are Kingsley and the rest of the Order.'

Draco listened to Harry speak with mounting anger. But before he could erupt in a flurry of curses and hexes, Neville spoke up. 'Now that's just sour grapes. You can't put a dark geis on a group of people. It might possibly hold for a bit but not for any length of time.'

Draco stared in shock at Neville's calm and collected response.

Ron, meanwhile, just sniffed in disgust. 'We don't know everything about the Dark Arts. What if Snape helped them brew some dark potion?'

'Don't be an idiot,' said Hermione. 'Ron, really?'

Ron sighed and stood up to start pacing. He was like a caged tiger, cornered and unpredictable. 'Oh, alright, I'm not saying I still believe Ginny. But I did, for that moment.' Then, collecting himself, fighting visibly for calm, he carried on. 'What I'm trying to say is, Ginny and my mother aren't being rational right now. There's a lot of darkness in them, darkness they are not able to deal with at all. I'm getting better at controlling my knee-jerk reactions, but it's still touch and go for me. But for them, there just doesn't seem to be any rationality left. We need to stop my sister before she destroys herself and the Order. Imagine the damage she could cause if she were allowed to just spew such stuff to Skeeter.' He shuddered at the thought. 'I need your help. What do we do?'

Silence reigned. Even Draco seemed to understand the desperation evident in Ron's voice. Draco, the ultimate joker, the one who loved nothing better than to needle someone in pain, was all too aware what darkness had done to his family. How could he ever forget Aunt Bella? Finally, thoughtfully, Draco looked at Astoria, as if her beautiful face and loving eyes could give him the strength he needed. 'You need to distract the Weaslette. She'll be hurting from the Boy Wonder's rejection. Nothing hurts worse than rejection, I should know, so you need to find her another lover, and quickly too. Someone who will shower her with attention, prestige.'

He frowned and stood up to start pacing over on the far side of the room. Thinking aloud, Draco said, 'None of the Gryffindors have enough position to beat Potter's prominence as the Boy-Who-Lived. All the Hufflepuffs will be eaten alive by her temper. The Ravenclaws are as a rule too interested in knowledge to pander overmuch to their partners' ego. You need to find her a Slytherin.'

Ron flung himself out of the chair he had retaken on Draco's pacing. He lunged towards the blond as if to attack, but then stopped about a foot away to swing around to glare at Harry. 'Boy Wonder suggested the same thing, actually,' he confessed in disgust. 'I don't like it. But if it will work...'

Even as Draco and Ron seemed to participate in a battle to see who could outstare each other, Astoria clapped her hands in delight. 'I know the perfect person for her.'

Everyone who had been focused on watching the imminent confrontation between Ron and Draco swung around to look curiously at Astoria. She seemed to gloat even more at the attention before laughing at the gathered crowd. 'Can none of you see it?'

Hermione was smiling inside. The others had expected nothing but derision and sarcasm from the two Slytherins. But their quick understanding of the situation, and indeed, clear sighted view of what needed to be done had surprised the others in the room. Hermione, though, had had no such doubts. She knew Draco and Astoria were waiting for an opportunity to show that they were no longer the enemy. If by helping the DA, and indirectly the Order, avoid scandal and unwanted media scrutiny, they could force the others to see them more clearly for what they were capable of, she knew that Draco and Astoria would do all that they could.

No one responded to Astoria's arched query. Just because the Slytherin couple were consenting to be in the same company as the other did not mean they had suddenly changed their behaviour. When threatened, Draco and Astoria, as Hermione had now learned, retreated to haughty and supercilious mannerisms. But Hermione could see how volatile everyone's temper was. Wanting to defuse the situation, she said with a laugh, 'Right, 'Tory, you've shown that you're smarter than all of us. Now give. Who are you thinking of setting Ginny up with?'

Astoria giggled. 'Theo Nott. Can't you just see it? His dad's dead and their name is shit at the moment after Odin Nott's desperate fight to the death with the Aurors at their

castle in Inverness. But Theo was never a Death Eater, or even really an overt sympathiser. He was just afraid of his dad. You know what a bastard Odin was. The only one who seemed to have him wrapped around her little finger was that tramp Clarissa. So anyone who can help Theo distance himself from his father's legacy will be warmly welcomed. Theo, of course, has always spent most of his life, when not in school, with his mother's family in Cornwall. That's where he went when the Slytherin students were made to evacuate Hogwarts. Moreover, since the hated Clarissa is on the prowl for a new husband, the castle will soon be empty of the Dowager Baroness of Inverness. It's perfect. He's good looking, rich and desperate to clear his name from his father's legacy. He'll worship Ginny if we can make her fall for him.'

'Hmm...,' said Ron. He didn't like it, but he could truly say that Theo had never, not once in their years in Hogwarts, taken part in any of the overt Gryffindor bashing that took place in the halls. He'd never been part of any of the Slytherin gangs and had always been kind of a loner.

Harry, too, nodded in agreement. 'That might work, actually,' he said thoughtfully.

Astoria beamed in pleasure. 'Draco has always got on fairly well with him. I'm sure, if he pointed out the benefit in a suitably Slytherinesque manner, man to man, giving some politically sound advice, that Theo would fall for it.'

Draco nodded. 'Yes, Theo and I've always got along. We've shared a desk for Potions for a long time. I'll go down and have a little chat with him. I'm sure he's got enough Slytherin to strike while the iron is hot, as it were.' Draco's eyes were twinkling evilly. 'You know, you'll owe me if this works out.'

Ron growled and clenched his fists.

Hermione though could see that Draco was just jerking Ron around. 'Stop it, Draco. It's not nice to tease people, especially when they don't realise you're not being a bastard but just jerking their chain.'

Draco pouted in mock dismay. 'But 'Mione,' he started in an annoying whiney voice, 'what fun would I have if they thought I was a good guy? The bastards seem to get all the chicks.'

Hermione laughed. 'Idiot,' she said, smacking him gently on the back of his head. 'You don't need any more chicks, you're engaged to 'Tory.'

The others watched the byplay between the two with more and more astonishment. Who would have ever believed that Draco and Hermione would be so openly affectionate? It was obvious by their ability to tease each other that they truly were at ease with each other.

## Chapter Thirty-Three: Slytherin to the rescue

*Chapter 33 of 40*

Draco and Theodore Nott have a frank discussion. Ginny flaunts herself with the hope of making Harry jealous.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going, but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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Draco and Astoria were the first to leave the Room of Requirement. The couple had their heads together discussing how best to approach Theo. Hermione was confident that between Draco's cunning and Astoria's practical sensibility, they would come upon the most likely way of convincing Theo to approach Ginny.

The plotting couple were closely followed by Neville, Susan and Hannah who had their heads together, too. Hermione knew the three were working on how best they could squash the rumours that would probably be circulating among the guests in the Great Hall. Many of the alumni were friends or distantly connected to the trio. Moreover, with Susan Bones' connections and Neville's Gran's acquaintances, making sure nothing was said was easily achievable. They only really needed to ensure Ginny behaved. Sometimes, Hermione thought it was wonderful to have friends who were so obviously unremarkable. No one paid Susan and Hannah much notice, even though they were celebrated heroines. They were good at fading into the woodwork and working quietly behind the scenes. Right now, a full frontal attack would send Ginny screaming to Lavender and Romilda Vane with vicious gossip. That kind of tittle-tattle needed to be avoided at all costs. After leaving the gathering at the Head Table, Ginny was being shepherded by George and Bill. Both of the older Weasleys were sensible and would be willing to let Ron distract and deflect Ginny's ire.

Ron, Harry and Hermione were the last to leave the Room of Requirement. After the others had left, the trio began to make their way down to the Great Hall together. Harry kept looking around to make sure they weren't spotted. The other two, however, were trying to repair their long-standing friendship.

"Okay, Ron?" asked Hermione gently. "I know it was a gamble bringing Draco and Astoria, but I've come to trust them. You do realise that the advice they offered was sensible."

Ron frowned but nodded. "I don't like it. I don't like having Ferret in on my family business. But I know it's for the best. It's just hard. I still don't entirely trust you, despite knowing it's just my inner darkness disliking you and being jealous of the prominence you and Luna gained after the Battle of Hogwarts. I know it's bullshit. I know I'm the one who went home, but this feeling that rises in me isn't logical or sensible. I'm fighting it, but it's not easy to control."

Hermione put her hand on his arm. "I know. I've got my own inner darkness, you know? Mine's just as hard to control; it just isn't as obvious as yours. I'm really thankful I had Severus, Lucius, even Cissy to talk to. They know what it's like to fight the beast within you. They've really helped keep me grounded."

Harry nodded his head in agreement. "Severus is excellent. He's got so many demons, and still, he's so strong. He's got superb control over his magic. So sometimes he falters, but he generally grits his teeth and tampers it down. Kingsley's the same. I think all Aurors have it in them because they've had to perform so much Dark magic in the name of the greater good. Remember Mad-Eye. No one said he was sane. He became what he did because of the Dark magic he had been exposed to over the years. We are not alone. We have support if we need it. But ultimately, only we can fight our inner fears, our hidden paranoia."

Ron sighed. "I know, mate. I was there when Kingsley spoke at the Auror Training inauguration meeting, remember?"

Harry blushed. "I didn't know you were paying attention."

Ron grinned. "How could I help it? He was talking directly to me, or so it felt at the time."

Harry nodded his head. "I felt his words were meant for me, personally, too. Perhaps all of us in that room felt the same. He was talking about what we are all going to have to fight, to face, for the rest of our lives."

Hermione wished she'd been able to listen to Kingsley talk so frankly to the boys. She'd learned everything from books, from Lucius and Severus. But she realised that they probably knew even more than Kingsley did. Lucius, after all, was almost as much of a Dark Arts expert as Severus was. Perhaps even more so, as he was heavily into Dark Charms, something that wasn't really Severus' forte.

"It was worth it, though," said Hermione brightly. "Look on the bright side. Moldyshorts is gone. We are still standing, and tonight is just one example of how far we have come. Draco and Astoria were working with the DA. That's something I never thought would ever come to pass."

"Me neither," said Ron with a chuckle. "Merlin, if Crabbe and Goyle could have been flies on the wall."

A sombre silence fell as the other two considered the painful way in which Crabbe had died of Fiendfyre, of the absolute lack of sense in the thuggish Slytherin.

"Goyle's going to be in Azkaban for a long time," said Harry quietly.

"I don't think he really knew what he was doing," said Hermione.

Ron scoffed. "You've gone soft, 'Mione. He knew what he was doing. He and Crabbe deliberately ignored the ferret's pleas to leave well enough alone."

Hermione nodded. "It's such a waste though. All that hate, all that killing, for some stupid megalomaniac. Ron, do you see why it's so important that we forgive, that we help bridge the gaps? We can't let some maniac use our fears against us. Lucius and Cissy aren't inherently evil. Manipulative, sneaky, cunning, devious, yes, categorically to all of that, but they aren't evil. They were afraid. Afraid of losing their world."

Ron grunted. "I know, 'Mione. I'm a pureblood, remember? I've heard all of this from my Aunt Muriel. But that doesn't mean we Weasleys were willing to go on a rampage and kill Muggles and Muggle-borns either."

"I know, Ron," said Hermione gently. "But your family had less to lose. They had some knowledge of Muggles. The Malfoys were so afraid of losing everything they had worked centuries to collect that they weren't really being logical. Most of the purebloods were just afraid, and then, lo and behold, here comes the heir to Slytherin offering them a way forward. They latched on and didn't question Riddle's motives and plans until it was too late."

Ron sighed. "Yes, well," and then he stopped and scratched his head. "George said something to that effect before going up to speak to you and the Malfoys. He said we can't allow people to use us for their own purposes. I can't believe George saw so clearly."

Hermione looked down on the floor silently. She still found it hard to even think about George without Fred's presence and death colouring her thinking.

Harry put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "I think it was losing Fred that finally made George sit down and think things through. He was always the strategist of the two, and without Fred to go charging off into mischief, I think George has had time to think, to reason. He's right. We can't let the next Dark Lord or Lady use us, our fears. Goyle and Crabbe, well, they were fools. We knew that. They didn't have a fully functioning brain between them. That's why it was so easy to convince them that Riddle was right. They couldn't reason. If Severus could be taken in for a while, and he's undoubtedly a genius, then why should idiots be able to see beyond the obvious?"

Ron grunted in agreement. He didn't have to like it, but he did see that Harry and Hermione were right. Hell, everyone was right in doing their best to include the Malfoys and the other Slytherins into their world. Turning the lot of them into outcasts would just go to create the next Dark Lord or Lady that much quicker. He wasn't so far gone into his sense of irrationality that he couldn't see their point.

Upon reaching the student entrance to the Great Hall, the trio split up. Ron went to go speak to George and Bill while Harry cornered Kingsley and relayed their plans. Hermione meanwhile went to inform Lucius and Narcissa to see if the other Malfoys had anything worthy to contribute. It felt good to have such excellent people to support their arrangements. No longer were the Golden Trio stuck in the middle of nowhere. Now they had solid support to back them up.

Draco and Astoria had, on entering the hall, made their way towards the group of their former Slytherin house-mates. They hadn't really socialised since Draco had been too intent on spending some solid time snogging his fiancée.

The others immediately made room for Draco and his future wife. They were too smart to deliberately cut the pair. Pansy, despite her jealousy at losing Draco, who she had thought was a sure thing, smiled broadly in welcome and immediately began cooing about the artful arrangement of Astoria's blonde hair.

Draco, watching the attention being paid to his fiancée, sneered at the other Slytherin's flattery. But he had to agree that, compared to Pansy, Astoria, despite her attention to her locks and artfully applied make-up, looked young and fresh in her school uniform. Pansy looked like she'd come to the party to pull. Her dark hair was cut short in an edgy, trendy style, and her dress was slinky, black and extremely short. Shaking his head at his former friend's obvious lack of taste and his own youthful foolishness in finding something and someone so overtly attractive, he instead began to talk politics with Theo and Blaise. Soon, the three young men had quietly moved apart from the ladies.

Draco cleverly brought the topic over to his father's brilliance in adopting Granger. He'd always boasted in his younger days about his father, so this kind of discussion was in keeping with what they expected of him. "I was rather shocked to see how quickly mother and father were willing to change their behaviour to suit the new order. I did hesitate in welcoming the Mudblood into our company. But I must admit she's not at all what I expected. She's rather witty, actually, now that she's learned to spar in a manner befitting a Malfoy."

Blaise sniggered. "Really, Draco? You like the Mudblood."

Draco looked thoughtfully at Blaise, but then he turned to include Theo in the confession he was making. "I do. Much as it pains me to admit it, I was wrong. Potter's not that bad either. I still get the kicks out of annoying them and insulting them, though, but it's not got that tinge of impending doom surrounding it. There's no one left to spy, to sneak back to the Dark Lord that I actually laughed at one of their return insults. It's nice to be free and to be able to figure out who I really am without fear of death or pain or the destruction of my family."

Theo sighed. "You're lucky. Your father was always politically savvy. Mine just didn't know when to quit. I'd rather he were stuck in Azkaban; at least I could have visited him at some point. Now he's gone, fighting the Aurors in a supposedly brave blaze of glory. I'm just glad I didn't evacuate to the castle, but to my grandparents' manor in Cornwall. If I'd been there, I'd have been forced to fight and would be sharing a matching cell to Greg. How is he? Any news?"

Draco shook his head. "Father didn't do too much to find out. We know that he and his father are in for life, though they will evaluate the case in three years' time and see how they are doing. If there's room for re-education and reintroduction to society. But you know how the Goyles have always been. It's unlikely that they'll know how to play the game and recant their position as loyal Death Eaters. Fools, all of them."

Blaise nodded. "I know. We at least all sat on the sidelines. We never got involved more than we could help it."

Draco frowned. "Well, you and Theo were lucky. I got branded. I had no choice; it was agree or watch the madman torture my mother. Of course, I crawled on my hands and knees and kissed his bloody hem."

Theo shivered. "I hated my father for the longest time, but now I'm only glad he insisted that I wasn't marked until I finished Hogwarts. I was even willing to fail my NEWTs if

it had meant I could have put it off for another year."

Blaise, Theo and Draco all shared a moment's contemplation of what their lives would have been like if Riddle had won. Then, shaking themselves out of their momentary contemplations, the three men threw themselves into a more jovial frame of mind.

"Congratulations on the betrothal," said Blaise with a smile. "I've not been around since the war ended."

"Thank you," said Draco. "I'm fortunate to have been able to secure so ideal a partner."

Theo's eyebrow quirked at the comment. "What happened to you and Pansy? Weren't you guys together almost until the end of the war?"

"Not really," said Draco. "We were together through our sixth year, but in the seventh, we were already drifting apart. It was never really an exclusive relationship. It was handy mostly."

Blaise tried to pretend that he wasn't paying attention to the discussion of Pansy. He had, on more than one occasion, made use of the fact that Draco and Pansy hadn't shared an exclusive relationship.

Draco, however, was using the topic to make Blaise feel slightly uncomfortable, and perhaps leave him and Theo alone.

"Is she seeing anyone, do you know?" asked Theo next. He, too, had been out of the loop for a while.

"I'm not sure," said Draco. "I doubt she'll refuse an offer though. You know what Pansy's like."

As the two of them sniggered, Blaise nodded his head and strolled off towards the drinks table.

Draco grinned unrepentantly. "I think he likes her. But he knows his mother will never approve of her. She's not as well connected as Mrs. Zabini would like."

Theo smirked in response. "I doubt Pansy would want to be tied to Blaise anyway. He's got that whole 'I'm your man, you're my woman' thing going. None of the girls like to feel like they're owned by the person they're seeing. Even I know that much, and I'm always hopeless in relationships. I can flirt and do the first bit, but then I get all muddled."

Draco laughed. "I've been thinking. You need to stop seeing Slytherins. They are far too likely to see through your attempts at manipulation. Besides which, other than the Greengrasses, most of their family reputations have, if not been tainted, at least been damaged by default with the Dark Lord's reign."

"Don't I know it," said Theo glumly. "My family name is shite. I can't even go back to the castle. The Ministry is holding it at the moment until we pay compensation for the Aurors and other related war crimes. My coffers are empty. No wonder my bitch step-mother is actively seeking another partner. We are almost completely financially ruined. The only good thing about the Ministry is that they aren't taking anything away permanently. It's only being held in trust until I can pay their price. Then, it will be returned to me. I thought they'd just put it on the market. Shackbolt's got his head screwed on right, though; he knows that's the surest way to drive us all even further away."

Draco nodded. He'd heard rumours, of course, who hadn't? But he hadn't known things were this dire. "Why don't you try going out with someone from the other side? By ensuring that Father cooperated as fully as possible with the Order and the Ministry, we've managed to do okay. Adopting Hermione was a genius stroke of luck. She's really helped ensure our place in society didn't falter. Godfather was pivotal, but people will always question his role as double-agent. Hermione, though, is beyond doubt the poster girl for the Order."

Theo's eyes widened at the suggestion. "Who do you have in mind? Granger?"

"No," said Draco, horrified. "Don't put it around, but Father's just spoken to Severus about organising a betrothal between him and Granger. I was thinking more along the lines of the Weaslette. She and Potter have broken up. She's vulnerable, will be impressed with your descriptions of the castle and you will always have, despite the current change in fortune, a place in society. Moreover, you want to maintain that place, something Potter's got no interest in."

"The youngest Weasley? Are you mad? They'll skin me alive for even looking at her." Theo was horrified, but even as he spoke these words, he couldn't resist a glance across the Hall at Ginny, who was surrounded by Ron, Lavender, George and Angelina. Even from this distance, she did stand out. She looked vibrant, sexy and filled with raw energy. He had a sudden vision of her, naked, her hair spread out like fire across his silk sheets. It was a tempting thought.

"Come on," said Draco. "I'll introduce you."

Theo gaped for a moment at Draco. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Draco. "It makes perfect sense. Arthur is going places. He's the backbone of the Order and will soon be moving up through the Ministry once they've weeded out all those they feel are not for the new programme. The joke shop is still doing well, despite the loss of Fred. Lee Jordan's been a good replacement, so money is not going to be that much a problem in the future. Bill's married well. Fleur comes from good French stock. Other than for their Blood Traitor status, they are not a bad family to be connected to. Even my mother and father allowed and acknowledged their overture of reunification this evening."

Theo nodded. "Yes, I saw that. I was amazed when some of the Weasleys came and spoke to your family."

Draco nodded his head. "There you go then. They aren't socially unacceptable. And politically, they are well placed. Come on. This is sure to be useful."

Theo still looked wary, but he allowed Draco to lead him across the floor.

Once in the presence of the Gryffindors, Draco smiled pleasantly.

George, who like his brother Bill, had been quietly told of the plan the others had arrived at, smiled in welcome in return. "Cousin, it's good of you to join us."

Angelina looked in query at George. She well remembered the Slytherin seeker from her days on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. But seeing the others, except for a glaring Ginny, nod in welcome, she too extended a smile in greeting.

Draco nodded in greeting to everyone in the circle too. Then, putting an arm around Theo, he said, "I brought the most evolved of my friends over. I thought Theo would benefit from some mutually informative conversation."

George sniggered. "What, is he going to tell us how to invest our money?"

"I could, if you'd like some advice," said Theo seriously. "Notts have always taken a keen interest in finance. It's what I've known since I was old enough to read the broadsheets."

Draco agreed with a chuckle. "Yes, we used to give Theo part of our pocket money while at school. He'd invest it for us, and we'd use all the profits for our end-of-year parties."

Theo laughed. "I remember that windfall I made when I bought shares in East Asia. I think the entire party consisted of caviar and champagne our fourth year. I'm still getting business propositions from the seniors of that year. They couldn't believe a fourteen year old could make that kind of dough from pocket money."

George looked impressed. "If you're serious, mate, and since you come with my cousin's recommendation, I'd like to show you my portfolio sometime. I've put away most of

the earnings since we started back into the business, but I've also started putting a little away for my parents and siblings."

Theo immediately agreed. "I'm still getting into large fund management, but I'd be pleased to look over your portfolio. I've already started handling some of Draco's more personal investments."

As the men began talking profit and loss, investment futures and financial markets, Ron's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He had never paid the slightest attention to any of this kind of thing. He had no idea his brother even understood this kind of talk. It was obvious that George had been working very hard since leaving school. As the topic changed towards Muggle investment prospects, Ron's eyes widened even further. Who would have imagined that Slytherins knew so much about Muggle technology? He was starting to see why Hermione kept saying that the Slytherins were not what they had thought they were. Theo seemed to know more about computers and wireless technology than even his father did. But then, Ron realised, his father to be fair wasn't really studying Muggle technology in depth. He was more of a dabbler.

Eventually, once the two Slytherins had completely gained their place in the Gryffindor circle, Draco winked at George and asked Angelina for a dance.

Blushing, the older girl placed her hand in Draco's. Never would she have thought she'd take the floor with the boy she'd known in the Gryffindor Common Room as the Ferret. The war really had changed things.

Once Draco made the move to lead Angelina on the floor, Theo graciously asked Ginny for a dance.

Ginny had not expected it. At first, she had been horrified to see the two Slytherins make their way over to join her family group. She had been fuming, listening to Ron, the traitor, and George. What was George thinking, talking to the two snakes? But eventually, she had grown interested, despite herself, in their conversation. She loved money. Hearing them throw around figures and expectations had made her realise that although Harry was rich, Draco and Theo were infinitely more well off. They were the real cream of pureblood circles. She had always known it, but she'd never really thought further about it since, in her mind, they had just been dirty Slytherins. But now, since she was no longer with Harry, she looked at Theodore Nott with new eyes. He was tall, lanky, yet well built. His shoulders were broad, his waist and hips slim, and he dressed with the Slytherin eye for detail and quality. His robes were of the softest wool, his shirt, expensive spider silk. A quick glance confirmed he had on diamond-studded cufflinks and matching buttons. Nice.

Preening at how quickly she had been sought out, for she had not missed Theo's quick glances her way, even as he talked finance and investment with her brother, Ginny decided that the best way to show Harry what he was missing out on was to find someone else. Theo Nott would do nicely. He was everything Harry wasn't. Didn't his father die fighting at their castle in Inverness, if the *Prophet* was to be believed? Ginny tried to imagine herself the mistress of a castle. A smile graced her face. Oh, wouldn't Romilda gasp to know she had found someone so much more interesting. She could even tell everyone that she had broken up with Harry because she was interested in Theo. She knew Harry would not contradict her. Deciding that circulating her version of events was far more preferable to letting the gossips know she had been dumped by the Saviour of the Wizarding World who wanted to live in a village and make soup, Ginny smiled flirtatiously at Theo.

Theo's shrewd eyes did not miss the emotions that were revealed one by one on Ginny's face. But he was a Slytherin; he did not mind the calculating gleam in her eye. He had a plan of his own, after all. Besides, it was refreshing to be with someone who was so easy to read. No Slytherin girl would have allowed herself and her vulnerabilities to be seen so easily. However, his heart picked up a faster beat when she finally seemed to come to a decision and smiled seductively up at him. Theo tightened his arm around her in response. Two could play the game.

Ginny's eyes widened in alarm at the openly predatory gleam in Theo's eyes. She shuddered as she felt the strength and possessiveness in the arms that surrounded her. Harry had never really held her this way. Theo danced with superb mastery and control.

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A note from the beta:

I'm so sorry for the wait!!! Kittyperry is an absolutely amazing author/friend who had this out a long while before I managed to pull my act together.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty-Four: Outcomes

*Chapter 34 of 40*

Hermione meets Severus and Minerva for tea. The girls tell Luna about the Halloween Feast and its results.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. I apologise for the delay in posting this chapter. However, my PhD thesis must come first, and these last few weeks, months, have been taken up with completing the rewrites for one of my chapters. Please do not think though that I will abandon this story. I shall see it through. In that respect, your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going, but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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The Halloween Feast ended shortly afterwards. Hermione had not had a further opportunity to talk to Severus, but she had briefly informed Lucius and Narcissa, before their departure from the castle, that Draco would fill them in. She knew Draco would take great pleasure in giving them all the details once they were back home. Once the Malfoys departed, Hermione did not linger in the Great Hall. She did not want to be questioned by the other students, and she especially wanted to avoid Ginny, who was, even now, wrapped in Theo Nott's arms.

Amazed at how quickly the Slytherin had pounced on Ginny, Hermione could not help but smile inwardly at Draco's ability to sell his ideas to his friends. He was going to be a power to be reckoned with once he'd grown more in knowledge and stature. She could well understand now how Lucius had risen to such prominence within pureblood circles. It was something to do with the confidence of the Malfoy men, their belief that they knew how the world should be. Severus had that same quality, but he was not as

pushy. He was more likely to work quietly in the background. The Malfoys, however, were not backward in coming forward, in imposing their vision on the world. No wonder the Dark Lord had insisted that Draco take the mark. The megalomaniac would have been able to see the promise in the young man. Such a power had to be contained, or it would have grown to become a threat in later years. It similarly explained why the Dark Lord had courted and pandered to Lucius, why he had ensured that Lucius was neatly trapped within his web of deceit. Voldemort had known that without Lucius, he would not be able to control and rule the pureblood brotherhood.

It was amazing how much more clearly she could see, now that her fears had been laid to rest. It was as though a dark cloud that had been blinding her had suddenly been lifted. Sighing, Hermione slipped into her nightdress and prepared for bed. She kept replaying past conversations, trying to understand what had changed and why she felt so much more herself after such a long lapse of time. Surely, seeing the truth of Severus' adoration and feeling her new family's devotion could not have made such a difference? But she realised that it had. The paranoia that had forced her to cling to people no matter how they used her had finally lifted. She finally felt secure in the knowledge that she was loved for herself, as she was. Her mind was not something that she needed to be ashamed of. Her thirst for knowledge was not and never would be a source of discomfort in her family. It was something Lucius and Cissy appreciated about her, and Severus, well, he adored her quick mind. It was what made them so compatible. She did not need to be spoken down to; she understood him, just as he understood her.

Sliding under the cool sheets of her four poster, Hermione felt a shiver run down her spine. At first alarmed, she listened intently and realised that it was the spirits of the castle speaking to her. They seemed satisfied that their present lord was pleased. She guessed the castle had picked up on Severus' pleasure at the proposed engagement. She, too, was happy. She knew that although the move had been very much against her Muggle upbringing, it had been the right step to take in approaching Severus. He needed the reassurance of the old ways. He had worked hard to distance himself from his Muggle half, embracing the pureblood creed with a vengeance in reaction to his father's brutality. The contract therefore would ensure that her virginity was checked, and though it seemed barbaric, obscene, it would still all the malicious rumours that had circulated about her. There was no way that anyone could question her past relationships. She would come to his marriage bed pure, and as they performed the High Magic, they would bind themselves with strong ties of commitment.

Hermione could not stop the huge grin that graced her face at the thought of being able to publicly claim Severus for her own. It would be heaven to be in his arms again, to feel the strength of his passion, the lushness of his kisses. She couldn't wait to have the contract settled. Sighing in satisfaction that he had agreed to Lucius' proposition, she settled down to think about the rest of the evening's happenings. She worried about what the Order would now do about Molly, Ginny and Ron. Ron, at least, seemed to understand the problem with his darkness. Like her, he was battling his demons, so there was hope that he would in time learn to live with the altered state of his magic. Ginny, seemingly lost in her darkness, was revelling in it. She didn't seem to be fighting it at all, even though DADA lessons had focused in the changing of magic specifically for a lot of the curriculum. She realised that the red-head was not paying attention to what was being taught in class. Molly, too, seemed to have not understood the message at all. She wondered if Bill and Arthur should try getting Molly to take more of an interest in gardening. Hermione had been working on a side project since discovering the changes that Dark Magic brought about. She felt sure that there were specifically Light Magics that would act as a counter to inherently Dark Magic. Herbology, for example, was especially Light. There was something about the act of working with the earth that grounded a practitioner's magic. It required concentration, skill and total commitment from the practitioner. And although there were plants that were dangerous and indeed, deadly, the growing of them required so much dedication to the soil that it acted as a way of balancing out Darker tendencies. Neville was a case in point. Though he had killed Nagini and thus a part of Voldemort's soul, he had not been tainted, or at least not overly so. But then, from the very first, he had worked on the reconstruction of the green houses and the mending, healing of the forest. He had spent most of the summer in back breaking work, ensuring that the grounds, the forest and the gardens were brought back to their possible best. No wonder then that of all the DA members who had battled Voldemort and the Death Eaters, he was one of the most well-adjusted. Healing seemed to have similar properties, though Hermione didn't know enough about Healing magic to really go into the theory of its effects on practitioners of Dark Magic. It was something Hermione planned to discuss with Severus when she had the opportunity. She was sure it would be something that he was interested in.

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The next morning was a busy one. After the late night, many seventh-years were tired and bleary eyed. However, everyone in the Gryffindor common-room seemed to be buzzing with discussions of the night before. Hermione tried her best to avoid listening to the gossip, but she could not help but overhear Romilda Vane discuss with her friends the startling development of Ginny dropping Harry Potter for Theodore Nott. It seemed that Ginny had told Romilda in confidence that Theo was so much more dashing than Harry. Jealously seemed to drip from Romilda's every pore as she tried to do her best to not pout at Ginny's success in attracting Theo. 'Ginny said that Theo is a Baron. She'll be the Baroness if she marries him.'

Hermione bit back a laugh, but she realised that if this was what was required to stop Ginny spreading malicious gossip about the Malfoys that it was worth keeping quiet. Harry wouldn't care; he was not the type to worry about the stigma of having a school girl drop him for another man.

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At four o'clock, Hermione made her way to the Headmaster's Office. She had much to narrate to Minerva and Severus about their activities the previous night. Indeed, when Hermione reached the gargoyle, it leapt aside as if it had been told to expect her. Hermione smiled at it in gratitude and said a quiet, 'Thank you.' She couldn't be certain, but she was almost sure she saw the stone statue's countenance soften ever so slightly. It still amazed her how blind she had been for so long about the castle. Now, she realised that everything around her was watching, alert and protective. No wonder that Dumbledore had managed to know what was going on all the time within Hogwarts. He had had the most effective of spy networks, one that most students had never even been aware of. As students, they had been wary of the portrait network, of the house-elves, but they had never considered that the very walls of the castle were sentient.

When Hermione reached the office, she found both Severus and Minerva already seated around the coffee table. A pot of tea stood in readiness, as did a large, ornate tray of biscuits and cakes. It looked like the house-elves were celebrating their Headmaster's return to good humour.

Hermione beamed in greeting. She was happy to see her mentor and her fiancé. It had been so hard to contain her happiness, to stop from bursting into inappropriate giggling at the thought of finally being able to claim Severus as her own.

Minerva smiled at Hermione's obvious joy. Standing up in greeting, she opened her arms in welcome while saying, 'Congratulations, my dear. I'm so happy to hear of your upcoming nuptials.'

Hermione blushed, but then allowed herself to be smothered in a large, warm hug. 'Thank you, Minerva. I'm ecstatic. I'm so glad Severus agreed to Lucius' proposition. I had nightmares of him refusing merely on principle.'

Severus frowned in warning. 'I'm not fool enough to sabotage myself. When a Slytherin is given a treasure, he is not going to refuse it just to be difficult.'

Minerva chuckled even as Hermione turned big, innocent eyes in his direction.

Severus muttered darkly, 'Enough you two, you know me far too well. But I couldn't refuse Hermione; I am not fool enough to cut off my nose in spite of my face, neither am I going to insult my oldest friends when they offer their daughter to me. It would be the height of foolishness.'

Hermione giggled. 'You've done plenty of the former, and enough of the later to prove you can be excessively foolish, you know,' she said with a grin. 'Take for instance, you not putting up a fuss when I elected to return to Hogwarts for my final year.'

Severus sighed. 'Enough, wench. I'm here to have tea, and some nice conversation, not ribbing by you two Gryffindors. What did I ever do to deserve such a fate?'

Minerva laughed in delight at this playful teasing. 'It does me good to see you both so happy,' she said, sitting down and pouring out the tea. 'This place is in need of more laughter. Even though it's been a few months since the end of the war, sometimes the darkness seems ever so oppressive.'

This honest comment turned the conversation to a more serious direction. Taking the offered cup of tea, Hermione brought up the topic of Light Magic that was foremost in her mind.

As Severus and Minerva listened to Hermione's thoughts, the two teachers exchanged a telling glance. They had both always known of Hermione's brilliance, but this joining of dots seemed inspired.

'That sounds like a very good hypothesis,' said Minerva after seeing Severus return her questioning gaze with a tiny nod of his head. 'I think it would be a good idea to put the theory into practice by way of experimentation. We can get Molly and Ginny to participate in a small trial. We've been meaning to have the Burrow's protections strengthened now that Arthur had been given a more prominent position in the Ministry as one of Kingsley's advisors. This will ensure that Molly and Ginny work on the growing of protective plants for the periphery of the property. They are unlikely to want to do things for others, but if it is to demonstrate their own status, it will be more likely to be accepted.'

Severus nodded in agreement. 'Yes, all purebloods of good standing have protective enchantments around their grounds, mostly woven into the plants, shrubs and bushes. This would be directly along those lines. Now that the Weasleys' position has altered, it will seem as though the Order is encouraging their own growth in status. If we speak to Arthur and Bill in advance, I'm sure they will be able to sell the concept to their women. Moreover, if we select enchantments that rely on women's magic, it will increase the worth of both Molly and Ginny within the eyes of their family. They both want to feel needed, valued. This should work.'

Hermione beamed in delight. She had not thought that her ideas would be implemented so quickly. 'Women's magic? I haven't really heard of that much,' she said with obvious interest. 'I thought there wasn't a gendered difference in magic.'

Minerva went into teacher mode. 'Generally there isn't, but for the older forms of magic, like house-hold protection, infant-protection and so on, there are the more gender specific branches. It's old magic, like blood and sex magic. Intrinsic, not generally found in books and not taught at Hogwarts. What evidence you will find will be in family grimoires. I'm sure Lucius has some in his library, as do I. Mine was hand-written by my great grandmother on my father's side. It's something that I'm slowly recopying to preserve for my own god-children. I'm sure the Weasleys have their own version. All the families have their own individual spells and enchantments.'

Hermione's eyes once again began to take on that look of intense fervour. 'Has there been no attempt made to consolidate such material? Surely it should all be gathered, catalogued. How can we let such things moulder away, unlearned, untaught?'

Severus chuckled darkly while reaching for a biscuit. Looking at Minerva, he stage-whispered, 'And she's off. I can see it now. The latest in the long line of Hermione Granger-Malfoy-Snape's legacies. The collected grimoires of the British Isles in a series of volumes. Next will come the more complete collection of work from the great European houses. It might indeed be a life-long project.'

Hermione laughed and threw a napkin at Severus. 'Really, Headmaster,' she admonished. 'Having you happy seems to be a disadvantage. I much preferred you as a grouch. You didn't tease me so.'

Minerva laughed. 'Indeed, lass, he does seem to be taking his delight in having you has his future wife to the extreme. Could I suggest not having such a longwinded surname? It's going to be hell when your books start coming out in print.'

Hermione blushed and giggled again. Who would have thought that her two teachers would rib her on her future role within the magical research community? For she had realised since her return to Hogwarts for her final year that she wanted to spend her time working as a researcher and data collector. The magical world seemed to not have thought about the need to standardise, to catalogue, to preserve and gather magic found within families and magical institutions like Hogwarts. Sure, there were libraries, but they contained well-known books, published works. There were no manuscripts, no family archives. It was possible that a lot of the more private information was faulty, but once it was verified, tested, it could be collected as a more cohesive database. The magical world seemed very lax in its approach to proper archiving.

Once the cake was consumed, the discussion eventually turned to the events of the previous night. After Severus and Minerva were told in detail about Draco and Astoria's involvement in handling Ginny, there was a moment of silence. Severus was smirking. It was obvious that he was proud of his god-son and his fiancée's ability to read the situation.

Minerva, though, looked troubled. Finally, with a sigh, she said, 'I guess it's the best we can hope for. Are you sure Theodore has no Death Eater leanings?'

Hermione shrugged. 'I don't really know him personally, but Draco was sure that he wasn't involved in anyway. Draco felt Theo had only pretended to lean towards the Death Eater creed to avoid angering his father.'

Minerva nodded her head. 'Well, if that's the case, then the match will help both of them. I suppose all Slytherin plans will always have a number of benefits.'

Severus chuckled. 'Of course. It's what we are best known for, and my god-son's learned from the best.'

Minerva laughed, and Hermione joined in the mirth.

'We will have to arrange an Order meeting soon,' said Severus, once the laughter had subsided. 'I know Kingsley was going to put Percy in charge of organising it, but I'll have Lucius come in for the meeting, perhaps even Narcissa and Draco. It's bound to make things interesting, though I'm sure that now Arthur has taken steps to mend the breach, it won't turn into a bloodbath.'

Minerva nodded her head. 'I think that's a good idea. Perhaps even invite some of Hermione's friends from the DA. Neville will surely want to be a part of the meeting, as will Augusta, and I can't imagine Miss Bones not wanting to know about the measures the Order has taken to ensure that former Death Eaters were made to pay for their deeds in one form or another. She's lost most of her family to the Death Eaters. This will help give her more closure.'

Hermione nodded her head vigorously in agreement. 'Susan and Hannah were with us last night in our little plotting session, so the two of them should definitely be included. And perhaps we should include Theo? That should distract Ginny surely.'

Severus laughed again. 'Last night, I accused Lucius of turning into a Gryffindor, but my dear, you're turning into a Slytherin in equal propositions. I'm glad your evolution has begun, even before our formal engagement. That is a very good plan.'

Hermione winked at him. 'Yes, well, since I'm so utterly involved with you snakes, it makes sense to make use of all the advantages at my disposal.'

Minerva choked on her tea as she broke once more into laughter.

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The week passed by at break neck speed. Luna returned to Hogwarts on Tuesday after having spent the weekend in Sweden. As soon as classes were completed for the day, the three friends retired to their special corner of the library. There, she was immediately told of all that had gone on in her absence by her two girl-friends. Hermione, who had now come to realise that her friend was unlikely to be surprised, took it in stride to see Luna simply nod her head when she was told of Ginny's latest relationship with Theodore Nott.

'It was obvious she wasn't going to stay with Harry, just as Harry wasn't going to be happy with her,' said Luna placidly. 'I told Harry that at the Fudge Ball, actually. I told him he should put his happiness and comfort first. That he shouldn't let Ginny bully him. That if she wanted fame, she should earn it. But I guess getting it through Theodore is much easier.'

Hermione smirked at Astoria at Luna's candid reading of the situation. 'Why am I not surprised?' she asked with a grin. 'You always seem to know what's going to happen before it does.'

Luna shook her head. 'I don't, but I see people, I see their auras. Some blend well together, while some just don't mix, not in the way they should. Draco and Tory together form a beautiful medley of colours. It is obvious they were made for each other. Harry and Ginny were attuned to each other in fifth year, but Ginny's changed, as has Harry. Now they just clash.'

Astoria's eyes glowed in interest. 'What do Draco and I look like? You've spoken of auras before, but I never thought to ask.'

Luna's eyes lost focus for a moment. Then, she spoke in her vague tone as though her gaze was on a far off plane. 'You're like an old gold shade, bright but refined, not brassy like that of new gold. Draco's more of a silvery platinum. Together, the two of you just shine, your colours intertwine and dazzle like I'm looking at the sun and the moon.'

Astoria's eyes misted in tears. 'Oh, Luna. That's such a beautiful image. You're so special. I'm so glad I got to know you through Hermione.' The haughty Slytherin slipped out of her seat and wrapped her arms around Luna.

Luna hugged her friend in return. 'I'm lucky, too, Tory. Until I met Harry and joined the DA, I didn't have any friends. People always called me Loony Lovegood and used to spend their time harassing me. You have no idea how good it is to have you and Hermione this year. Last year I had Neville, Susan and Hannah, but we were never as close as I've grown to be with you both. For the first time, I've got real girl-friends, real people who I know actually care about me.'

'Of course, we care,' said Hermione, moving over to join her friends in a three-way hug. 'You are very important to us. I was a fool in my sixth year. It took me a while to see beyond the obvious. I'm sorry, Luna, for all the petty things I thought and said before I really got to know you.'

Luna's eyes spilled over with tears. 'I know you're sorry. I can see in your aura that you truly consider me one of your closest friends. You have the same tone to your gestures when you're with Harry as you do when you're with me and Tory. That, more than anything, makes me know that I'm one of your special people.'

'Really?' asked Hermione, even more interested. 'My gestures have a tonal variation depending on how much I care, or how I feel about someone?'

Luna nodded her head. 'Yes, if I look carefully and study someone for a long while, I can easily tell how they feel towards someone. For example, your aura is usually some shade of purple. When you're with Headmaster Snape, it is really bright, almost like royal purple with bright flashes of silver and gold. When you're with Harry, it's gentler, more maternal if you will, like lavender. It's not as maternal with me and Tory, but it is still a similar shade of lavender. For our professors, especially Professor McGonagall, it's like a dark aubergine, I suppose because of the respect you feel for their knowledge. For Draco, Lucius and Cissy, it's more of a periwinkle blue. When you look at people you don't like, like when we were at the Fudge Ball and the reporters tried to speak to you, you have this sickly gray tinge to your very dark purple aura of anger and annoyance.'

Astoria and Hermione were both struck dumb with this detailed description. 'How do you cope?' asked Hermione finally in astonishment. 'If you're constantly being bombarded with so much information merely from our auras it must make it very hard to be around people.'

Luna nodded her head. 'I've learned to not focus on people directly, but to just look away from them somewhat. It's only since my imprisonment at Malfoy Manor that I've learned to look at people directly. It really came in handy when I was in the dungeons. I knew immediately that Draco hated having me there, that he would have let me go if he could have. His aura is generally silvery gray, but it was tinged with yellow, sickly, I suppose corresponding to how miserable and embarrassed he felt. I knew, then, that he didn't want to see me hurt. If he had enjoyed my pain like Pettigrew did, it would have glowed with malicious glee. His did. His aura was like the colour of dried blood. The more I cried, and I did cry for the first few days, the more his aura glowed, pulsed in enjoyment.'

Astoria and Hermione both moved back to their seats as Luna had started describing Hermione's aura, but they both surrounded their friend when she began speaking of her imprisonment. They shared a look over Luna's head. This was one of the few times Luna had really spoken of her time at Malfoy Manor. Generally, she touched upon it and then shrugged it off as though it was of no consequence. Though it pained them to hear her speak of such a horrid experience, they realised it was a sign of her slowly but surely healing.

The friends remained in a close huddle for a while. Then, Hermione broke the mood by bringing up the topic of the Order meeting that coming Sunday. Luna was attending, and Astoria had insisted that she come too. She didn't want Draco to attend without her. They all wondered how it would go, how Molly and Ginny would react.

Late Saturday morning found the trio of friends seated on their bench in the Great Hall courtyard. The girls were discussing their Arithmancy homework and generally trying to both study and relax. There was teasing and laughter in the air. Into this happy atmosphere came the sound of beating wings before Narcissa Malfoy's horned owl made its appearance. In its possession was a scroll bound in decorative gold.

All three of the girls sat up as Hermione took the scroll from the owl's keeping. She stroked the owl's feathers and thanked it. Then, while the bird took off towards the owlery for its treat before its journey home, Hermione untied the golden cord holding the missive closed and broke off the seal. Luna and Astoria crowded around Hermione as she read the note of introduction from Cissy. It let the girls know that Severus had sent Lucius his financial affairs for perusal, and based on discussions, a formal agreement had been signed at dawn, since it was an auspicious time for such a venture, between the two men. The missive stated that there would be a brief celebration for lunch this afternoon in the Headmaster's Office.

Hermione beamed with joy as her two friends hugged her. 'Finally, I waited all week for news, but Cissy kept saying that the men were still in discussion. As if Lucius cares how much money Severus has.'

Astoria smiled gently. 'You know, it would probably have been more that Lucius wanted to give you a large dowry and that Severus probably refused most of what was offered because he didn't want it being said that you were being sold off or something.'

'Oh,' said Hermione thoughtfully. 'I hadn't thought of that. I didn't realise Lucius would offer a dowry. It isn't really a part of Muggle custom.'

Luna sighed. 'You aren't paying attention again, 'Mione. This is the pureblood way. Both sides would make offerings. Lucius a dowry worthy of you, and Severus a bride-price.'

Hermione grimaced. 'I suppose I just found all the financial discussions distasteful and willfully chose to blind myself from that aspect of the betrothal. In the Muggle world, a couple just go on feeling. They build their lives together. Finances aren't really looked at in this way for most of us.'

Astoria smiled and stroked Hermione arm in comfort. 'Most purebloods don't go to these extremes either, but the Malfoys are like my family. They adhere to the customs very stringently. And since Lucius made a formal contract with Severus, this is part of the requirement. Think of it as a necessary evil. Besides, it is done now. And since you had Madam Pomfrey validate your virginity on Wednesday with the appropriate spell work and documentation, there's nothing to do now but celebrate and start planning your wedding. I can't wait for our joining. Draco and I are so excited. It's too long for summer.'

'I guess Severus and I will be wed in the summer, too,' said Hermione softly. 'Perhaps we could have a joint wedding? The Malfoy heirs wed. I think that would make a nice headline, don't you?'

All three laughed. Then, Luna said practically, 'I think we should all go tidy up for lunch. The bride to be should look presentable for the celebrations, don't you?'

Astoria giggled. 'Indeed. Though, 'Mione, I think you should change and meet me and Luna in the Room of Requirement. I'll do your hair and make-up.'

Hermione grinned at her two friends. 'Okay, you can help make me beautiful, though you know, he does know what I look like. This isn't going to be a deal breaker.'

'Of course not,' said Astoria with a chuckle. 'But it's always nice to see Severus lose the thread of his conversation when he sees you. It gives me a special feeling of joy to see him so in love.'

Hermione laughed. 'You're such a romantic, 'Tory. Be careful the other Slytherins don't find out.'

The girls all laughed and parted ways. Lunch was not really that far off.



# Chapter Thirty-Five: A meeting at Grimmauld Place

Chapter 35 of 40

There is a celebration of Hermione's betrothal in the Headmaster's Office. Minerva suggests having a more formal celebration the following day at Grimmauld Place. This she feels will help diffuse tensions before the big meeting that is being planned to discuss Death Eater settlements. Lucius and Cissy agree although they are not too thrilled at the idea of having their affairs bandied about.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the brilliant J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. I apologise for the long delay in posting this chapter. However, my PhD thesis must come first, and these last few months have been taken up with completing the rewrites for one of my chapters. Please do not think, though, that I will abandon this story. I shall see it through. In that respect, your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So, please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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As Hermione entered the Headmaster's Office flanked by Luna and Astoria, Severus stopped in mid-conversation with Lucius and Minerva to gaze at her for a long moment before dragging his attention back to his amused listeners. She looked extremely fetching in a simple ivory wool dress. He always liked how she managed to find clothes that were elegant yet simple. The cowl neckline showed a hint of her bosom while managing to remain entirely discreet. The colour complimented her glorious hair and creamy skin to perfection.

Luna and Astoria watched with delight as the two lovers gazed at each other in adoration before doing their best to pretend to a sangroid they obviously did not feel. Luna especially found it touching because she could see how the Headmaster's aura had changed since he had been able to get back together with Hermione. When they were apart his aura had been extremely dark and desolate. Now, although his colours were still an obvious pewter, there was brightness in it, as though it had been infused with silver shards and golden moonbeams.

Lunch in the Headmaster's Office turned out to be a much larger affair than the three girls had been led to imagine from Narcissa's missive. The office seemed to be overflowing with people and good cheer. The reason for this much larger party lay in Minerva's hands, for when Severus had informed Minerva, she had, in turn, told Poppy, Pomona and Flitwick. Then, feeling guilty, she had also informed Slughorn and Hagrid. Minerva knew how close the half-giant had always been to both Hermione and Severus and Slughorn, of course, would feel terribly left out if he ever found out the other Heads of House had been present. Meanwhile, Lucius and Narcissa arrived with Draco, as well as Andromeda and Kingsley.

Thus, the party was forced to move from the Headmaster's Office into his private quarters. The gathering was filled with much mirth and goodwill despite Severus' grumbling about being invaded without warning or notice. Hagrid, as expected, cried tears of joy and wiped his face with an enormous acid-green handkerchief that looked like it had started life out as a particularly nasty fashionista interpretation of a pashmina shawl. There was much congratulating and back clapping, hugging and the shaking of hands, all of which Severus endured good naturedly. Lucius, meanwhile, basked in the spotlight and gave all and sundry his patented shark's smile. Cissy, however, was well and truly delighted, and it showed. For many who had not witnessed the real warmth behind the icy exterior of the Slytherin matriarch, this came as an unexpected surprise.

Hermione, of course, seemed to have re-found her lost confidence. She smiled and responded with twinkling eyes to all of the comments and felicitations being offered. Hermione felt as though she had undergone a total transformation since she'd made up with Severus at the Halloween Feast. The Darkness that had made her an insecure, frightened little girl who was willing to let others take the lead seemed to have finally disappeared. She still had moments of fear and irrational doubt, but now she felt as though she was more in control of her emotions. She really found it interesting how the Darkness picked up on people's most obvious weaknesses. She had always been desperate to belong, to please, and the Darkness had latched on to that with gusto. That she had latched on to the Malfoys and Severus had been sheer luck, although it also struck her that it could have been because the Darkness found in them kindred spirits.

Hermione mused that there was much she really needed to discuss with both Severus and Minerva. If her thinking was correct, it would explain Harry's desire to vanish into the woodwork and his desire to give up on being an Auror and retire to some tiny village and make soup. Not that it was a bad thing to do, but she didn't want her dear friend to do anything based on fear and a desire for anonymity. Harry, Hermione knew, had political influence; it was only right that he not waste the fruits of his labour. She agreed that he didn't need to be a slave to fame as per Ginny's desires, but he should not let his voice fade into the background. For the moment, people listened to him, and he should use his fame to better the way things were done.

After the felicitations, Severus led everyone to the feast that had been laid out. The house-elves, of course, had outdone themselves once more with a veritable banquet. They had laid out smoked salmon, ham and pheasant, as well as a lovely selection of cheese and fruit for a light repast for those who didn't want a large meal at this time of day. For others, like Slughorn, who enjoyed their food, there were large platters with warm shredded duck, orange and little gem salad with hazelnut oil dressing, baked Cornish brie wrapped in filo pastry with beetroot and apple salad, honey roast Devon pork sausages with mashed potato, gravy and vegetables and, to end it all, individual servings of white chocolate mousse topped with blueberries.

Once the meal was consumed and everyone's hunger sated, Lucius stood up and toasted the happy couple. He had brought over bottles of his cellar's finest French champagne to toast the occasion. "Today, my only daughter and old friend are finally betrothed. This is a very happy day for me and mine. Long have we wanted to officially welcome Severus into our family. Now that dream is finally realised. Hermione, I commend you in your fine selection of your future spouse. Severus, you old dog, I wish you all the happiness in the world with my beautiful, talented and powerful daughter."

There was much cheering and applause following Lucius' words. Everyone seemed delighted to be in attendance and enjoyed the delicious champagne. Minerva's eagle eyes noted Slughorn's special enjoyment of the wine, for he did prefer the finer things in life. Minerva could also not miss the obvious pride that Lucius seemed to take in Hermione's magical strength. She was surprised to note that there were tears in her eyes that she had to blink away rapidly. She despised women who cried at the drop of a hat, but to see the obvious love and affection shared by her star-pupil and Severus, who had proved himself to be the truest of friends, meant much to her. As her glance met that of Narcissa Malfoy, the two women shared a moment of perfect understanding. They would both do whatever was needed to ensure that these two could live a life of happiness and peace.

Severus accepted the teasing in good grace. He was, in truth, pleased and overwhelmed with the generosity that Lucius had shown with the dowry he had settled on Hermione. In fact, he had tried long and hard to refuse, but the Malfoy patriarch had been insistent. He did not want anyone to ever suggest that he had not done more than was required for his Muggle-born child.

Once the toasts were drunk, Severus stood up and addressed the gathering. "On behalf of Hermione and myself, let me thank everyone of you for your congratulations. We are both fortunate to have such dear friends here with us today. However, as you all know, Hermione is still a student at Hogwarts preparing for her NEWTs. I, therefore, urge you to ensure that the news of this engagement does not do the rounds outside those of us gathered here. It is imperative that she is allowed to focus on her education. I want no suggestion of scandal to disrupt her final year at Hogwarts."

Minerva nodded her head in agreement with Severus' pronouncement. Taking the cue from her, the others, too, nodded their heads in agreement. They could understand how difficult it would be for Hermione if news of her engagement to the Headmaster were to become public knowledge.

Minerva turned to Hagrid and said gently, "You must take great care, Hagrid. We can't have anyone of the press finding out this information. Do be careful that you don't speak of this down at the pub."

Hagrid blushed at Minerva's words. "I ain't as foolish as I was, Professor," he said gruffly.

Minerva smiled. "I know, Hagrid, but there's nothing lost in reminding you. I think it is prudent that we all mind our words. We must take care not to speak of this in the staff room and certainly be mindful that students do not overhear us."

Everyone readily agreed.

"But what about letting the members of the Order know?" asked Kingsley. "Surely, Arthur is trustworthy as are Augusta and Harry?"

Hermione, who had been paying close attention to the conversation, responded to Kingsley's questions. "Well, I've not told Harry or Ron yet, but I did mention it to Neville, Susan and Hannah. I don't think they'll spread it around, though. I did mention to them that I'd not told Harry yet and told them not tell anyone what I'd said."

Severus sighed when he heard Hermione's words. "Well, if you've already told some of your friends from the DA, I suppose there's no point keeping it from Potter and Weasley. But we can't have this spread to Miss Weasley or any of the students other than Astoria and Luna. It really needs to be kept under wraps."

"How about if we do tell the members of the DA and the Order who are at the meeting and take a wand oath requiring that they don't talk about it until we are ready to speak of our engagement in public?" Hermione questioned. "That way, they can be told, but Ginny and Molly, for example, can't do anything with that knowledge."

Lucius chuckled. "That's spoken like a true Malfoy, my dear. Give them the information but ensure they can't do anything with it."

Severus mock-frowned in Lucius' direction. "Stop it. You're turning Hermione into too much of a Slytherin. I was planning on enjoying her Gryffindor openness. If you turn her into a cunning Slytherin, you'll take away any chance I have of keeping up with her."

There was much laughter at this comment. It was more than apparent to all present that the Malfoys, Hermione and Severus were in perfect accord and understanding.

Minerva, especially, was delighted at this. She had worried when she had heard about Hermione going to stay with the Malfoys on her return from Australia. She had not wanted to interfere, for she knew that Kingsley and Severus were both regular visitors since the end of the war to Malfoy Manor. But in her heart, she had not trusted that the affection that was professed was genuine. Now, watching the interaction between Lucius, Narcissa and Hermione, as well as the camaraderie between Draco, Astoria and Hermione, it was obvious that the affections and emotions were real on all sides. This was not just a politically and socially motivated stunt.

Minerva felt much more assured after watching the interactions closely. She had allowed her mind to drift, to consider the implications of all of these emotions, but she was brought back to the conversation with Hermione's words. Turning to address Severus and Lucius, she said, "Perhaps the meeting tomorrow could commence with a formal announcement of the engagement."

Kingsley frowned thoughtfully at this pronouncement. "I don't want any suggestion that we are avoiding the issue, Minerva."

Minerva nodded her head. "I do see your point. Miss Weasley and Molly will most likely see it as an attempt to distract their attention away from the topic."

Lucius inclined his head. Gesturing to Kingsley and Severus with his head, he said, "I have already stated that Cissy and I are uncomfortable with having our affairs made so public. However, it will go a long way in helping the other members of the Order see how committed we are to the new order of things. In that light, perhaps we could have the Death Eater settlements discussed first, then a demonstration of my sincerity in wishing Hermione and Severus well via the exposition of the dowry I have placed in Hermione's name. This will, therefore, automatically ensure that the others cannot speak of Severus and Hermione's betrothal until they are allowed to do so, and it will also allow for a tidy summing up of our current positions."

Narcissa nodded her head as Lucius finished speaking. "I agree with Minerva's assertion," she said, meeting the older witch's gaze. "Molly is unlikely to let Hermione and Severus' engagement overshadow her accusations."

Thus it was agreed.

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The next morning at about half past eleven, Luna, Astoria and Hermione made their way to the Headmaster's Office to Floo to Grimmauld Place for the Order meeting. They were joined in the office by a vindictively gloating Ginny, who seemed to feel that the meeting was being held entirely for her benefit. That she was, responsible, only made her gloat all the more. The four girls maintained a strained silence until Minerva ushered Ginny into the Floo first. Severus, knowing the tense situation, had decided to go to Grimmauld Place in advance of the Hogwarts' contingent so that he could prepare Harry for the coming meeting.

Once Ginny was safely through to Grimmauld Place, Minerva turned around and hugged Hermione warmly. "Don't worry, lass. I'm sure it will all go off smoothly. You know Kingsley and Severus have everything well in hand. And with Bill, Lucius and Arthur having already made up, there should not be any difficulties."

Hermione smiled at the reassurance. "I'm not worried, Minerva," she said quietly. "Ron has started to realise his inner Darkness and pay more attention to what he is actually doing emotionally. Harry, too, is so much more aware now. I'm sure it will all be okay. Neville being there seems to act as a buffer to Ron's more impulsive traits as well."

"Good girl," said Minerva bracingly. Then, turning to Luna and Astoria, she looked them both in the eye. "I know I don't have to tell the two of you this, but do keep an eye open for Miss Weasley's behaviour. She might do something rash when the betrothal arrangements are revealed. We've invited young Nott, but one never knows how the Darkness might manifest itself."

It was Luna who replied. "Don't worry, Professor. 'Tory and I will be watchful. Besides which, Draco will be there. He won't let anything happen to Hermione. He knows 'Tory and I would step in to help, and he wouldn't want anything to happen to 'Tory."

Astoria grinned. "Too right, Luna," she said, winking at Hermione.

The three friends shared a fond smile before letting Luna make her way into the Floo. She was to go first to ensure that Astoria and Hermione could go through safely without meeting any interference on the other side.

Luna came out of the fireplace at Grimmauld Place to see Harry standing there in readiness. Ginny didn't seem to be anywhere around because Harry's first words to Luna were, "Hello, Luna. We missed you at the feast. Don't worry. Ginny is with her family in the kitchen."

"Hello, Harry," said Luna seriously. "I'm glad you managed to get the Wart-fuzz infestation out of your head. They do tend to make thinking clearly difficult."

Harry grinned at this pronouncement. It really was good to see Luna again. She was just so refreshing.

Astoria emerged through the Floo soon afterwards. She smiled in greeting at Harry.

Hermione was next. "Harry," she greeted, catching sight of her friend waiting with the girls in the study. The two friends beamed at each before moving further into the room so that Minerva could follow Hermione through.

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Severus Snape had arrived early. He had wanted to have a quick meeting with Kingsley and Lucius, and he also wanted to ensure that the security measures would allow Theodore Nott to be able to get to Grimmauld Place without upsetting any of the protective enchantments. Just because the war was over did not mean the master spy was willing to take any unnecessary risks, especially when he was very aware that the pesky reporters were still eagerly watching their every move.

Kingsley, too, had arrived early as discussed previously. The two men, avidly watched by Harry, went through a barrage of spells and enchantments to make sure the location was safe. Once that was done, they sat down with Harry to go over the arrangements for the arrival of the Slytherins. Nott was to Floo to Malfoy Manor, from where they would be brought to Grimmauld Place by Andromeda Black. Not only was she a member of the Order but her family connections with the house would ensure that the Malfoys, although still carrying the now faded Dark Mark, would not be targeted by some undetected stray spell.

Harry was amazed at the care taken by Severus and Kingsley. He acknowledged ruefully to himself that he could now well understand why his former professor had almost always been in a raging temper at his and his friends' harebrained schemes. It was obvious that Severus never did anything without careful deliberation, thinking everything through as much as he could.

Not long after, the first of the members of the DA arrived. Severus was surprised to see that it was Neville Longbottom.

Neville smiled in greeting at seeing the three men sitting around the table. "Grandmum will come in a little while with Hannah and Susan," he said by way of introduction as he made his way into the kitchen. "But I thought it would be good if I turned up early in case there was something that needed doing. This is a big meeting, after all."

Severus' eyebrow rose in contemplation. Longbottom was showing maturity in thinking about what might need to be done in preparation. He understood now why his Hermione had been confident that Neville would not discuss their betrothal or reveal anything without thought.

Neville continued. "I brought some of my soothing chamomile tea as well. I knew Headmaster Snape would have any potions that were needed, but I thought it would make a subtle addition in case tempers got out of control."

Kingsley and Severus shared a glance. They both suddenly felt very proud of the way the younger generation was shaping up. They both had worried and discussed the dangers of Dark Magic and how it would affect the future. But if Neville and Harry were any example, it seemed the young people were finding their way through the mire.

Harry smiled broadly at Neville. "Thanks, Neville. I'll go speak to Kreacher and tell him when to make some of this if he thinks it's needed. Won't be a moment."

Neville nodded. Once Harry had left, Neville stood awkwardly with the two men. Then, taking a deep breath of reassurance, he walked over to the table and sat down. Then, extending his hand, he said quietly, "Headmaster. Hermione told me the good news. Congratulations."

Severus was flabbergasted. He had not expected such consideration or maturity from Longbottom. He realised that the young man had waited until Harry had left the room before making his congratulations. "Thank you," he said quietly. Reaching out, he shook the hand offered to him. Then, rubbing his temples, Severus sighed. With a look of slight distaste at what he had to do next, he said briskly, "I'm no longer your Headmaster, Longbottom. You might as well call me Severus. Potter has already made the transition."

Neville smiled. He realised this was a rite of passage. Boldly, he replied, "Only if you call me Neville, sir."

Kingsley threw back his head and chuckled in delight. The young man did have gumption.

Severus turned to his friend and frowned before inclining his head. "If I must."

Harry had just re-entered the kitchen when he had heard Severus offering Neville the use of his given name. He couldn't help but laugh at the concession Neville got out of him in return. The three men turned to look at Harry when he began to laugh. Still smiling, Harry said, "Well, Severus, if you're going to call Neville by his first name, you might as well call me Harry, too. I'm not my father. Perhaps not calling me by his name will make it easier for us to be friends."

Severus sighed again but nodded. Then, looking at Neville, he said with a smirk, "I think I shall enjoy watching your friend Ronald and his family's reaction to you and Neville both calling me Severus."

Harry laughed. He knew the dour man well enough to know that this was his way of teasing. "Oh, Ron already knows. He's heard me speaking of you by your first name before. I think it shocked him, but he's grown to accept it. I don't think it will be too much for him to handle."

Severus harrumphed in dissatisfaction. However, he was surprised to note that he was secretly glad that they were all finally showing so much more maturity.

Not long afterward, Andromeda arrived with the Slytherin contingent. Once they had all settled down, and the first round of tea had been served, the mood slowly relaxed. Everyone had been very tense. The meeting to follow was going to be a difficult one, especially if awkward questions were going to be asked, which they all felt was very likely given their interlocutors.

Soon enough, everyone from the Order was gathered around the extended kitchen table. As usual, Hagrid had been stationed outside the kitchen door in the passage leading into it, as there just wasn't enough room for him to fit into the kitchen with all of the assembled invitees. Other than for 'Dung and Dedalus Diggle, everyone from the Order seemed to have arrived for the meeting. Even old Aberforth had turned up despite being known to not generally make it to Order meetings.

As Kreacher served more tea and coffee, Kingsley called the meeting to attention. "Welcome, everyone, to another meeting of the Order of the Phoenix." He smiled pleasantly around the table. He then inclined his head to greet the Slytherin contingent of Lucius, Narcissa, Draco and Astoria. "Welcome, too, to the members of the DA and our latest political collaborators. I do appreciate them coming along to this meeting so that the matter to be discussed can be addressed." Kingsley then smiled at Hermione, Astoria and Luna, who were all sitting together, Hermione safely ensconced between her two protective friends. "It does my heart good to see all of us here today. For too long we have been divided. Now, it gives me great pleasure to know that we are all committed towards a common goal."

Theo Nott sat alongside Lucius, and Ginny, despite her so-called aversion to dirty Slytherins, snuggled cosily beside him. In fact, if one paid careful attention to the couple, it could be seen that they were holding hands while Theo had his other arm flung casually around her shoulders.

Kingsley made it a point to smile brightly and wink at Theo Nott. He had been told of the plan to have Theo Nott court Ginny. "This meeting is being called because of concerns raised by Molly and Ginny Weasley at the recently held Halloween Feast. Molly put forward the suggestion that the Malfoys had placed a dark geis on myself, Hermione and others that was causing them to behave in a manner favourable to the Malfoys. This meeting is to address those allegations and to demonstrate clearly to all present that the Malfoys have no possible way of acting in such a manner. Molly also suggested that former Death Eaters were allowed to escape their actions freely, that people known to consort with Voldemort were not called into account, that they were not held accountable for their actions. This matter has, in fact, been dealt with both by me and by Severus. As acting joint heads of the Order, Severus, Minerva and I had not realised that anyone would think us lax or lenient when it came to making sure there was some kind of compensation and restitution enforced from Voldemort's supporters and collaborators."

Here, Kingsley stopped and looked around at everyone present. He met the very alert and interested gaze of Susan Bones, who in that instance was clearly her aunt's niece. She had lost many members of her family to the Death Eaters. For her, as it was for many others, this was personal.

Kingsley went on, "But before more information is presented, I must insist both as acting Minister and as the one in charge of this meeting that you all take a wand oath. The matters that are to be discussed are sensitive in nature. They cannot be, even accidentally, revealed to people not present here today. If you are unwilling to take the wand oath, then I must request that you please remove yourself. Severus will perform the necessary memory charm to ensure you have no recollection of what we are about to discuss."

There was a moment of silence. Then, Theo Nott spoke up. "Minister, I'm well aware of the sensitivity of the topic under discussion. I'm more than happy to take an oath."

Seeing Theo's agreement, George and Bill immediately followed suit. Once they had got the ball rolling, everyone around the table touched wands with Kingsley and swore the oath to not discuss anything they would hear during the meeting with anyone not present there. Even Hagrid, who had been told to bring his pink umbrella, blushing touched its tip to Kingsley's wand.

When the procedure was complete, Kingsley murmured quietly to Hagrid. "Talk to Minerva, and she'll see about getting you a proper wand. You've more than proved your worth, Hagrid, there's no need for you to hide your right to wield magic."

The half-giant looked down in embarrassment. This was the Minister of Magic speaking. He had really been given permission to consider himself a full wizard. Remembering Dumbledore's belief in him, Hagrid stood up straight and pushed back his shoulders. "Right you are, Kingsley," said the half-giant ruffly. "I'll speak to the Professor about it."

"Good man," said Kingsley before turning his attention once more to the gathering.

Then, Kingsley got down to the business of informing the gathering about what Lucius had promised. "Thank you all for taking the wand oath. As you hear more of what is to come, you will realise how vital it is that this sensitive information does not leak out. The Order has worked long and hard to ensure that it has political clout and minimum Ministry interference: hence me not being both head of the Order and acting Minister. It is critical that the Order, which began as a vigilante organisation that has the power to act outside the constraints of the Ministry, does not end up becoming just another tool used by the Ministry to control and exert power over our people. We must ensure that our interests act for the betterment of wizarding society, not the glory and prestige of the Ministry."

There were murmurs of agreement. Most had already discussed why Kingsley had refused to be the sole head of the Order. There had, of course, been raised eyebrows when Snape was made one of the ruling triad, but following his heroic actions, it was impossible for people to not take his dedication, knowledge and commitment to the cause seriously.

Once the crowd around the table quietened down again, Kingsley said, "Once it was ascertained that Severus was safe at Malfoy Manor, I personally went to visit him. Over the course of the visit, I spoke with him and was assured that Lucius, Severus' long-time friend, would be willing to cooperate fully in the new epoch that we are trying to bring about. Following the sending out of invitations to the victory celebrations, Severus and I met formally with Lucius to take not only a wand oath but also a blood oath to never bring war or violence to the people of Britain unless called upon to do so by the express request of the head or heads of the Order of Phoenix. Moreover, he has promised to never aid or knowingly allow any of his family and bloodline to do the same. The oath, being bound by both wand and blood, ensures that his life would be forfeit if he ever knowingly worked to harm or cause damage to people or property without the consent of the head of the Order."

There were a few shocked exclamations at this piece of information. Molly Weasley, in spite of her inner darkness, could not deny the truth of the words she was hearing. Severus and Kingsley had truly had made Lucius Malfoy a pawn of the Order.

Kingsley continued. "I promise you that Minerva, Severus and I worked together beforehand to get the wording of the oaths right. There is no room for error here. Lucius has agreed, and by their presence at the oath taking, so have Narcissa and Draco. I guarantee that you have nothing to fear from the Malfoys. They are committed to maintaining the peace. They will not revolt; they will not join any revivalist Death Eater movement if it should ever come about. In fact, they will work with us, much like Severus did if it should come to their knowledge."

Once this was said, there was a moment's stunned silence. Severus and Lucius could see from the expression on Potter's face that the young man was appalled at the nature of the oath. Wand and blood was serious; it was even more binding than an Unbreakable Vow, for this tied down not only the individual but also his bloodline.

Harry had been told that he would most likely have to speak to the Order. Knowing that at the last big meeting he had not been able to discharge his duty, he stood up and bowed stiffly to Kingsley.

It was obvious to the watching Hermione that Harry had been practising. It was so unlike him to bow that it brought a smile to her face. She could not help but be proud of her brother, who had clearly taken her rant of understanding pure-blood manners and etiquette into consideration. Hermione's thoughts, however, were sharply brought back to Harry as he began to speak.

"Thank you, Kingsley, for explaining this to all of us. I must admit that I am frankly appalled that you insisted on both a wand and blood oath. I thought Dumbledore asking Severus to make an Unbreakable Vow was bad enough, but this is very binding. However, I can't fail to see the pragmatism of this move, especially now that Hermione is part of the Malfoy family."

Lucius chuckled darkly. "It's good to not hear fake protestations and talk about the greater good."

Harry blushed. Then, meeting the smirking visage of Severus Snape, he laughed while re-taking his seat. "Well, at least no one can ever bring up the charge that the Malfoys are using Dark Magic to control the Order. The oath would not allow it."

There was a grumbled agreement from Molly, but it was obvious that the wind had been taken out of the witch's sails.

As Harry's words penetrated the gathering, Theo added his own comments. "You all know that we Slytherins, for the most part, consider Lucius the undisputed head of the pure-blood faction. If Lucius is oath bound, then we, who follow his advice in most things, are so bound, too. It is an implicit bond for his bloodline runs through almost all of us pure-bloods. As long as Lucius continues to hold our allegiance, and as long as Draco continues in his father's footsteps as the rallying point for the next generation, then we, too, are committed to protect and work with the Order. The Malfoys lead and others follow. It has been this way for generations, and it will continue to be so."

This had not been foreseen or understood by many in the crowd. Bill and Percy, who had been as appalled but as accepting of the need for Kingsley's actions, now came to fully realise the enormity of the oath. The heads of the Order had ensured that peace was not only likely to continue but almost definite to continue. The path had been established. Only they, the bound, could now destroy this alliance. It was they, with their equally blind prejudice, who could negate the work of their elders. As Bill and Percy met the eyes of Draco and Theo across the table, a new alliance was formed.

Next, Severus spoke up. "I assume you also have questions about how Lucius' oath ensures restitution. As you know, most of the known Death Eaters, and between Lucius and myself, we do know everyone, have been asked for significant amounts of money to rebuild the destruction caused during the war years. Since we do not, however, want to beggar people and force them to hate us even further, we have refrained from confiscating family property and assets. The payments will come in cold, hard galleons, no matter how long it takes for such amounts to be paid off. We decided, that it was, in fact better that the amounts come in monthly instalments, following the initial bulk payment, for it means that the money can be invested wisely by the committee set up for this purpose. I hesitate to even inform you of who makes up this committee; it is extremely classified information. You will not speak of this to anyone not here but also you will not use this information to your gain at all. Is that clear? If I hear even a whiff of rumour that suggests otherwise, I assure you the full wrath of the Order will be upon you all."

There were more shocked gasps. The loudest came, unsurprisingly, from Molly. "Who do you think you are? Of course we can be trusted; it's those damned Slytherins you can't count on."

Arthur gentled his wife with a touch. "Be reasonable, Molly. Lucius is oath bound, and Theo is with our Ginny. There's no one else here who was not in the DA or the Order originally. Severus is warning us all that this is important. We can't compromise the way the Order's assets are handled."

Molly sniffed and quieted down.

Kingsley took over the re-telling of the information. "Together, with the council of elders, the Order appointed four wizards to oversee the investment of money being brought in. This is paid into the Ministry, but its allocation is in the hands of the Order. We are working together in this, for we insisted that the war was won by the actions of the Order, not the Ministry."

There were murmurs of, "Here, here," following that statement.

Kingsley smiled. "Given that the Malfoys are one of the largest contributors to the fund, the wizards in charge of its best allocation include Julius Malfoy, whose credentials in fund management and business investment are second to none; Hippocrates Smethwyck, who has great knowledge of where medical assistance is required as well as what kind of research needs to be funded in that area; Professor Phoebus Penrose, from the Department of Mysteries; and finally, Theo's maternal grandfather, Augustus Selwyn. None of us can doubt Selwyn's expertise in investment banking or the financial markets, nor his insistence on staying neutral during the Voldemort wars, even though his cousin, Wilhelm Selwyn, was one of Tom Riddle's own."

Again, although Molly wanted to protest that the funds were being overseen by people not of the Order, she could not. These were all individuals with impeccable credentials, people who were known for not being politically associated either with the Death Eaters, or the Ministry. And although Penrose worked for the Ministry, the nature of the Unspeakables ensured that the Ministry had no possibility of interfering with that specialised department. People were chosen by the department for the department, its funding was its own and its governance was its own.

Once there had been, in Kingsley's mind, enough time for the information given to settle, he looked at everyone gathered around the table. "Now, are there any questions?"

There was thoughtful silence around the room. Susan Bones looked as though she was dying to ask a few questions, but she didn't speak up.

Kingsley looked once more around the table. "If you do not want to speak up now, you can do so during the lunch that is to be served once this meeting is concluded. I want no more false rumours and accusations. Never think that Severus, Minerva and I are not here to listen to you. Nor must you imagine that we are willing to forget all the lives and destinies that have been lost and altered due to this long conflict. But you must realise how committed we all are to seeing in a new future. That future will never be possible if we don't have the fullest cooperation of people like the Malfoys. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, Lucius here is the head of the pure-blood faction of Britain. Voldemort knew this and used Lucius to his own ends. If Dumbledore had not been so anti-Slytherin, perhaps he would have paid more heed to the fears and concerns that drove the pure-bloods to see in Riddle a saviour of their shrinking and dying world. As Hermione, for example, has come to learn through her joining the Malfoys, the pure-bloods are not evil. They just want to preserve their customs and traditions in the face of continuous change and innovation. This is not and should not have been a war of good and evil, it should have been a dialogue, a learning process between the traditionalists, the Muggle-borns and their modernist supporters. That lack of communication and understanding could allow someone like Riddle to speak for all pure-bloods is not only the fault of people like Lucius' father but also Dumbledore and the Ministry. It is demonising, and the cutting off of communication that results in hatred and scaremongering. We must, as the victors of this confrontation, ensure that such a situation does not come to pass. We must listen, and only then can we find a compromise, a way of moving forward. We are nothing without our roots. We cannot claim to be worthy citizens of the world if we have forgotten and chosen to ignore the lessons that have been taught to us by the past."

A hush engulfed the room as Kingsley finished speaking and sat down. He had spoken with passion and the belief and commitment he felt was evident.

Slowly, quietly, conversations broke the silence. Many had not liked to hear Dumbledore being blamed for the long years of war with Riddle, but they could not deny that Kingsley had spoken the truth. They had all learned from day one to hate and distrust the Slytherins. Perhaps if they had taken the trouble to get to know them better, the war could have been avoided. Molly especially looked over to her pride and joy, Ginny. She could not doubt that her daughter seemed to be utterly in love with the young Slytherin by her side. How that had come about the witch did not know or understand; it had only been a few short days since Ginny had hoped for a marriage proposal from Harry, but now, Ginny seemed happier than she had in a long time. Molly could not deny the charm and perfect manners of the young man who had been introduced to the family before the commencement of the meeting.

Once it seemed as though people were getting ready to leave the kitchen and mingle before lunch, Minerva stood up. "Before you all disperse, there is something else that must be announced. My dear friend and colleague Severus has accepted the betrothal contract presented to him by Lucius Malfoy for his daughter Hermione. Lucius has long wanted to make Severus a part of the Malfoys, and now, he has finally been given the opportunity to do so through his acquisition of one of my all-time favourite students. It gives me great pride and pleasure to present to you Severus and Hermione."

There was stunned silence once more, and then Harry rushed around the table to hug Hermione in glee. "Bloody hell, 'Mione. Congratulations. I never thought you'd be the first of us to get hitched."

Everyone around the table laughed at this obviously delighted show of support. Then, as Harry moved towards Severus to shake his hand, Ron made his way to Hermione. Again, many around the table watched the unfolding drama with rapt attention.

"You and Snape, hmmm....," said Ron softly.

Hermione smiled. She hoped that Ron would not make a scene.

"Well," said Ron, taking a deep breath, "I can't say I'm surprised. I'm just stunned it's taken him so long and that Lucius needed to approach him. I'd have thought he'd have popped the question a good long time ago."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, you know Severus. He's never able to take the easy road. He has to complicate matters by thinking about Hogwarts, my scholastic reputation, my age. If it were up to me, I'd have hurried it, too. But this way, all the possible traditions can be followed. It's more in keeping with Malfoy customs, and it is the way Severus prefers to do things."

Molly had been listening to Ron's conversation with Hermione. She did not like to see how easily Ronald accepted Hermione's explanation. Turning to Lucius, she asked loudly and pointedly, "Were all the proper traditions followed if a contract was signed?"

Lucius' eyes glittered dangerously. He wanted to lash out at the Weasley matriarch for her question. It was so rude, so uncouth. But he understood what Dark Magic could do to a person. Besides, Molly Prewitt had never been the most well-mannered of women. In the coldest possible tone, Lucius said shortly, "Yes. Madame Pomfrey verified Hermione's chastity via the appropriate spell-work last week before the official signing of the contract."

Arthur tried to stop his wife; he could see that she was going to push the issue further. Molly, however, was now once again spiralling out of control due to her darker impulses. Denied the ability to find fault with the settlement made by Kingsley and Minerva with the former Death Eaters, and hearing that Hermione's chastity had been verified, she felt as though her rational mind was slipping away. Loudly and even more rudely, she asked, "And what was the bride price and dowry?"

Severus, who had been prepared for Hermione's chastity being discussed, was infuriated at this most unnecessary of questions. "Woman, that is personal. You have no right to know what was agreed upon."

Molly sniffed in disdain. "He probably wouldn't offer anything worthy anyway. He might have fooled you all, but can you imagine him giving a Mudblood anything that was valuable to the Malfoys? I can't believe how easily he continues to fool you. So, he took an oath. Words don't mean his beliefs and attitudes have changed."

Narcissa Malfoy was furious. Icily she said, "I would say, Molly, that it is your prejudice that is now showing. Lucius and I have stopped using that term. Hermione is our daughter. She is now a Malfoy, her parentage is immaterial. She has all the rights and privileges due to my own Draco."

Molly looked like she wanted to argue further.

Kingsley looked pointedly at Arthur, who was struggling to control his irrational wife. Realising that there was no stopping her, and that her attitude was affecting the

thinking of other, less regular members of the Order, Kingsley sighed. "Perhaps, Severus, if you and Lucius would be so good as to share with us all the significant points of the contract, it would be best. After all, everyone here is still under oath to not discuss these details with anyone not here. If we also ensured that it could not be discussed outside this house before the oath is lifted, it would ensure the utmost of secrecy."

Severus sighed. "Do what you think is best."

Lucius, too, inclined his head. They had known that it could come to this. It was not ideal, but they wanted to put all of this nonsense behind them. Standing up, Lucius Malfoy looked at everyone around him with his most arrogant sneer. "I only share this information because I want no one to assume or feel that my affection for Hermione, my pride in my daughter's achievements, is in any way lacking. If you take time to study the old ways, you would know once a child, no matter his or her parentage, is adopted, they are for all intents and purposes part of the new family. As such, Hermione will, at our demise, inherit with Draco everything that belongs to Narcissa and me. The two of them will share equally in all of our joint assets, our funds and our investments."

Molly gasped in shocked silence. She was not so lost in her darkness that she did not realise that it made Hermione a very wealthy young woman.

Lucius continued, "Moreover, as a dowry, I have given Severus, Hermione and their future offspring my personal share of the properties owned by the Malfoys in Italy and Spain. Draco will, on his marriage to Astoria, be similarly given the shares for the estates in England, France and Switzerland."

It was a most generous of dowries. Listening to Lucius speak of the dowry, Hermione realised why the negotiations had taken so very long. No wonder Severus had felt that Lucius was going overboard. It was too much; even she thought so.

Lucius smirked. He could see the effect his words were having on his audience. There was a stunned silence. No one could doubt that the Malfoys had been more than generous. One property would have sufficed; this was all of the extensive properties in two countries. Given that much of the Malfoy wealth lay in mead and wine manufacture, it was obvious that the properties also contained the bulk of their wineries and vineyards. Once the patriarch felt that his bombshell had attracted enough attention, he carried on. "Severus, meanwhile, as the undisputed Master of Potions in the British Isles, if not Western Europe, has given my family a magnificent collection of potions that are impossible to be found on either the open or black markets. They are healing and anti-ageing potions that require years of brewing to complete and are worth their weight in unicorn and phoenix tears. These are, or so he says, what he has been making for the last twenty years. They had been his Voldemort-and-Dumbledore-back-up-plan potions. Now that the war is no more, they are mine to use as I see fit for the protection and continuity of my family."

Molly was appalled that all Severus had offered the Malfoys were potions. She didn't seem to comprehend that these potions could, if not heal, literally put someone in a coma for years until a cure could be found or the problem healed. They were the stopper on death that Severus had spoken of in his first-year speech.

Hermione, however, did catch the reference. She raised her eyebrow in enquiry, and Severus responded with a smirk.

"Yes, you are correct," his smirk seemed to say. "You have read me correctly."

Molly could not stop herself from asking, "You offer him, them, wealth beyond their wildest dreams, and he offers you potions?"

Lucius threw back his head and laughed. "Molly, you are amazing. These potions that I have been given are so difficult to make that they require years of preparations and brewing. These potions could not be bought if I sold everything I own. No one who had the skill and the patience to make this kind of thing would sell them. These are definitely made by Potions Masters for their own use. Think of the Philosopher's Stone only in potion form."

Molly nodded her head. The Darkness was lifting. She could see that her questions were all being addressed. Lucius was speaking to her directly. It was true; she was still shocked that Lucius Malfoy was giving away so much to Hermione and her husband-to-be. But she was starting to see that if he had had a real daughter, that the same thing would have happened, that it was a father's duty to make sure an adequate bride price was paid at the engagement of valued girl child.

Hermione looked at Narcissa and then Severus. It did look like Molly was going to be appeased for the moment, but the question remained, would it be enough. Taking a deep breath, praying that she was doing the right thing, Hermione spoke up in a soft but clear voice. "It is not just with property that my father and mother honour me as their daughter and heir."

Immediately, everyone around the table turned to look at Hermione.

She smiled tightly and met Lucius' eyes. When he nodded his head, she went on. "When I was adopted, I was given the living legacy of the Malfoy matriarchal line, which includes all of their magic and spell-work."

This pronouncement brought more gasps, especially from Minerva and Augusta Longbottom. These two witches, who were themselves matriarchs of their own families, truly knew what this all meant.

With that bombshell, the meeting was concluded. Kingsley once more, before removing the bond on the wands of all those gathered, ensured that they re-swore their oath to not discuss anything they had heard anywhere but at Grimmauld Place with anyone but those present here today. Having heard all the sensitive information, no one was willing to refuse.

As everyone started drifting towards the sitting room as Kreacher started getting things ready for lunch, it did seem as though Molly was finally appeased. Ginny, too, had listened. With her total focus on Theo Nott and the fact that it seemed her mother was satisfied, the young witch did not have the desire to be vindictive. Now, she, more than anything else, wanted to have what the 'cow' had: wealth. For that, realised the redhead, she would have to ensure that Theo Nott did not escape.

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A/N1: Thank you all once again for your patience in staying with the story. I do apologise profusely for the time taken to update. Unfortunately, the rate of me posting updates is not likely to increase in the very near future. That said, I'm off to the Lake District on holiday at the end of the month. Hopefully, the long evenings and beautiful surroundings will give me the boost I need to write more for you.

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A/N2: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty-Six: Theodore Nott

*Chapter 36 of 40*

Theo Nott thinks about what this new alliance with the Gryffindors and the Order means for his own future.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the brilliant J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. I apologise for the long delay in posting this chapter. However, my PhD thesis must come first, and these last few months have been taken up with completing the rewrites for one of my chapters. Please do not think though that I will abandon this story. I shall see it through. In that respect, your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Not only do they provide motivation and inspiration to keep going, but your intelligent comments help me formulate my plot and character development. So please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen\_of\_Stars.

All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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Theodore Nott was a complicated and intelligent young man. He had learned very early in life that he could not turn to his father or his spiteful and vacuous step-mother in times of trouble. In truth, Theo had spent many hours contemplating his father, and he had come to understand the reasons why Odin Nott had never been able to love or forgive his son, who he had always blamed for the death of his beloved first wife, Teresa. That it was in no way Theo's fault was something the old man had not wanted to accept. How could a young witch of such potential die of birthing complications and pneumonia? It had made no sense. Thus, the old man had surmised that it must have been the brat's fault in some way. Clarissa, his father's second wife, had been a good distraction. She had warmed the old man's bed and softened his dislike of Theo, but she had never been able to replace his mother in his father's heart. Perhaps that had been best. It had allowed Odin to focus on what he had thought was most important: making money and serving the Dark Lord.

Now, walking out into the crisp November air of London's Diagon Alley, Theo thought about how much his life had changed since the fall of the Dark Lord and his own father's demise. No longer was he afraid that his life would be spent in the service of a crazed psychopath. Now he could do what he wanted; he was free as he had never been before. He had no father to control him, no Dark Lord to terrorize him. He did not like to admit it, but he, like Draco, owed a great debt of gratitude to the Boy-Who-Lived and his surprisingly not so annoying Gryffindor friends.

Walking down the street in the late autumn sunshine, Theo thought about the interesting meeting that he had just come from. He had met with George Weasley to discuss his portfolio management and investments. He had been shocked to see the tentative but sensible investments already undertaken by the red-head. This was a portfolio that Theo could handle and handle well. There were sufficient funds to invest with, enough for him to play and make more with. He had never expected to work for Gryffindors. The Notts and his own maternal grandfather handled most of the Slytherin and Ravenclaw funds, even some Hufflepuff ones, but the Gryffindors didn't invest, and if they did, they didn't come to any of the well-known Slytherin families, even if they were the best in wizarding fund management.

The war had changed a lot of old practices and beliefs, but Theo understood why the Malfoys had insisted that working with the new order was better than sticking to the old and no longer valid way of thinking. He realised that if he had refused Draco's offer of being introduced to the Weasleys that night at the feast that he would have made a serious error in judgment. The opportunity to invest for the Weasleys was sure to help him establish himself as someone with unbiased, objective leanings. Moreover, being seen to be dating the youngest Weasley was already opening doors for him and his grandfather. Old man Selwyn had been delighted to be on the board entrusted with running and investing the money being paid to the Ministry for the rebuilding of the wizarding world. It was a coup for the old man, and to work with Julius Malfoy had been the icing on the cake. The Selwyns had contacts throughout Britain and Ireland, but they had not managed to break into the continental European arena. That had remained entirely in the hands of the Malfoys. Now, Augustus Selwyn's name was linked to that of the Malfoys, and it would allow more opportunities to come their way.

Theo knew he had much to thank Draco and Lucius for. They had not forgotten their old friends and their position as the leaders of pureblood society, even as they scrambled to ensure their own safety. It was, he thought, what true leaders should do; think of their collective futures, not just their own private ones. It was one of the many things that the Dark Lord had never understood; he had been all about personal power and not the collective good of those that followed him. It was no wonder then that the bungler that was Dumbledore had managed to run rings around the Death Eaters and ultimately defeat them. It was also not surprising that someone like Snape, whose brilliance was unquestionable, would turn against the Dark Lord.

As Theo finally came to the end of Diagon Alley and Apparated back to the Nott premises of business in Edinburgh, the young man thought about how Snape must have realised how completely unhinged the Dark Lord was and how the most astute of men would have done all he could to save himself, and by default his Slytherins. None of Snape's students from Slytherin doubted that they mattered to their Head of House and later, Headmaster. Snape had always done the utmost for them. He had cared for them, been a father to them, more so than many of their own fathers had been. Theo understood that Snape could not have prevented them from following their familial obligations into the Death Eaters, but he knew that Snape had fought as much as he could to prevent students taking the Dark Mark while at Hogwarts. It had been the best the Potions master could do.

Theo and his friends had been proud when Snape had been made Headmaster, and they had been even more proud to learn that not only had he lived, but that he had been celebrated as a genuine war hero. A true Slytherin war hero, lauded for his spying, his double dealing. It was something only a true Slytherin could do and do so well.

Now, Snape was betrothed to Granger, and he himself was supposedly romancing the Weaselette. How strange life was. He knew that he had lucked out in catching Ginny when she was on the rebound. Draco was right; just being with the young woman had already caused him to gain more business, as could be seen by the Weasley portfolio. However, he wondered how he was going to manage the young woman's obvious Darkness. She was no Slytherin, she had no guile, and had no talent in hiding her scheming ways. She was so easy to read for a man who had spent his entire life reading other people in order to survive. He had seen her calculation as she had taken his arm for their first dance, and he had correctly noted how her eyes had widened as she realised that he was both a Baron and the owner of a castle. But being desired for his wealth and standing was nothing new to Theo. It was what Slytherins did, after all.

He had also not missed the way Ginny's eyes had become even more predatory when she had realised how much wealth the Malfoys had given Granger and Snape on their engagement. Add to the fact that most Slytherins knew that Snape was the new owner of the Lestrange Manor in Ryde, and he could see how desperate his newest conquest was in becoming the mistress of his castle. It was odd to see that type of look on Ginny's face. It felt wrong. He wondered how it would feel to be loved for himself, to be wanted for himself. He was almost sure that Granger had not given a fig to what Snape owned. It was obvious that she wanted him, the man, not Snape the Headmaster or Order of Merlin, first class winner.

Once at his place of business, Theo quickly attended to the decisions he had reached with George Weasley. Papers were filed, shares were bought and sold, and investments were made via Floo and phone before Theo sent a message with his house-elf Blinky to Malfoy Manor. Theo had been thinking, and now he wanted to talk to his friend and confidant. It was time to take on the Darkness of Ginny Weasley.

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Draco had just finished afternoon tea with his mother when the Nott family house-elf arrived with a note.

"I wonder what Theo wants?" mused Draco as he unrolled the scroll. Reading the contents quickly, he looked up to meet the enquiring gaze of his mother.

"Theo wants a meeting. Personal business, apparently," explained Draco in response.

Narcissa inclined her head. "Well, if it is urgent, we can postpone the rest of our conversation. I only wanted to go over the details for the family supper I am organising for the Greengrasses. I have been thinking that I have been remiss in entertaining them, especially now that Daphne has finally been allowed to accept the Davies boy."

Draco smiled. "You know you have my complete approval for anything you decide, mother. I doubt Astoria would mind either. Just do what you want. You always manage these things perfectly."

Narcissa smiled at her son's praise. "It doesn't mean that I am not open to suggestions, Draco. You young people have such wonderful ideas; I can't just ignore your tastes."

Draco chuckled. "True, but you know the Greengrasses. 'Tory's mother thinks the sun and moon revolve around you. She's so happy that I've formalised my association with 'Tory that she doesn't really care about what Daphne does now. Daphne said it was the best thing I could have done for her. Now that one of the sisters has caught the only Malfoy, the heat is off Daphne. Hence Roger's suit being allowed."

Narcissa smirked. "Well, my darling, you are the catch of the year. Only your father in his bachelorhood could possibly generate as much envy, and I of course caught him before he even had time to blink."

Draco laughed. "Yes, mother, I know what a clever minx you were."

"Cheeky," retorted Narcissa, laughing. "Off you go then, and give Theo my best. Tell him Lucius and I really appreciated his sentiments on Sunday."

"I shall," said Draco, leaning down to kiss his mother's soft cheek before walking out of her private sitting room.

Draco Flooded directly to Theo's offices. Once there, Theo's secretary quickly ushered the younger Malfoy into Theo's chamber.

Standing up and moving around the large teak desk, Theo greeted Draco with a smile. "Thanks, Draco, for coming so promptly."

Draco shrugged. "Your missive sounded urgent."

Theo nodded. "Well, not really urgent, but more like important. Come, sit, I need to talk to you about Ginny Weasley."

Draco's eyebrows rose at the topic under discussion, but he silently took the seat offered around the low coffee table. Then, he watched Theo walk towards the drinks cabinet and pour himself a brandy. "Drink?" asked Theo once he had got his own drink sorted out.

Draco shook his head. "No, I just had tea with mother."

Theo nodded. Slowly making his way back to Draco, Theo sat down and stretched his legs in front of him.

Draco watched his old friend. He realised the man was taking his time, collecting his thoughts. Draco did not rush him. He could see that whatever was on Theo's mind was obviously important.

The silence stretched, and about five long minutes passed. Finally, Theo sighed. "I'm not really sure how to begin, but I'm sure you're aware of the Dark magical residue that is consuming Ginny."

Draco nodded. He'd spoken to Hermione enough about her own issues that he knew that the Weasleys and Potter had been tainted.

Theo sighed again. "I know you wanted me to make a play for her due to the far reaching political implications that it would have. You are right, of course, and I do appreciate the heads up. But despite her Darkness, I've come to like the girl. She's not all bad, and given the kind of women we've been exposed to, I can see that she has a lot of good qualities hidden underneath this current exterior."

Draco remained silent. He had never liked the Weaselette, but he could see the attraction in her fiery personality.

Theo smirked at Draco's continuing silence. It surprised Theo how much Draco himself had changed since the war. Before, it would have been impossible to have the blond listen so quietly and attentively. Now, Theo could really trust the younger Malfoy; he knew Draco was listening, evaluating, and that he could be sure that the response he eventually got was one that had been well thought out.

"We purebloods are dying out. There aren't enough babies being born. The Weasleys, however, are one of the few families that have managed to reproduce successfully. If for nothing else, I want Ginny's fertility to benefit my family. I am the only surviving Nott; I have no siblings or cousins. If something happens to me before I produce an heir, the Nott family name will die out. Draco, do you realise how serious this is? You are the youngest Malfoy, but your father is not the only Malfoy; you've got your uncle Julius and your distant cousins Marcus, Christina and Elladora in Portugal."

Draco nodded. He knew that almost all the pureblood families were concerned about the poor birth rates of the last thirty to forty years.

Theo sighed. "The Selwyn name is no better. My mother was an only child, and my grandfather's cousin, who was my grandfather's official heir, was one of those killed when the Dark Lord fell. It is imperative that I marry and produce not only an heir but a few children. I promised my grandfather that if I had two children, the second one would carry on the Selwyn name."

"Ah," said Draco, finally. He could see now how attractive the Weasleys' fertility was to Theo.

Thoughtfully, Draco asked, "So why the problem with her Darkness? Can't you use it to bind her to you, get her to give you the children you desire as soon as possible?"

"It's not that simple," said Theo softly.

Draco had to strain to hear his friend.

"I've been doing research, and it seems as though Dark magical residue does not allow for witches to breed. It seems to do something to them. Possibly nature's way of avoiding completely Dark children to be born for it usually is the case that women with Dark magical residue mate with men with Dark magic themselves."

Draco listened attentively. He had not really thought about this, but it made sense. Most Death Eaters had had one or two children only, and those children had been born before their wives had been forced into the presence and service of the Dark Lord, and even his aunt Bella, despite being desperate for children, according to his mother, had not managed to produce offspring since she'd taken the Dark Mark almost immediately after she married.

"I can't deny that I have my own Darkness," said Theo quietly. "We all do. I know your father and aunt taught you the Unforgivables, just as my father taught me. After all, it is what Slytherin men are taught. Control and power is essential to us. But if Ginny's taint remains and she doesn't learn to control her all too obvious Darkness, I suspect that she will not be able to have any children. I can't bear to see such waste of such beauty, fire and passion. She would make a good mother. Molly Weasley, for all her annoying, petty and uncouth thinking, is a good mother. George, for example, is a decent bloke, and William seemed quite sensible too."

Draco nodded again. "Percival isn't too bad either," admitted the Slytherin. "So, you want to do something to remove or control Ginny's Dark magic? Is it even possible if she's not willing to admit that there is a problem? You know as well as I do that Dark Magic, while giving enormous power and control to the wielder, requires an equal amount of power and control. Voldemort lost control, and so did my aunt Bella. Father nearly did, but I think having mother and me saved him from the worst of it. Even Severus has his moments, but he uses that vicious tongue of his on the 'dunderheads' and manages to keep a lid on the worst of it."

Theo laughed. "I remember watching him in class when Potter was in attendance. I was always amazed that none of them realised that he was the most vicious after he had been to a Dark Revel or meeting. You could almost see his control about to shatter. I always wondered how none of them ever actually got hexed in class. He does have superb control, doesn't he?"

"He does," agreed Draco. "But none of this is helping your Ginny."

"No," sighed Theo. "I was hoping you could think of ways in which we could involve Ginny."



Draco stood up and began pacing. "I'm not really sure, Theo, but Hermione was talking to Mother about some reading she was doing. I think she's already spoken of it to McGonagall and Severus too. She was saying that of all those who had contact with Voldemort's Horcruxes, that the least affected and the one with the most control over the Dark Magical residue is Longbottom. She theorised that it had something to do with the time he spent working with the earth. I think she's now researching elemental magic and how working with the elements allows for Dark Magical residue to dissipate. I'm not sure how far her research has gone yet, but if you could get Ginny involved in Herbology more, perhaps that would help somewhat at least."

Theo looked pleased and thoughtful at the same time. "Elemental and earth magic. That might work, Draco. I'm planning to meet Ginny again this coming Saturday at the Hogsmeade weekend. Perhaps I could tell her about the disused gardens in the castle and how I want to rebuild them to their former glory. Perhaps this could get her interested in learning more about gardening at Hogwarts while preparing for her NEWTs."

Draco shrugged. It was worth a try. It couldn't really hurt. Not at this stage.

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A/N: To all my wonderful reviewers and readers since you've been so kind to stay with the story so far, here is a quick, short chapter. More to follow soon, promise.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven: Surprise

Chapter 37 of 40

Severus asks Hermione if she is willing to enter a secret marriage. He has decided that he just can't wait until the end of the school year to make her his bride.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the marvelous J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. It is wonderful to hear your thoughts and comments.

(iii) Finally, much gratitude to my gracious beta, Queen\_of\_Stars. Thank you for agreeing to help me work on, polish and present this story.

All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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When Hermione had first moved to Malfoy Manor, she had laughed quietly at the ostentatious display of white peacocks on the grounds. Reading the book of Malfoy matriarchal magic had revealed that the white peacocks had originally been brought over during the Crusades when Constantine Malfoy had fought as one of the Barons of Richard the Lionheart. It seemed that the magical world and the Muggle world had worked much more closely together in those days. However, Constantine Malfoy had not merely been a Knight of the Crusades, but also a mediator and negotiator for Saladin, working closely with wizards from the Holy Land. It seemed that there had always been wizards and witches working quietly in the background of most of the ruling houses of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. *It made sense*, mused Hermione, as she researched magical history more closely. She wondered why Professor Binns had spent so much time on the witch burnings and the Goblin wars when there was so much more interesting history to learn and explore. Shaking her head at the sometimes inexplicable curriculum choices of Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic, Hermione just read further.

More information from her book revealed that the peacocks had been brought because white peacock blood was used in fertility potions and some healing potions. That made more sense, for it could not be denied that Constantine Malfoy probably needed the potions for his recuperation following the bloody years of war. She wondered if Severus had these supposedly potent potion recipes. She knew he would be interested in reading this section of the book closely. Constantine had not only brought peacocks, but he had also come home with a Saracen bride, a witch by the name of Zarina. She had, however, not managed to produce any male heirs and had died in childbirth. Saddened, Hermione found herself falling more and more into the Malfoy family story. It seemed to mirror the rise and fall of British history closely, and it also explained why Lucius and Narcissa still retained the title of Lord and Lady.

The most interesting sections for Hermione, however, were the notes on the construction of the various gardens of the manor. Each garden had been crafted by one of the mistresses of the manor, Narcissa being the one who had introduced the Japanese garden to the property. She wondered how that affected the women and their magic, and if Herbology and gardening were, as she had thought, not only a way in which to counter the use of Dark magic, but also a way in which to boost fertility. She had been told by Draco of his conversation with Theo concerning Ginny, and as she continued to research what was one of her many ongoing projects, she was sure that she had come across something that had been known instinctively by the larger families. She wondered if she could get Severus to speak to Kingsley about getting Molly to do more to the garden of the Burrow. They didn't really have a garden, just a lawn and some trees and flowers. Although Hermione had already mentioned this to Minerva and Severus, she knew that Molly had said she would start planting in spring.

Perhaps there was no point in waiting for the new planting season to come around. Surely, if the Order encouraged Molly, she could get to work improving the landscape of the Burrow now. Hermione knew there was enough to do in the gardens all year around.

At their now tri-weekly meetings, Hermione brought up her reading. "Severus, Minerva, you know I've been reading my Malfoy legacy."

At nods from both the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmistress, Hermione continued. "Well, besides there being a really interesting section on potions for health and fertility dating from the time of the Crusades, there are lots of discussions and notes about the work done to the gardens of the manor by each generation of Malfoy wives. Given that we've been talking about how to help Molly and Ginny better control their Dark Magic residue, I've been coming to the conclusion that older families knew the importance of magical gardening for fertility and magical control reasons instinctively. The task of designing and planting her own garden on arrival was entrusted to each wife by her mother-in-law. Most women, interestingly, also fell pregnant while working on the planting or on completion of the garden. Doesn't that suggest that there is some connection? I may be wrong and it may only be a coincidence, but I don't believe in coincidences. There must be some kind of connection."

Minerva sipped her tea as Hermione explained her hypothesis. Once the young woman was done with her passionate presentation, the deputy Headmistress nodded her head thoughtfully. "It can't hurt, and the Order needs to do whatever it can to stop Molly from sliding further into Darkness. Poor Arthur is at the end of his tether. It might even help Percy, who is still very depressed and has done nothing but bury himself utterly in sorting out the mess that is the Ministry. Turning into a workaholic is not the answer to his own Darkness. I've seen what happens to Severus when he can't work, brew or research. We shouldn't use any one activity as a crutch."

Severus harrumphed but could not disagree. As the past few years had progressed, he had learned how detrimental it could be to only have one way of dealing with his own Darkness. In a way, he was grateful to his Dark Veela curse since it had allowed him to use his tongue to wound and thus satisfy his Darker tendencies.

Hermione's eyes shone with enthusiasm. She really did love the Weasleys, and she hated seeing people she had considered her own become too impossible to bear.

Severus, who had been standing by the fireplace, suggested thoughtfully, "Perhaps we could get Pomona and Neville to devise, together with Molly, a new back garden layout for the Burrow, one that is in keeping with Arthur's status. A knot garden for kitchen herbs, for example, should please her culinary skills, but also provide plenty of space for year round gardening. That, perhaps coupled with a more formal layout for the front of the house, should give them plenty of variety. Magical roses, for example, or even fruit trees would also provide the right blend of practicality and stature to suit Molly's nature."

Hermione agreed energetically.

Severus smirked. "Given that Molly is keen to gain recognition for Arthur, having her house reflect her husband's increased position in the Ministry and the Order should be welcomed without too much persuasion. And I agree, there's no point letting her ignore our advice about the landscaping until spring arrives. Too much could go wrong between now and then."

Hermione beamed.

Minerva continued, "And if what you've shared concerning young Theo and Ginny is to be believed, then having Molly speak of the benefits and importance of having an adequately designed garden should encourage Ginny to take an interest in Herbology, too."

Severus laughed. "Perhaps if someone were to mention the orchids in my own manor, it would encourage the Weasley ladies in their mission further."

Hermione looked enquiringly at Severus, but Minerva chuckled. "Saw that did you? I thought you might have."

"What?" asked Hermione. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing very important, my dear," said Severus.

"Come on, you must tell me; now I really want to know," pleaded the young woman.

Minerva laughed and Severus grinned evilly.

"Don't be difficult, Severus, you know how I hate not knowing stuff," said Hermione with a huff.

Severus continued to grin, but he finally relented at the look on his beloved's face. "We were simply thinking about young Ginny's predatory look when she learned of what we got from Lucius as a dowry. I think that when she began seeing who Theo really was. Oh, she saw his position within the purebloods and his rank as the Baron of Inverness, but I don't think she really, clearly understood what it meant beyond the fact that he owns a castle. I think it wasn't until after hearing of the list of our own future possessions that she truly grasped what Theo represented."

"Poor Theo," said the tender-hearted Hermione.

At Severus' quizzical look, she explained further. "I want to marry you because I adore you and want you, the man you are, not Severus Snape the hero and spy. It would be sad if Theo only had Ginny after him for what he had and represented, not for himself alone. You know I'd want to marry you if you didn't have a penny to your name and lived in a shack. That's not what matters to me."

Severus' eyes burned with tightly leashed control and passion. If he were anywhere else but in the Headmaster's Office, with Minerva sitting so politely, sipping her tea as if she had not heard Hermione bear her soul and proclaim her attraction to all the former Heads of Hogwarts, he would have ravished her to within an inch of her strength. For so long Severus had yearned to be wanted, needed for himself alone. Now, finally, this treasure, this wonderful, brilliant young woman wanted him. All of his suffering, all of his years of being unwanted, of being rejected because of the Dark Veela curse were suddenly behind him. He knew now that it was only a technicality that remained from the total banishment of his family's long curse. When he married his beloved, when he made her his in every possible sense, then the curse would dissipate, and he would have, share and feel the power of true love. He hoped and prayed silently to all the goddesses and gods that nothing happened to prevent the event. He couldn't wait. He wanted her, now, this very minute, and he knew that he would want her every day for the rest of his life.

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Astoria and Draco had finally decided on having a Mid-Summer's Eve wedding. Narcissa was over the moon since it symbolised extremely good luck for the bonding couple. Hermione knew that her adopted parents assumed that she and Severus would have their nuptials at the same time. It was what Astoria definitely was planning if her sly grins and nudges indicated anything.

But the many conversations that Severus had had with Hermione had convinced the dark Slytherin that waiting until the Summer Solstice was folly. He was terrified that the Dark Veela curse would do something to destroy the happiness he had found. He was convinced that the curse needed to be broken, and the sooner it could be done, the better. Thus, now that he knew she wanted him truly, it seemed ridiculous to suffer alone. Impatient, Severus decided he really needed to talk to Hermione in private, away from the listening walls of Hogwarts.

Plotting once more, he sent her a note towards the end of November. In it, he asked his young bride-to-be if she cared to venture into Muggle Manchester, his old home town, for a supremely sumptuous curry.

Hermione, who adored exotic cuisine, readily agreed. They'd not been on a date since her birthday, and she wanted more than anything to spend time with her fiancé. They had not kissed or been physically affectionate since September, and it was driving her crazy with suppressed desire. The thought of being alone with him in the Muggle world, to be able to touch him and feel his passion, was something that sounded divine.

Once Hermione had agreed, Severus had only one request. Dress casually. It wasn't the best part of town to go to, but the food was worth the surroundings. Hermione was now totally curious. She'd never really been to Manchester.

So, on a cold, wet December evening, Hermione met Severus by the front doors. She had dressed warmly but casually in a pair of pale blue jeans with her brown knee-high leather boots. She'd worn a long-sleeved t-shirt, a jumper and a nice warm over-coat on top with her cream woollen hat, gloves and scarf to complete the look.

Severus inclined his head in greeting as he let his eyes smoulder over her form. Finally, nodding his head in approval of her attire, he murmured, "You'll do."

Hermione smiled at his greeting. She knew he was doing his best to hold his passionate words in check, but the look in his eyes was so intense that words didn't really matter between them anymore. He could have told her she looked completely inappropriate or that the sky was green, and she would have still understood his meaning.

Severus himself was dressed, as always, in black. But his black trousers and white shirt were topped by a black cashmere jumper and a long black trench coat with the collar turned up against the cold. He looked different without his robes, but still utterly delicious to Hermione. In fact, now that she thought of it, he looked even sexier in his Muggle outfit.

Smiling, she quickly did her best to control herself and follow the Headmaster as he began to make his way rapidly to the front gates. They didn't speak. They both knew that what they wanted to say could not be said while on Hogwarts' grounds.

Once they reached the Apparition point, Severus pulled her roughly into his arms and sped away. Like before, once they reached their destination, he didn't waste a moment before casting strong notice-me-not and silencing spells. Once that was done, he pulled her into his arms once more and kissed her ravenously.

Unlike the last time, Hermione knew what to expect. She didn't waste a moment either; she was ready for him, and she met his passion with her own. For long, long

moments, they kissed and re-affirmed their love and desire for each other. When they finally broke apart, they were both panting.

Severus pressed his flushed forehead against that of his beloved and sighed. "God, I've missed you, woman. You have no idea how much. But I just couldn't organise the time away until now. First, the Order nonsense with Molly and Ginny, then getting the betrothal contract sorted, and then making sure that all the administrative work was done for the upcoming Yule Ball and the holidays. It's been a really mad few weeks."

Hermione allowed her hands to caress his back and hair. "It's alright, my love," she said softly. "I do understand. I knew you wanted to be with me, and I knew that you would have made time for me if you could. Each time you looked at me while we ate together in the Great Hall, or when we met for tea at our chaperoned meetings, I could feel your passion, your need."

He groaned softly as he felt her caress him. "I still need to apologise, Hermione. I don't want you to feel that I find you less important than Hogwarts, but the Yule Ball is critical for the Order and Hogwarts, and I suppose also for the Ministry's public face, since now all three institutions are so closely linked. And since I'm playing a part in all three places..."

"Sh...", interrupted Hermione. "It really is okay, my love. Please, don't worry. I know. I know. I speak to Minerva and she has explained your different responsibilities. And I've been working hard, too, so I don't blame you. I'm just glad you found time tonight."

"I think I would have gone mad with want," he said gruffly, "if I couldn't have managed to have time alone with you tonight. I'm like a half-starved beast; all I can do is think of you and salivate at the thought of devouring you."

"Oh, Severus," she moaned, reaching up to pull his mouth down for another long and passionate series of kisses.

Severus felt as though his head was spinning. He could feel the curse lifting, changing. He realised that it was on its last legs. He realised he would have to be ever so careful now. Like all Dark Magic, it would now fight its hardest since it could sense that the end was nigh.

"Come, my own heart," he murmured tenderly, once they had broken apart for breath once more. "Let us get something to eat. There is much that I want to discuss with you. And you know we can't be away for too long. It would not do to give the castle the suspicion that we are breaking rules away from its watchful eye. A couple of hours, at the most, are all we have."

Hermione looked at him in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

Severus shrugged. Then, taking hold of her small hand in his, he said in explanation, "Well, since we've left together, and the castle knows that we are now formally engaged, it is going to be ever watchful of our behaviour upon our return. It would not do for it to suspect that we have gone for some clandestine sex, now would it?" he asked with slight irritation.

Hermione squeezed his hand and laughed. "Clandestine sex, if only, Severus. I'd be more than willing, you know." She giggled at his expression. He looked like a man who was clearly considering saying to hell with everything and taking her right then and there.

"Come, you cheeky, sexy minx," he said in a tone of utmost tenderness. Tightening his grip on her hand, he led her out of the alley and into the teeming hub of Levenshulme.

Once they were seated at the Indian take-away restaurant with dishes of lamb nahari, chicken khorma, chicken makhani, pillau rice and Peshwari naan, they got down to the important business of eating. Both of them, although they adored Hogwarts' cuisine, were delighted to enjoy something totally different. This was heaven. Once Severus' initial hunger for food had been sated, he leaned back and smiled at Hermione, who was still going strong.

"Good, isn't it?" he asked with a knowing smirk. He took a long drink from his tall glass of mango lassi and watched his treasure as she mopped up some curry with her naan. She looked so erotic when she licked the curry off her fingers. He really and truly hoped she would agree to his suggestion. He so wanted to marry her and marry her quickly. He had promised himself that he would not ravish her until their wedding night. He wanted to perform High Magic and bind them together as securely as possible and ensure that all possible rituals were adhered to. He knew this would ensure that she was protected by all of his magic and the powers possessed in his blood-line.

"Fabulous," she replied. "You wouldn't think so," she continued, looking around the tiny shop. It was nothing special to look at. In fact, compared to some of its neighbouring restaurants, it looked quite run-down.

Severus nodded. "They make enough without having to draw in the tourists," he said knowingly. "Regulars still come and buy the food because it is so good. And you'll always find this place full on weekends. That's why I thought tonight was a good day to come. Tuesdays are generally quiet."

Hermione nodded. She could understand. She supposed that Wednesday would be another busy night for places like this since the mid-week crowd would turn up.

As the silence settled around them she admired her fiancé's dark masculinity. Especially in the bright fluorescent light of the tiny shop, he looked like hero of old come back to battle for king and country. In spite of how good he looked in Muggle clothing, she could imagine him in pirate garb or even that of a knight going on Crusade. But even as she admired his proud Roman nose and his piercing eyes, she could see that despite his relaxed aura, there was something on Severus' mind. Extending her hand, she took a hold of his.

"Tell me what's on your mind, Severus. I can see that you have something to say. Small talk was never your forte."

He sighed before nodding his head. "Especially not with you," he said quietly. "Hermione, I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say what I think. Stop me if you disagree."

Sensing the seriousness, she nodded her head. "Of course."

He took a deep breath and began. "I know Cissy expects us to wed along with Draco and Astoria, and I know they are probably planning a big celebration. But I don't want to wait. I can't wait. I want you. Now. And I was thinking, since we need to keep our engagement quiet anyway, why don't we get married and just keep that quiet instead? You could move into my quarters. You could take some of your NEWTs early and perhaps begin a kind of special project or apprenticeship or something. I know Minerva, Filius or even Septima would be delighted to teach you. I just don't want to wait anymore. I want you, in my life and in my bed."

He looked so worried after he had bared his heart that Hermione felt like weeping. She looked thoughtfully at her love. She could see how sincere he was. She didn't want to hurt him. She could see how vulnerable he had made himself.

Severus steeled himself for disappointment and nodded his head.

Seeing him prepare himself for rejection brought tears into Hermione's eyes. "I want to marry you, I really do," she said softly. "How could you doubt that, my love? And I think getting married at Christmas sounds lovely." She smiled into his eyes.

Severus relaxed and a broad smile transformed the countenance of his face. This didn't sound like a rejection.

"But I'm not really sure about taking my NEWTs early. You know I could have sat for them with Draco; we did study together over the summer. But I also came back because I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. If I had taken my NEWTs with Draco, I wouldn't have learned to hear the castle. Besides, this first term has allowed me to discover where my strengths really lie. As Minerva has said, it is in research, in collecting, in cataloguing information."

Severus was not really listening. All he could think was, *she said, yes, yes to marrying me and marrying me soon.* But as Hermione continued to speak, he brought his

attention back to what she was saying.

"If I did complete my NEWTs early, I think I'd like to work with Madam Pince and sort out some kind of archival traineeship. Perhaps I could make some volumes of women's magic or even do more to bring old forgotten traditions into the mainstream? All the books were written by Slytherins, for Slytherins. If only by having me organise the material and have them re-printed, it would help bring it into discussion once more. Besides, I was thinking it might be prudent to produce a how-to guidebook for Muggle-borns. We are never taught how to mingle in pureblood society. We learn nothing of pureblood etiquette. Since joining the Malfoys, I have learned so much. No wonder Pansy always called me an ill-mannered know-it-all. I thought I knew how to be polite, but every time I tried to make friends with them, I would commit some faux-pas and alienate them even further."

"Hermione," Severus said gently, "I just made those suggestions because I didn't want you to think that I didn't wanted you to further your education. Do whatever you want; you know I shall support you. If you want to go to Cissy's old finishing school, you can do that too. I think they are fine with setting up a Floo connection. Cissy said many of the princesses who came were already married, and they did have facilities set up for such situations."

Hermione smiled brightly. "Perhaps once I finish my NEWTs and these projects then," she said enthusiastically.

Severus smirked. "If you want, you could just drop out of your classes and take on your special projects, and then sit for the NEWTs with the rest of the students. Then, no one could say that you had special privileges granted to you, but you could avoid the brats. And then, once you officially graduate, we could reveal our marriage. We could even retake our vows at a more public ceremony with Astoria and Draco."

"Gosh, no," said Hermione immediately. "You know me; I hate big functions. I'd much rather have a quiet, private wedding at Christmas. And with this short amount of notice, we won't be giving Cissy enough time to organise anything too dreadfully ostentatious. I think its perfect."

In fact, now that Hermione thought of it, given the old customs she had been researching, she realised that a binding done on the eve of the winter solstice as a symbol of the returning fertility of Father Sun could be extremely auspicious.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight: Engaged!

*Chapter 38 of 40*

Severus and Hermione inform the Malfoys about their desire to have a small Yule wedding. They have a formal engagement ceremony, blessed by the Priestess of Hera.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the marvellous J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me throughout the writing of this tale. I have now submitted my PhD thesis J hence the long delay in posting this chapter. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. It's wonderful to hear your thoughts and comments.

(iii) I've finally got a beta for this story again. Yey. Thank you to the amazing Beaweasley2. You are a star! All errors that remain are my own.

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After their wonderful dinner in Manchester, the couple returned to the castle. The brisk walk in the falling snow allowed them to digest their meal and by the time the couple were within the walls of Hogwarts' Hermione was more than ready for pudding.

"Shall we have some desert before we go our separate ways?" she asked Severus whilst rubbing her hands together to warm them up. "I doubt the castle will mind. Besides, we've got chaperones a plenty with the former Headmasters and Headmistresses looking on."

"Undoubtedly," Severus agreed readily. Then, looking thoughtful for a moment, he added, "In any case, now that we've established that we are to wed during the Yule holidays, we might as well inform your parents. I'm sure Cissy and Lucius will want to be told as soon as possible."

Hermione smiled. "I was going to tell Cissy once I got back to my dorm-room actually. But if we can Floo them from your office, we can talk to them together."

Severus inclined his head. "Come, before we attract the attention of Filch or Minerva. I don't want them to hear our news before we inform Cissy and Lucius."

The couple walked side by side towards the Headmaster's Office. They had decided not to worry too much about gossip. They were doing nothing wrong, after all, and now that the castle had learned of their planned wedding, it was more likely to help them maintain their desire for privacy. It was obvious now that the Headmaster was not taking advantage of Hermione.

Once they reached the office, Severus summoned one of the Hogwarts' elves and asked for some pudding. Meanwhile, Hermione took off her woollen gloves, hat and scarf while nodding in greeting at the smirking visage of Headmaster Black. Severus had, in the interim, gone to the sideboard to pour them both a glass of port.

Not long after, two bowls of hot, sticky toffee pudding with caramel fudge sauce arrived on a tray that set itself down on the coffee table. Hermione groaned at the sight and scent in appreciation. "How do they know just what to bring?" she asked in wonder, following Severus' invitation to approach the fire. "I was just thinking that a hot treat would be marvellous after that walk in the snow."

Severus smirked, even as his eyes twinkled with mirth. "Practice! Years and years of practice," he said, leading her to sit on the sofa placed to take full benefit from the blazing heat. As he stroked the fire he continued, "The best house-elves become attuned to those they serve, Hogwarts house-elves are especially adept at listening and anticipating."

Hermione blushed. She found his smirk extremely sexy. For so long she had known him only as her harsh professor. This gentle, caring man was a wonder to her. She hoped she never grew complacent or took his love for granted, for she knew how lucky she was to see this side of the taciturn man.

Accepting the glass of port that Severus handed to her, she leaned back and allowed herself to enjoy the warmth of the fire and the comfort of the sofa.

Severus watched Hermione relax thoughtfully as he sipped his drink, taking in every detail. He enjoyed seeing her here, in what he had come to regard as his personal

space. He couldn't wait to have her in his personal chambers like this for all time. Who could have imagined that he'd find pleasure in spending every evening like this, ensconced together in privacy and comfort? It amazed him that she brought him so much joy. He still found it hard to believe that she had agreed to a Yule wedding, things had progressed so quickly between them. Settling himself on his armchair that was angled towards the sofa, he sipped his port and watched his beloved.

Eventually, they both stirred to do justice to the now slightly cooler pudding in a companionable silence.

After they had both eaten their treat, Severus Floo-called Malfoy Manor. It was still fairly early in the evening, and they hoped to catch the Malfoys at the point where they had finished their supper.

It proved to be so, for Flitty the house-elf informed Severus that the master was just finishing his meal and would be with him shortly.

As they waited for Lucius, Severus stood up and walked towards the drinks cabinet. Pouring himself another glass of port, he then prepared her a soothing camomile tea. "This will help you sleep at night," he said knowingly. "I doubt otherwise that your mind will give you any peace."

She smiled and accepted the drink. It pleased her that he was so observant and knew her tastes so well, but then he'd always been the sort of man to pay close attention to the details in everything. It was how he had survived all these years.

Not long after, Lucius' head emerged in the Floo. "You wanted to speak to me?" he asked cautiously as if expecting bad news.

"Yes," said Severus, "Hermione and I have something important to share with you."

"Right," said Lucius, looking relieved. "You might as well come through then. My knees just can't take a long, drawn-out Floo call anymore."

Before long, Hermione and Severus were seated in the Malfoys' drawing-room. Taking Hermione's hand in his own, he said, "Tonight, we both decided that we would prefer to not have an extended engagement. Instead, we thought we'd just have a quiet wedding during the Yule holidays."

Hermione nodded. "We were planning on keeping our engagement quiet, so why not our marriage?"

Cissy laughed and opened her arms out to Hermione. "I am so happy for you both. I told Lucius that Severus would not wait and put up with a long engagement."

Lucius chuckled. "Well, you know Cissy. She has always been a good judge of character. We did expect this reaction once you both had time to let the idea of the betrothal sink in."

The Malfoys shared a fond laugh at Severus' expression. Hermione was just glad that her new parents did not seem disappointed at the thought of a quiet family wedding.

But even as that thought was going through Hermione's mind, Narcissa spoke. "We have actually been making contingency plans, my dears,"

At Hermione's startled expression, Narcissa giggled. "We could have a private engagement party next Saturday. It does not need to be a large affair, just one that allows you to both formally make your vows and have the blessings and rituals performed. The wedding itself could be done on the dawn of Yule day itself, if you like. Again, it does not need to be a big affair, just enough that the ceremony and rituals are performed. We could hold a Yule or New Year's Eve Ball at Malfoy Manor, if you like, and only include the people you've already told and a few of our close friends and family who we can swear into not spilling the news, possibly Tisiphone, Julius and a few of our cousins from southern Europe. What do you think?"

"I think that sounds lovely," Hermione said in a dazed voice. Then, realising that Narcissa was actually excited about the upcoming celebrations, she smiled and hugged the blonde Slytherin again.

Once the women parted and Hermione returned to Severus' side, Narcissa sat up and said briskly. "Right then. I've got most of the plans already drawn up just in case, so I shall start putting them into effect. Severus, do you have a list of people you especially want for the engagement and marriage ceremony? Who will you have stand in for your kin?"

Severus allowed his fingers to massage his temples. "I haven't really thought this through, have I?" he asked softly. "I just thought of the possibility of a quiet wedding, not the details of the ceremony." The dark man sighed. "I'm not close to anyone of the Princes, not really. I think in place of my father I would like Kingsley. And I suppose in place of my mother there is no one more suited than Minerva. It will also acknowledge my ties to Hogwarts and the Order."

Narcissa inclined her head in agreement. "It is as Lucius and I had thought." She smiled fondly at Severus. "Don't worry, you don't need to do anything more than turn up on the day. I shall send you missives if your input is wanted. Wedding planning has always generally been women's work. I am sure that between Minerva, Hermione, Astoria and myself we will have everything done to perfection."

Lucius laughed. "I think it's the fact that you've already got plans and are being so accepting of this that has him worried, my dear."

Severus glared at Lucius.

Lucius chuckled darkly. "Don't frown at me so, Severus. You know I am right. You thought we would both be taken by surprise. That you would be able to do the bare minimum and have a truly small wedding. The fact that we guessed your intentions and have plans ready to be put into action means that you're stuck with us still doing a fairly small and secretive yet ultimately elaborate affair."

Severus sighed again. "Bloody hell! How did I last all these years as a spy if everyone can read my thoughts so easily?"

Hermione giggled. "Because we all love you and see you for who you are, I suppose."

Severus rolled his eyes, but his heart felt as though it had dropped like a loaded stone into his stomach *Was that what it meant? The curse was broken, and so the people who loved him were finally seeing him for who he was? It made sense*, supposed Severus. Lucius and Narcissa were two of his oldest friends, and they had spent enough time with him over the years to know him well. Now that they could express their affection for him openly, they could communicate and understand each other all the better. The curse was no longer doing its utmost to keep him alone and alienated.

Not long after, Severus and Hermione returned to the castle. It had been decided that Severus would speak to Minerva and tell her what had been agreed upon. He was also given the task of asking both Minerva and Kingsley if they would stand in for his parents during the exchange of their wedding vows.

Hermione felt as though she was flying. She felt like everything was coming together. For so long she had felt alone, but now she knew, beyond doubt, that Severus returned her feelings. She swore to herself as she lay in bed, her hand pressed against the castle walls, that she would do everything in her power to be a good and worthy wife to Severus, and she swore that she would be a good chatelaine to the castle.

As she communicated this to the castle, she felt the walls pulse with warmth. It seemed as though the castle had accepted her vow and welcomed her fully as the future lady of the castle. It was a rare honour; this Hermione understood. Many of the Headmasters and Headmistresses had not brought up their families within the castle's walls. They had acted as the lords and ladies of the castle, but since before Dumbledore, there had not truly been a chatelaine. Her duties were different to those of the lord or headmaster. She bore the duties of a more subtle nature, of caring for the people's emotional needs as well as the more pastoral elements of both the castle and its inhabitants. All these details flowed through Hermione's mind as though in a dream. She realised that the castle was in return showing her what it desired and yearned for from her. She was gratified to realise how much belief the castle had in her abilities to take care of it and its denizens.

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Once Minerva and Kingsley had been informed about their plans for a Yule hand-fasting, they agreed on the date for the formal engagement. Hermione smiled as she remembered Minerva's knowing glance when Severus said that they wanted it to be a small affair and so were settling on having it on the fifth of December. It hardly gave them enough time to send out the invitations, much less organise anything. But Cissy had said that all they would do was exchange rings and have their engagement blessed by a Priestess of Hera.

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The night before the engagement, Severus and Hermione met with Lucius, Narcissa, Kingsley and Minerva for an informal meal and a final discussion about the arrangements for the following day. Over their cosy supper in the Headmaster's private dining room, they went over last minute details. Then, once the meal was over, Minerva formally presented Hermione with her ceremonial robes for the engagement. Narcissa similarly gifted Severus with his.

Hermione exclaimed in delight in seeing her beautiful robe of raw silk, dyed a warm moss green, held at the shoulders with two lovely silver fibuls, accompanied by an undyed lamb's wool stola that would drape around her body, as protection from the cold winter weather. Hermione smiled at Minerva. She knew the green silk was to symbolise fertility and prosperity.

Severus meanwhile smirked in recognition of Narcissa's little victory over his wardrobe when he beheld his own long woollen tunica that was a pewter gray with the smallest hint of smoky lavender and undyed lamb's wool toga.

Watching the interaction between the old friends, Hermione couldn't help but smile at Narcissa's superior look of innocence. Catching Lucius' eye, and observing the Slytherin's shark-like grin, she giggled softly. Hermione knew Cissy had delighted in finally getting Severus to wear something other than his customary black. The matron had laughingly revealed beforehand that it was a standing joke between them that she had been trying to get him to wear something other than his trademark colour for ages.

The old rituals called for bride and groom to be to be attired not in their best, but in the most organic and natural manner possible, for they were coming to each other without artifice. Severus had chosen, with Hermione's blessing and full-knowledge, the most archaic of soul-bindings, for they both wanted to honour the old ways that were so important to both the Malfoys as well as Slytherin tradition.

Once the official presentation of the engagement robes was concluded, Severus gave his betrothal gift to Hermione. Trying not to smirk too much at the reaction he expected from Hermione, Severus gifted her with her own personal house-elf.

Hermione looked extremely aghast when Severus presented Tansy to her. But glancing at him and taking into account the eyebrow he raised in warning, she didn't do what she wanted to immediately, which was to refuse. Instead, she did her best to smile graciously and accepted the gift of Tansy in spite of her misgivings. She knew he understood her hatred of slavery, and although she had come to accept the presence of elves in the Malfoy household and at Lestrange Manor, she had never wanted to own an elf of her own. But Hermione had also come to trust Severus. She knew he would at some point explain the reason for Tansy. She knew that this was not the time or place for her to question him. So she smiled. She greeted Tansy warmly, and she said, "I'm delighted to meet you, Tansy."

Tansy dropped a low curtsy. Then, she said excitedly in her voice high, "It is a pleasure to serve the new Mistress of Lestrange Manor. Tansy be with you always. I be watching you and protecting young Mistress to the best of Tansy's abilities."

Tansy's speech made Hermione realise what Severus was about. She threw him a quick glance before accepting Tansy's protection and care. "Thank you, Tansy," she said. "I'm honoured to be under your care." Hermione was grateful that she had learned the most appropriate responses while doing her reading about pureblood customs and traditions.

Tansy beamed in delight, her large, blue eyes bright and brimming with joy. Then, the elf threw her thin arms around Hermione and surrounded her with a wave of elfish magic. Hermione could feel Tansy's magic binding itself to her being. She felt the love and affection the elf felt for the new Mistress of Lestrange Manor. She felt the pride the elf felt in being chosen for such a responsibility. She understood that the elf had longed for a Mistress to serve for many decades, for Bellatrix had refused her offer with a scornful smile.

Hermione could not refuse the elf's affection and need to serve. Disregarding tradition that suggested the wizard's need to maintain a level of superiority with the newly bound house-elf, she in turn hugged the elf, bending low so that they could embrace on a more equal level. Tansy's big blue eyes filled with tears. Her quiet elfish chant strengthened, and Hermione realised that now the elf no longer only served her as the Mistress of Lestrange Manor, but also as the individual person she was, for her simple actions had affected the elf greatly. Tansy had served Rabastan and Rodolphus' mother, but during that time, Tansy's care had merely been tolerated and accepted. The elf had never been made to feel wanted, or treated like an equal.

Once the binding with Tansy was concluded, the elf departed with a soft popping sound.

"You only need to call for her," said Severus by way of explanation. "She is always on call for you. She will always be there to protect you and will do her best to anticipate your needs."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Severus."

He inclined his head.

Then, Hermione presented her own engagement present to Severus. She had thought long and hard on what to give him. Finally, after speaking to Cissy, she had painstakingly copied many of the potion recipes, tips and suggestions found in her Malfoy inheritance into an enchanted notebook. The journal would only open for Severus and Hermione and their eventual descendants, and it had an ever increasing number of pages so that there was room for him to perpetually add information to his collection of notes. It was the start of their own family Potions grimoire.

Severus accepted the silk wrapped package with a shallow bow. She knew he would open his gift in private. Once the presents were exchanged, the party broke up for the night. The preparations for the next day were scheduled to begin early. They all needed a good night's rest.

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The day of their engagement ceremony dawned bright and cold. Snow lay on the ground, but the sky was blue, and it looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. The ceremony had been planned for the hour of noon, and the ceremony itself was to be held in Lestrange Manor.

Hermione woke to the sounds of Tansy drawing open her bedroom curtains and bustling around the room. She didn't think she'd ever heard anyone bustle with so much vigour. Hermione smiled to herself. She guessed that the elf was brimming with joy over the prospect of preparing the future mistress of Lestrange Manor for her engagement ceremony.

"Good morning, Tansy," said Hermione with a smile.

"Mistress," said the elf, bowing low in greeting.

"Please, just call me Hermione," insisted Hermione immediately.

The elf looked at Hermione in horror.

Hermione met the elf's eyes with her own insistent gaze. "I want us to be friends, Tansy. Being called Mistress by someone who is going to be with me forever just seems wrong."

The elf's eyes brimmed with tears. "Mistress Hermione honours Tansy with friendship. Even though it is not done for Tansy to be so familiar in her address, she will not refuse Mistress's first request."

Hermione smiled. She liked Tansy's older way of speaking. Then seeing that a response was required, she said, "Thank you, Tansy, I do appreciate it."

Tansy nodded her head. But then her left ear folded itself as she became more serious. "If Tansy am to be a friend to Mistress, then hear my words well. Mistress Hermione must not allow other elves to become overly familiar too quickly. Some of them long for a Mistress to serve; they will be very saddened if you attempt friendship. Slowly, once you get to know them, make the offer if you think they will agree."

Hermione frowned.

Tansy approached the bed and placed her hand on Hermione's arm. "Tansy is your personal elf. Tansy can be seen to be your elf. But the kitchen elves or those of the garden is different. They is not cut out to be as closely related to the Master or Mistress of the house. To do so would disrupt the orderly running of the house, as well as the hierarchy of the elves. When you become Mistress of the house in truth, then you will meet the matriarch of the Lestrangle elves. She controls all of the house-elves and garden-elves, and even though elves like me is outside her command, we still heed her word."

Hermione had heard of the order and hierarchy of house-elves. She nodded. "I promise not to be disrespectful."

"Good," said Tansy. "Now is time for Mistress Hermione's bath."

Hermione smiled at the elf's tone of command. She allowed the elf to lead her to the already prepared fragrant bath. Once in the bath, she allowed herself the pleasure of breathing in the sweet perfume of the oils scenting the water. She thought she could identify the scent of freesia and gardenia, but she was not sure.

"The bath smells lovely, Tansy," she said appreciatively. "Is it freesia and gardenia I sense?"

Tansy nodded. "Freesia for innocence and gardenia for purity and joy. But there is also iris for faith and wisdom, lilac for love's first emotions and white rose oil for love, joy and beauty."

Hermione smiled. "No wonder it smells so divine."

"Mistress will not be carrying a bouquet for the ceremony. So tradition is that flowers are used to scent your person instead."

"What a lovely custom," said Hermione. "I've not heard about it before."

"It is Lestrangle family tradition, Mistress. Since you is to be the new Mistress of Lestrangle Manor, and since Master Severus is not insisting on us adopting Prince or Malfoy ways, the elves is continuing the Lestrangle customs."

"Oh," said Hermione with growing understanding.

Once Hermione was done with her bath, she was told to stand so that she could be dried. Hermione blushed. "I can dry myself, Tansy," she insisted.

Tansy looked sternly at her. "Tansy be chanting while Tansy dries her mistress, Mistress. It is part of the traditions."

Hermione gave up. She had wanted to give elves freedom and more control. She could not now complain that her own personal elf was being dictatorial and bossing her around. She smiled to herself at the irony and let it go.

Once Tansy had finished the chanting and the drying, Hermione was led to the bedroom where she was made to sit on a chair and have her hair brushed and arranged in artful twists and curls. There were no ornaments used, just elfish magic to hold it all in place so that it framed her face becomingly.

Once the hair was done, Hermione was told to stand. Then, Tansy slipped the moss green silk tunic over her head, which felt soft and sensual against her nakedness. Over this, Tansy placed the stola made from undyed wool. Tansy appeared to be an expert, and she arranged the stola around Hermione's body so that she was completely covered and thankfully, with the added benefit of elfish warming charms, comfortable and cosy in the extremely light clothes she had on. Looking at the mirror that Tansy had brought forward, Hermione felt a little as though she were wearing a night gown, wrapped in a large stole, and a plain one at that.

"Are you sure this is enough?" asked Hermione worriedly. "Won't I be cold, Tansy?"

Tansy shook her head emphatically. "Tansy be already casting strong warming charms on Mistress. Mistress be warm as Mistress walk to Master."

Hermione bit her lip. "I feel so under-dressed, Tansy. Muggle brides wear so much more finery." She looked again at herself in the mirror. The robes looked good, but she remembered the photos she'd seen growing up of Muggle brides. Their dresses were so well constructed in comparison to the simple Roman garments she was wearing.

"Mistress Hermione be beautiful," said Tansy, emphatically. "This be traditional. Appropriate."

Hermione sighed but allowed Tansy to turn her so that she could look again at herself in the full length mirror. She knew she felt a little exposed, but she also knew that she looked like some of the elegant witches portrayed in the Malfoy family gallery. She knew Severus would approve of the traditional look.

Once Hermione was satisfied with her appearance, Tansy held her hand and whisked her away so that she landed as pre-arranged in the drawing-room of Malfoy Manor. Travelling by elf was a far cry from Flooing or Apparation. It was almost immediate and completely effortless if one knew what was about to happen. She had felt like she had just taken a breath, and between one second and the next, her location had changed.

She turned and smiled at Tansy. "Thank you," she said graciously.

Tansy bowed low. "Just call for me, Mistress Hermione. Tansy be waiting upon your call." Then, before Hermione could respond, the elf popped away.

Narcissa entered the drawing-room soon afterwards. She, too, was dressed elegantly. Her gown was made of sky blue wool with gold and silver embroidery on the bodice. Her sleeves were long and fitted close to her arms with a wide flounce near from elbow to wrist. The waist was narrow and ended in a deep V shape that made Narcissa's tall slim elegance look even more pronounced. With the full long skirt, she looked very regal.

The two women looked at each other with smiles of delight on their faces. Hermione had never seen Narcissa look more beautiful. Her face glowed with pride and happiness.

"You look fabulous," said Hermione. "I love the style. You should wear this kind of thing more often."

Narcissa laughed. "Thank you, my dear, and may I say that you look splendid, too. Tansy definitely knows what she's doing. I was worried that you might need more assistance, so I asked Topsy to be ready in case we needed to complete your attire. But you look perfect." Then, coming forward, Narcissa wrapped her arms around her daughter. "I am so glad to be a part of your day. To see you bring Severus into our family. I never thought I'd have a daughter. This is like a dream come true for me."

"Oh, Cissy," said Hermione, and a few emotional tears trickled down her face. "I never thought I could be so happy. I've wanted a place to belong for so long. Now I have you and Lucius, Draco and Astoria, Harry and Severus. Even the Weasleys in part. I always thought I would be taking this big step with my parents that Dad would be there for me. Instead, I've got you and Lucius, and feel more love than I ever thought I would."

Narcissa was freely crying by the time Hermione finished speaking. The two women clung to each other. It was at this moment that Draco walked into the room. Draco was

at first alarmed to see his mother and Hermione crying. Then, realising that they were just being emotional and that nothing bad had happened, he walked over to them both to wrap his arms around them.

Cissy looked up to meet her son's eyes. Draco pulled out a pristine linen handkerchief and magically replicated it with his wand, handing one to each.

Draco smiled and kissed his mother's cheek. He then rested his head on top of Hermione's. "This is a happy occasion. I'm glad Severus isn't here to see both of you being watering cans."

Hermione sniffed and giggled simultaneously, snorting inelegantly.

"Nice," said Draco, laughing.

His teasing helped ease the emotional tension in the room. However, Draco still had his arms around the two women. He gave them both a squeeze and spoke against Hermione's hair. "Severus adores you, so as a Malfoy I can assure you that you have nothing to worry about there. And remember, you'll always have me and 'Tory in your corner."

Hermione turned her head to gaze into Draco's sincere eyes. "Thank you, Draco," she said simply.

He nodded his head; then, with a squeeze on her arm, he smiled at his mother and sister. Then, conjured up another pristine linen handkerchief, he did a good imitation of Severus' voice and said, "Blow."

Narcissa giggled while Hermione just raised her left eyebrow in a Snapish manner. "Does he know you can do his voice?" she asked with a grin, even as she took the proffered handkerchief.

Draco shrugged. "Probably. Most of Slytherins can, you know."

Hermione smiled. She could well imagine the students of Slytherin mimicking Severus' voice when narrating one story or another in their common room.

Not long after, Lucius strolled into the room. He looked very smart in a dark gray morning robe that perfectly complimented Narcissa's attire. The Malfoy patriarch didn't say a word. He just opened his arms to Hermione for a heartfelt hug. Lucius had been feeling rather emotional himself. He'd waited in his study, getting his equilibrium back. Not in a million years would he have thought that he would feel anything for the Mudblood that they had taken into their circle. To see the approach of her official engagement ceremony made him both immensely pleased at the thought of securing Severus as his son-in-law as well as a yearning for not having known Hermione in her younger years and seeing her grow up. Even the few months they had had with her had allowed him to experience the pleasure of seeing her bloom from a slightly awkward debutant into a more confident and emotionally secure young woman. He knew how much joy she had brought to his own beloved Cissy. He whispered a few thankful prayers to the Goddess and her Consort for their blessings. Not only had he and his family survived Voldemort, but they were growing in number, prospering and blossoming in contentment and joy.

Once the four were gathered, Flitty and Tansy were called as they were to be taken by elf Apparation to the sacred grove at Lestrange Manor for the engagement ceremony.

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The grove at Lestrange Manor was a ring of yew, hawthorn, ash and birch. Hermione had not seen it when Severus had brought her on her initial tour of the Manor, and she looked around the grove in interest. This one appeared to be more Druidic in concept. There was a large stone slab in the middle of the grove that somehow made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up in response to its ancient power. She could well imagine the Druidic blood sacrifices that had been performed in the sacred circle.

Severus' dress of tunica and toga made him seem very close to his obvious Roman ancestors. He stood waiting for them before the stone slab which was also the altar of the circle. He had his hair pushed back from his face, a circlet of olive leaves adorning his head in honour of the Olympian Gods. A Priestess of Hera stood resplendent behind him. She was dressed in honour of the Queen of Heaven and the Goddess of Marriage in a purple woollen stola, the long, loose tunic that was the standard costume of women in Ancient Rome, with an artfully draped, voluminous white palla around her as a mantle, soft, gold leather sandals, as well as a number of gold and gem encrusted necklaces. Minerva and Kingsley flanked Severus, ready to do their part in the ceremony. This part of the tradition was extremely intimate. Only immediate family was allowed. Despite being Draco's fiancée, even Astoria was not allowed to be a part of the ritual.

Hermione walked towards Severus. He looked every inch the Roman patrician, but it was the toga virilis in plain, unadorned white that really made her stare at him. She'd never seen him wear white before. He looked like he should be walking through the streets of ancient Rome, not surrounded by an entire ring of Druid trees. And yet, maybe because of the alteration of his clothes, she had eyes for no one else. He looked magnificent.

Narcissa and Lucius walked behind her, arm in arm. They were followed by Draco, who whispered the incantation that closed the circle of power behind him. Now, they were all enclosed within the sacred space.

Hermione tried to understand why so many different cultures seemed to be mismatched for what was their traditional ceremony. Her clothes were obviously Roman or at least, Roman inspired and the Goddess and Priestess chosen to enact their binding was Greek. But the circle, that was definitely Druid, or at least, influenced by the teachings of the Druids. Hermione had a thousand questions she wanted to ask.

She and Severus had discussed their desires for the binding, they'd shared what outcomes they'd wanted, and she had agreed that she'd wanted something really traditional, but the final preparations had been left in Severus' hands as was customary. Hermione smiled tenderly at the wizard standing before her and allowed her thinking brain to take a back seat. She could learn and discuss the concepts behind his choices later. Now she would bask in the joy that she could feel radiating from the man she was hoping to bind with.

When Hermione reached Severus, she placed her right hand in his extended right hand. Holding hands, they turned to face the aristocratic looking Priestess. She in turn began to chant in Latin as she blessed them in Hera's name. Once she had finished the ritual chant that called the attention of the goddess upon the couple, she took the gold ring Severus extended towards her. She then dipped the ring in a chalice of sacred wine from the Temple of Hera and blessed it, before passing it over the flame and smoke that rose in fragrant spirals from the burning incense in the golden, jewel-encrusted thurible. Finally, the ring was given back to Severus.

He turned to face Hermione. As the power in the circle flared, Severus slipped the ring onto Hermione's finger. Not a word had been spoken throughout the ceremony except for the Latin chanting of the Priestess. Instead, magical intent, their feelings and emotions, were the key, for this was the first stage of their soul-binding. It was not a matter of words, but of pure emotion, of spiritual unification, manifested through the aide of the Goddess and the Consort, personified and made more attainable through the mediation of Hera, who was believed to be just one of her many aspects.

Once the ring was on Hermione's finger, Severus brought their clasped hands to touch his forehead. He thought about all that he desired for their lives together; he willed all that he wished for their binding, giving her everything that he was: heart, mind, body and soul. Once he was done, he lowered their clasped hands to their original position.

Then, Hermione drew their hands towards her heart. There, she thought of all that she desired from their union, their shared life together. She willed all that she dreamed and yearned for from their binding, giving him all that she was: her heart, mind, body and soul.

Once she was done, she too returned their hands to their original position. Then, Minerva and Kingsley stepped forward and placed their hands on Severus' shoulders. Simultaneously, Lucius, Narcissa and Draco stepped forward and circled her with their hands. Once the couple were surrounded by their nearest and dearest kin, the ritual words were spoken again in Latin to aide and support the couple in their lives together. It was a solemn and serious occasion. This was the first step. If the couple were not compatible for a soul-binding, despite all their preparations, it would not take. The Goddess and Consort would not bind those who were not worthy of being together or those who were not suitable for such a deep and unbreakable commitment. If the binding failed at this stage, a less permanent ritual could be performed that



only bound the couple for their single human life-span. Since they believed in reincarnation, a soul-binding meant that witches and wizards would be tied together for all time.

As the collective magic of the circle was raised, the power flared. Brilliant flashes fell like lightning to the ground, while a wall of golden light illuminated the edge of the ceremonial circle. Then, from above, a shower of rose petals fell. The Goddess and Consort had blessed them. The magic had taken. They were soul-bound.

As the rose petals began to fall, Narcissa and Minerva began to cry. It was a powerful moment to be so blessed by the Goddess and Consort, to be in the presence of divinity and feel their magical power.

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A/N: Love it or hate it, please let me know what you think.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine: High Magic

*Chapter 39 of 40*

Hermione and Severus perform High Magic. Hogwarts welcomes its new Chatelaine. The Hogwarts' Yule Ball is held.

(1) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the brilliant J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(2) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me throughout the writing of this tale. I do appreciate you putting up with the long lengths of time between updates. The good news is that I am now finally Dr. Perry.

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The blessings of the Goddess and Consort had been granted. Severus and Hermione were soul bound. Thus, once the rituals had been observed, the couple made their farewells from those present and returned to the Manor.

There, they were greeted by all the elves who served in the house and the grounds. Each and every elf was formally presented to their new mistress by a beaming Mimsy, the matriarch of the line of elves that served the Manor in all things. Hermione had Tansy appointed as her lady's maid, Mimsy had an assistant head house-elf due to her age, a down-stairs house-elf, a chamber house-elf, three laundry house-elves, a nursery house-elf in training, two that worked solely in the kitchen, a scullery house-elf, a butler house-elf, and three footmen house-elves, not to mention that there were six that worked the grounds, and another two dozen or more small house-elves of all ages, apparently learning from their parents. She glanced quickly around to find her own Tansy. She knew Tansy would quietly teach her all that she needed to know about the day to day running of the Manor, especially with regards to the interaction with so many elves.

It only then dawned on Hermione that she had taken on the most traditional of pureblood households for her own. She had almost the same number, if not more, house-elves as Malfoy Manor! The irony was enough to choke on, and she had to do her best not to burst into inappropriate and demented laughter when she caught Severus' eye. She supposed he too was finding it rather amusing for he could not have forgotten her attempts with S.P.E.W. At Hogwarts, she was known as "the leaver of hats" and "the champion of house-elf freedom". And yet, now, she was taking on an army of them.

Nonetheless, she did her best to be gracious. She knew they were bound to the property; this was their home. She could not throw them out just because she still found the idea of such deep bondage to people and places distasteful. She had read enough to know that elves felt as though they were responsible for their masters, their homes. One book had even suggested that elves preferred working for difficult families, for their needs were greater. Once they were bound to a home, to a family, they took them on forever. It was as though the elves adopted the family. The more dysfunctional, the more in need the family was, the more useful the elves felt, for that proved that they were essential to the well-being of their family. It was a logic that seemed flawed, but she had to accept it. Trying to pay elves was akin to trying to pay parents for bringing up their difficult children or wards. The children were not supposed to keep thanking their parents for doing only what parents were duty bound to do.

So, Hermione greeted the elves with a smile, and finally, once a toast had been drunk to the master and his new mistress, she stepped forward and spoke about how glad she was to have such a wonderful family of elves to take care of her. She promised to be a good mistress. This was met by cheering, and then, Severus dismissed them all.

Finally, Hermione and Severus were alone. They were bound, soul bound, and alone.

Hermione smiled shyly at Severus. She had dreamed about being with him for months. She had yearned for him, and she could not forget that it was at her behest that they had come to this point. But suddenly, she felt shy and awkward. She was only nineteen, and despite all that she had been through with the war and its aftermath, she was a virgin.

She could feel the intensity of her desire working through her like a pulse in her blood. She wanted him, but somehow, on today of all days, she was not ready to make the first move.

Severus himself was filled with elation and fear. He was soul bound to this lovely and talented witch. He had won the heart of the woman who he knew in his heart loved him as well. But he worried, too. He had never had to expose himself so meaningfully before; he had never to not only give of his body, that was easy enough to do, but he had to give truly of himself, his soul and express his true feelings, through his body and perform High Magic, for that was his intent. But she was an innocent, and he suddenly felt himself to be a being defiled, consumed by the Darkness that he knew dwelt so strongly in his soul no matter what acts of penance he had performed his whole life. And yet, despite his unworthiness, even, perhaps in spite of his Darkness, he was adamant that they would perform High Magic. That way, his life would be tied to hers. If she was in danger, he would know it and would be able to come to her aid in an instant. There were no wards strong enough to keep apart those who had performed High Magic at their coming together. If she needed him, nothing could keep him from reaching her except death.

There was no point lying to himself at this moment. He had to be honest. Severus had another more insidious fear, too. He knew that their binding had broken the Dark Veela curse. To all intents and purposes, they had found and demonstrated their true love for each other. Now all that remained to be performed was the physical union, the manifestation of their feelings for each other. And so he worried that the Veela curse would strike him as he attempted to have sex to her. But he also knew that he could not put off their joining any longer. He wanted her.

Taking a deep breath, he moved until he was standing before his beloved. He smiled as gently as he was able and extended his hand to her. "Hermione," he said softly.

She returned his smile tremulously and took his hand.

"Would you like see our room?" he asked.

She nodded with a blush. "Unless it is too early?"

"No, it's not too early," said Severus with a slight smirk in understanding that she, too, was nervous. Overcome with feeling, he tightened his grip on her hand and added, "It could never be too early."

Hermione's answering smile was more confident. This, her ardent lover she knew how to deal with. "Oh, Severus." Then, with her confidence growing, she confessed, "I've been dreaming about being with you since the first time we danced."

Severus' eyes darkened even further with growing passion. "That long?" he asked as he began to walk out of the drawing room.

She grinned wryly as she walked with him, still holding his hand. "It was the first time I think I really understood that you were a man. I mean, I did figure it out when I went out for tea with you and Cissy that very first time. But I don't think it really struck me until I was in your arms. Then, after we danced, it was all I could think of. Suddenly, you went from being a teacher to being a man. The change was a bit traumatic to say the least. The flirting that followed our dance didn't help."

Severus smirked. Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed her fingers tenderly. "And that was the first time I actually entertained the notion of you as a possible partner. Who would have imagined then that we would be here today, soul bound?"

"Not me," said Hermione laughing. "I can't believe how much life has changed in the months following the end of the war. It is as if I've got a whole new life."

Their conversation dwindled as they climbed the stairs that led to the master chambers. When they reached the threshold, Severus swept Hermione into his arms and carried her across the floor.

Hermione giggled at his romantic gesture, but her laughter faded at the intensity of his gaze as he gently laid her down on the massive four-poster bed. The moment seemed to stretch for aeons until with a deep sigh Severus followed her down onto the bed. Their lips met in a passionate exchange of love and devotion. They had both been alone for so long. Now, finally, there was nothing to keep them apart.

Hermione was filled with a sense of wonder at the gentleness woven into the passion of Severus' kiss. Her heart filled with love for her soul mate, and she tried to show him how much he meant to her as her hands caressed his shoulders and back.

She sighed as his hands began to wander over her torso. Wanting to help him disrobe her, Hermione pushed herself to a seated position; then, with a lingering kiss, she stood up so that she could begin to unwrap the stola.

Severus stood up too and helped her remove the stola with alacrity. Then, reverently, he crouched on the floor and carefully bunched up the raw silk under tunic so that, as he stood up, the fabric rose with him.

Hermione couldn't suppress the giggle that burst free. She felt like a Christmas present being unwrapped.

Severus quirked his eyebrow at her, but seeing her shining eyes, he continued with his task. Soon, the silk was over her shoulders, and he had completely disrobed her.

Hermione felt a moment's panic because of the scars that marred her body, but the intensity and desire that was so obvious on her lover's face calmed her fears. She could see that she was beautiful in his eyes. All her former insecurities vanished in the face of his obvious need.

As the garment slithered away, discarded from Severus' hand so that he could take in the beauty before him, Hermione did her best to not instinctively cover herself. She knew she had some scars, but she also knew that Severus was the one of the few people who would truly understand what they signified. She forced herself to stand still while he gazed at her.

Severus had to forcibly swallow the lump in his throat. She was so lovely, and she was his. "Goddess," he intoned emotionally.

Then, kneeling before her, he took her hands and held them within his own. It was time to invoke High Magic. The words of each pledge of one's magical self to one's spouse was unique; only the sentiments expressed mingled with the act of love making made them binding. "Hermione, I am yours now, completely, for all time. My magic is yours, to protect, comfort and love. If ever you have need, a thought will bring me to you." He finished with tender kisses to her palms before swiftly pulling out his wand to bind their left hands together with magic. "Nos unum semus, nostril magicae est unum, veniam ad vocationis vestrae, respondeo dicendum tua, ego vester sum."

As he finished intoning the invocation, a magical cord of gold, blue and green began to wind itself around her. Hermione realised that it was his pledge, his magic binding itself to her. The feelings of love, devotion and safety that enveloped her were shattering.

All of Hermione's virginal insecurities and worries vanished in the face of this manifestation of his love for her. She opened her arms and welcomed Severus into her embrace. He responded with an even more impassioned kiss that seemed to melt her very bones. The feeling of his large hands caressing her body was driving her mindless with need. Desperate, she began to tug at his robes.

It was as if a switch had been flipped. The careful, and slightly tentative, gentlemanly suitor was gone, and in his place was a bold and sure lover. Severus' caresses turned more knowing, his hands skilled with carnal knowledge as they traced over her body, heightening her desire.

"Yes, Severus, please," she whispered.

Her dark lover's eyes blazed with triumph. With a last, almost brutal, kiss, Severus left her embrace to quickly strip off his own robes. Then, naked, gorgeous and proud, he returned to her.

They both sighed as naked flesh met naked flesh. With a gentle nudge he pushed her so that she was sitting on the bed. He joined her, and as he drew her to lie down, they embraced, touching from shoulder to thigh to knee. The feeling of so much skin on skin contact was almost transcendent. Hermione moaned as his hands stroked her heated skin, sliding beneath her bottom as he rolled over so that she was gently positioned under him.

She arched her back, bringing her straining nipples to come into contact with his almost hairless chest. This pushed his engorged flesh even more firmly against her molten core. "Severus, please," she whispered. "I need you, now."

"All in due time," he purred.

She squirmed, desperate to have him where she needed him. She had lost all sense of insecurity; it was as though Severus' obvious adoration had altered her into a more sensual being.

Hermione's obvious desire and responsiveness to his ministrations released the last of Severus' doubts and fears. Now, he felt in control of both his emotions and actions. With the greatest of devotion and passion, he proceeded to explore his lover with slow, meticulous devotion to her until she was a mindless puddle of sensation. His lips trailed kisses over her face before dipping down to slowly suckle her now hard and desperately pointy nipples. As he took more and more of her flesh into his mouth, Hermione groaned with desire. Feeding on her felt and tasted exquisite. Her hands tangled in his slick locks as he finally bit into her turgid flesh.

At her nearly frantic pulling of his hair, he raised his head from his feasting to kiss her deeply for long moments. Then, he began to work his way down her body, stopping to kiss and explore once again every inch of her torso. He could not get his head around the fact that she was finally his. Soon, he was raining kisses onto her upper thighs until she sighed and allowed them to fall open. He dipped his head and used his tongue to trace the very edges of her moist lips, tasting her for the first time. As she mewled in response, he allowed himself to settle more comfortably between her thighs and pleasure her in earnest.

Severus had surmised that she would be responsive, but her sheer acceptance of him, of his ministrations, filled him with wonder. No woman had ever wanted him as she did. No woman had looked upon him with such passion, such trust, such devotion. He felt the armor around his heart shattering even as his control broke and he pounded into her with the flat of his tongue. He couldn't wait to penetrate her with his cock, but he knew that he was a big man. He wanted her to be completely ready for him. He could not bear the thought of causing her more pain than was necessary.

Hermione was long past thinking of pain or the loss of her virginity. Now, she was a mindless creature of the senses; all that mattered was what Severus was doing to her. She was on the very edge; she could hardly draw breath as with a final thrust of his talented tongue and a firm nudge with his oh-so-perfect nose, Severus sent her hurtling into a mind-numbing orgasm. She saw stars and nearly blacked out as she exploded under his onslaught.

Severus watched in amazement as Hermione came apart under him. Kissing her trembling thighs, he swiftly pulled himself up to pepper her face with kisses as he lodged his erection at the entrance of her dripping centre and pushed himself firmly inside.

Hermione's eyes widened at the forceful intrusion, but she was still coming down from her amazing high, and she was too dazed to worry about what was happening. Thus, it was only when he pushed through her hymen and breached her completely that she responded to his invasion.

But Severus had done his preparation well. A brief moment of discomfort, soon eclipsed by the feeling of immense fullness, was all that she had to endure. Soon, she was moaning and gasping as he began to thrust gently within her.

The feeling of him moving within her was incredible, and soon she was doing her best to match his pace as best she could. Her untutored but obvious show of passion was all that he needed to begin moving inside of her in earnest. Their passion took them both over as they began climbing higher and higher, Severus slamming himself inside of her as if he meant to mark her as his for all time. Hermione, already sensitised, could not take this brutal possession. Her highly responsive state pushed her towards yet another orgasm that triggered Severus' own until they shattered in unison before drifting gently back to awareness.

As he came back to himself, he rolled aside and pulled her to him so that she was cradled against his chest. He was too overwhelmed to speak, and he could only hold her close as he tried to come to terms with what they had shared. In all his years, he had never felt anything more powerful.

Hermione, although equally undone by the amazing manifestations of their love that had resulted over the course of the day, was not lost for words. Snuggling even closer to her beloved, she traced her hand along his jaw and turned his face so that her eyes met his. Seriously, as though she realised that she needed to say these words with all solemnity, she said, "Severus, I love you."

"Hermione" was all he could whisper back, but he had to say it to break the curse. He took a deep breath, then murmured, "I love you, too." He was still reeling from his performance of High Magic. He was still coming to grips with the fact that his pledge to protect her had been accepted by his magical core to the degree that it had. But even with his inadequate response to her clear statement, he knew she would understand. She always seemed to understand. Not sure if the strong waves of love he was feeling were real, he clung to her.

As Hermione's words penetrated his deepest consciousness, Severus felt the strangest sensation taking over his body. He felt energy pulsing through him as he tried to catch his breath. Gasping, he felt power like never before rushing through his blood, his bones, his every nerve ending. He was caught up in the rapture of sensation. He was bathed in a bright white light as his body arched with a magically induced surge that felt very much like another orgasm.

Hermione was taken aback. She did not know what was happening, but as his arms tightened around her, she held on to him, whispering over and over again, "I love you Severus. I love you." It was as if she knew instinctively that this was what was required of her. Just as the surge of power had begun, it ebbed away, leaving Severus clutching Hermione like the lifeline she was. Finally, regaining himself, he said with his sardonic smirk tremulous on his face, "I think that definitely means I love you, too."

Hermione smiled. It looked odd to see her always in control lover so unsteady. His smirk had been so young and innocent, something she knew he had not been since he was a very young child. Her Severus had, after all, been forced to grow up far too soon. But at this very minute he was gorgeous, and that man, the man in her arms, her lover and the one she'd share a lifetime with, smiled at her with a radiance she'd never expected.

Seeing the tender expression in her eyes, Severus nuzzled his beloved's wildly tangled hair and slowly began to speak. It was time for her to learn of the Dark Veela curse and his magical heritage. "There is something I've neglected to tell you, and for good reason, which I hope you'll understand." He paused. "I'm a Veela, through my mother's lineage. Hermione, the curse on my family has now been lifted. The power you saw was that of the Veela blood finally being allowed full reign to flow through my veins."

She sat up at his pronouncement. "You're a Veela? But how? I thought....?" she stammered in shock, wondering what it now meant for them. "When, but you're... you've got black hair."

"Not all Veela are blond," he said with a soft laugh. "Hear me out, please."

She nodded her head.

Severus sighed and adjusted his position so that he could look into her eyes. Thankfully, Hermione settled down again and listened to him attentively without interruption. Finally, when he had finished his narration of how he had learned of the curse in his dying moments and how his mother had come to him, he said, "The curse can only be broken by true love both given and received."

"You were cursed?" she asked in disbelief. "But I didn't feel it what you described I never felt that way." She turned her head, searching her thoughts for any indication of what he called a repulsive aura. "I only saw you as acerbic and waspish as a child, but I... I was never repelled. I tried so hard as a child to gain your approval, to..." She looked at him. "But I always respected you. And this summer I was not repulsed by you I was drawn to you."

He smiled at her confession, even though her words confused him. "You never felt the repulsion of the curse?" he asked, completely in awe of the statement. It suddenly dawned on him, she'd still loved him even when the curse had exerted itself on him to try and push her away, and it explained why she had never faltered in her love for him. *No wonder the curse hadn't affected her she, my Hermione, could look past a person's exterior and see the good in them, as the saying went* She'd seen him, his real self.

"Well, not that I was in love with you as a student or had an infatuation then, but I no, I was never repulsed by you. Hurt on occasion, but I loved how you inspired me to excel, to do my best in your lessons, try my hardest to learn what you taught... I wanted..." she looked him in the eyes, "I always thought you were a remarkable wizard, and I could see you I thought you'd been hurt, or acted the way you did to prevent the girls in school from, you know, throwing themselves at you. Then when I found out you were Dumbledore's Death Eater spy, I assumed it was part of your role to distance yourself, to protect us all from being dragged before You-Know-Who."

She was so remarkable. With her kindness, her very nature, she'd seen through the curse even when she'd been a student. "I admit, yes, you are right on both accounts. My position as teacher and the fact that the Dark Mark had never faded meant that I knew the Dark Lord would return one day. And so I forced upon myself a way of keeping the students at a distance. If I was hated by anyone not in Slytherin, then I could never be used to lure away a student from the school. Besides which, when I began teaching, I was the youngest on staff. It helped to deal with the occasional infatuation, especially from students who thought they could gain something from me. But the truth is, most reviled me, or feared me."

"But what does this, your curse having been broken, mean for us?" Hermione asked, curious. The only Veelas she knew were Fleur Weasley and her sister Gabrielle. She was suddenly reminded of the ones they had seen at the World Quidditch Cup and how their faces morphed when they'd been angry.

"Nothing between us will change. I'm still the same man you know," he said reassuringly. He sighed softly before drawing her up to kiss her tenderly on the lips. "But it does mean that when they are born, our children will have some Veela blood."

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A/N: Love it or hate it, do let me know. Reviews are always warmly appreciated.

## Chapter Forty: The Ending of the Dark Veela Curse

*Chapter 40 of 40*

Hermione and Severus strengthen their binding. Women's magic is performed.

- (i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. You are all amazing. Your reviews are so appreciated.
- (iii) Finally, much gratitude to my gracious beta, Queen\_of\_Stars. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

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Their passion had barely abated, and now Hermione was faced with a stunning revelation. She was not sure how to respond to Severus' narration, but one look at his tentative and uncertain expression, visible clearly to her through the tightening of his shoulder muscles and the shiftiness of his eyes that were not quite able to meet hers, made her realise that, even despite their obvious manifestation of love both at the soul binding and the reversal of the Dark Veela curse, he expected her to even now reject him.

She wanted to shake him for doubting her. If he had been Harry, she would have yelled at him. But she knew her dark Slytherin's insecurities were a result of all the times that people had turned away from him. Thinking through what he had told her, she realised that the rejections must have been the Veela curse making Severus a pariah from his earliest days.

Doing her best to, therefore, reassure her lover, she smiled gently. "I don't care what you are, my love," she said, reaching out to stroke his hand. "I adore you. You must know that. I've given myself freely to you and I will continue to do so. Just because you've got Veela blood in you is not going to make me love you less. I'll just have to be more careful and learn a few especially vicious hexes if the other witches get too close in their attentions to you."

Severus' eyes darkened at her words of possessiveness and jealousy. His body became less tense as he gathered her even closer to him. "You are so precious," he murmured even as his mouth closed, hot and hungry, over hers.

Soon the passion between them rose once again, and Hermione suddenly remembered Narcissa's words about what to do after they first made love. Hoping that she was not too late, she gently pushed herself away from Severus and his embrace and worked her way down. At his inquiringly raised eyebrow, she blushed. He was just so sexy when he did that. "Cissy told me that I must clean our emissions from you and have you do the same for me. It is to strengthen, seal and bind our bond. I think its women's magic."

"Ah," said Severus with a smirk that made her feel all trembly and wet.

Then imperiously he added, "You may continue."

Hermione laughed and went back to her task. She had wanted to explore Severus for ages, and ever since her frank discussion with Narcissa on her birthday, she had imagined licking Severus clean. Slowly, teasingly, she allowed her tongue to circle his by now hard and straining head before taking long, leisurely licks, as though she were enjoying an especially tasty ice-cream on a hot summer's day.

Severus groaned in desire. "Witch," he said heatedly even as he readily submitted to her torture. Before long, though, the playfulness in her manner altered, and she set to her task with more serious intent. Once she felt that she had cleaned their emissions, she looked up to meet his eyes. "First blood, first pleasure, now I am yours, forever."

Once she had said the simple words, a feeling of contentment and peace settled over her. She knew instinctively that it was their love being strengthened even further. As Severus continued to watch her, she smiled at him and said, "Now it is your turn."

"Is it now?" said her devilishly smirking lover. "Right, then, Madam Snape." Suddenly her darkly dangerous wizard moved to push her on to her back so that he could attack her core.

Hermione squeaked at his unexpected show of strength, but then giggled at his superciliously arched brow. "Beast," she said fondly. Humour soon vanished though at Severus' display of masterful skill. He was now more than confident of her acceptance, and he set about showing her how much he adored her. His tongue was a weapon used to bring her to the brink of explosion, even as he cleaned their emissions and repeated in heated whispers the words she had used.

His words further bound their love together. They could both feel their magic combining, uniting. It was a very physical sensation of how closely their innate magical senses were now entwined.

Marvelling to herself at how much blood and magic brought into a consensual relationship, Hermione could not but be thankful that she had met the Malfoys. If she had never known Narcissa, she might never have been able to practice or perform these intimate magical practices. She knew from listening to the giggling comments of house-mates that many of the girls who gave their virginity to their boyfriends had not done any of the things she had done. The most, if they were clever, was to collect their first blood for healing potions.

However, her thoughts were soon brought back to the man who had loved her so thoroughly, for he was now, following the rapture, making his way towards her. "I can feel our love deep in my magical core, covering my soul, healing all the fissures that had opened up within me because of my Dark Magical usage." His voice was tinged with awe.

"Oh, Severus," she said in equal wonder. "I love you so much. I'm so happy our love has the power to heal."

He nodded. He had never heard that the act of making love could actually heal the damage done by the use of Dark Magic. Amazed at the many gifts finding Hermione had given him, he set to demonstrating his devotion to her in the most physical way he could. As he slid into her wet and ready core, he murmured his adoration in passion roughened voice.

Again, their ardour was raised to blinding heights, and when they both came, it was to united expressions of love. Hermione was especially vocal, her moans and gasps interspersed with her declarations of love and desire for him.

This time, when Severus regained his senses after his orgasm, he rolled on to his back and covered his eyes with his arm. He could not believe the feelings that were coursing through his body.

Hermione too was lost to the sensations that were making their way through her. She could feel her synapses firing, her nerves tingling with magic. She could do nothing but lie as she was, feeling the power of her magic and their combined love altering her. She did not know if what she was feeling was normal, but if it was, she could not understand how Dumbledore could have ever managed to make blood and sex magic into Dark and Evil practices. What she was feeling was life affirming. It was the very antithesis of Darkness. Finally, feeling more in control of her actions, she turned to Severus.

Seeing him so completely overawed by the power of what they had done made her smile in spite of herself. Sliding her arm around his waist, she drew close enough to hide her face in his chest and cuddle his side.

She heard him sigh and draw her more securely to him. "I don't know what's going on," he said, his voice laced with unexpected confusion. "I don't think what we just felt is normal, Hermione."

She forced herself to raise her head and look at him. She felt completely spent.

"I know," he murmured at her exhausted expression. "It could be the Dark Veela curse lifting, together with all of the blessing of the Veela coming into full effect. I didn't really do enough research to find out what being part Veela would bring to our relationship. I guess there was a secret part of me that thought that the curse would never truly be broken."

"Would Fleur know?" wondered Hermione aloud.

"Possibly. Although it might be better if we speak to one of the Veela elders. Now that the curse is truly broke, I will have to try and reconnect with that side of my family in any case. We'll need to because male Veela tend to impregnate their mates pretty quickly."

"What?" shrieked Hermione.

Severus began to laugh. He had just thrown that statement in there. Hermione's face had been scrunched up in thoughtful zeal. He could see the wheels in her head turning as she took on the task of researching all that she could about the Veela especially because he knew Veela males never seemed to be studied.

"Beast," said Hermione in exasperation. "I never know what you're going to say next," she said grumbling.

Severus smiled. He felt young and completely unlike the man who had woken up this morning in nervous anticipation of his binding. It was as though years of Darkness had been lifted from his psyche. He could see the years stretching before him, years in which he would be able to shock and surprise his precious Hermione.

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Hermione and Severus were now irrevocably joined together. Their coming together had played the final part in sealing their union. The Ministry's register would have been magically notified at their completion of the consummation of their vows.

However, tradition called for an official marriage ceremony, one that was more formal and social. This ritual followed the engagement because if the couple could not be soul bound or did not wish for so permanent a tie but merely wanted a blessing by the Priestess of Hera, then the purely legal service could be conducted to bind a couple for a lifetime, or until they decided to part. Magical marriage allowed for many different ceremonies, customs, bindings and vows. All were valid, all were meant to give couples the kind of union they desired. None of them were meant to coerce or force a couple into something that would not grant them happiness.

Severus and Hermione had, however, agreed to put off their official marriage ceremony until the school closed for the Yule holidays. Thus, Hermione returned to the castle, knowing that she would most likely not be residing in the Headmaster's comfortable chambers.

However, as Hermione spoke to the castle on her return following the binding, she was gladdened to hear the very walls rejoice in their union. Every staircase and doorway wished them well as she made her way to her room in Gryffindor Tower. Meanwhile, all the portraits and suits of armour welcomed her as their Châtelaine. And once she entered her chamber, the castle surprised her by the addition of an ornate and gilded arched door. Curious, but suspecting what was behind it, she opened it to reveal the Headmaster's master bedchamber. Smiling in thanks as she caressed the wedding present from the castle, Hermione wandered into her lover's most private domain. Knowing that he would not have yet made his way into his private rooms, but had instead gone directly into his office, she left him a gift on his immense four-poster bed from some of Narcissa's specially purchased trousseau. She knew that the scraps of emerald green and gold silk would most certainly gain her lover's interest especially since it was placed so strategically on his vast expanse of blindingly white, high thread count, Egyptian elf-made cotton linen, even if by some amazing stroke of absentmindedness he were to miss the new exit from his bedroom.

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