

The Jaws Of Darkness Do Devour

by Darkrivertempest

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

Written for Droxy at the SS/HG fic exchange 2010!

READ THIS PROMPT VERY CAREFULLY!

Genre is Straight-Up Horror (focus on the death, suspense, and fear) or Horror with dark/gallows humor (e.g. Addams Family, Hannibal Lector). Vampire HG and SS are a loving couple and literally have Weasleys for dinner. Please explain how SS and HG become vampires and why they are a couple. How do SS and HG get their dinner guests? One and only one Weasley survives; explain how they survive. You can't kill off Vampire SS/HG. You cannot kill off all the Weasleys at one time, as one human per vampire is a meal. Other book vampires can drain a Weasley if you need to knock off a few in one go. You can dispose of other characters in addition to the Weasleys. SS and/or HG must dispose of the remains. Be creative in your gore, victim attainment and torment, and body disposal. Snappy dinner conversation is always fun, especially when they play with the meals. Must be at least book 6 compliant. You can vary the places where our vampires have their dinners. No crossovers.

Know what that means? For all of those who hate the Weasleys - this is the perfect fic. I will save one of them. The rest? Well. *evil grin* This is and will be **YOUR ONLY WARNING:** This fic is gruesome, bloody, deals with death/murder/mayhem, and is humorous. Yup - funny. Several reviewers have already commented that they couldn't believe they liked it. This is not for the squeamish. Also, JK Rowling owns EVERYTHING. I make nothing. There is a significant portion of Chapter 32 of The Deathly Hallows in chapter 1. I used it (and twisted it) so that I could stay compliant with the prompt. My lovely betas: Dusty273, Ssddgr, Imbloodyenglish, and Blackoberst are indispensable, and this couldn't have been done without them. I love you all! Enjoy!

He knew he was dreaming again.

"I have a problem, Severus," Voldemort said in a deceptively soft tone.

"My Lord?" the Potions master asked hesitantly, his eyes darting between the Dark Lord and a tall, pale gentleman standing silently in the corner.

The serpentine man raised the Elder Wand and held it delicately. "Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

Swallowing the bile that threatened to fill his mouth, Snape drew his brows together in confusion. "I do not understand, my Lord. You have performed extraordinary magic with that wand."

"No!" Voldemort hissed. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary," he pronounced with haughty disdain, "but this wand... no." He looked at the crooked stick in his hand. "It has not revealed the wonders it has promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago."

What the hell could Severus say? He closely watched as his master rose from the chair he was sitting on and crossed to the person he'd seen perched in the shadows. There was a murderous glint to the gaze the man directed at the Dark Lord as he stroked his face, whispering in some unknown language.

So intent on the other being's eyes was Severus, that he'd almost forgotten the presence of his master. Almost.

"I have thought long and hard, Severus." Voldemort turned his attention to the dark wizard standing in the middle of the dilapidated room. "Do you know why I have called you back from the battle?"

"No, my Lord," Snape hedged, ever vigilant of his master's movements. "But I beg you to let me return. Let me find Potter."

A disgusted sneer arched Voldemort's thin, almost non-existent upper lip. "You sound like Lucius." The words were spat out. Rolling his shoulders, he moved back to the gaunt and pale person residing in the dimmed recesses of the room. "Neither of you understands Potter as I do," he said conversationally without facing Snape.

"Potter will come to me," he continued after several moments of tense silence. "I know his weakness, you see, his one great flaw." He snorted, as if the boy's Achilles' heel was not that much of a challenge. "He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is because of him that it happens." Looking briefly over his shoulder at Snape, he smirked. "He will want to stop it at any cost." Nodding to himself, he said more confidently, "Yes, he will come."

"My Lord..." Snape tried to placate him, knowing something terrible was about to happen...and odds were it had very much to do with him. "Potter might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself, and..."

Voldemort whirled around in righteous fury, his already red eyes glowing in an unholy light, as he cut off Snape's pathetic attempts to deviate him from his path. "My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear!" He pointed a talon-like finger at his most trusted servant. "Capture Potter, kill his friends...the more, the better...but do not kill him!"

Emerging from the shadows, the Dark Lord dragged the other man with him to stand before Snape. The Potions master could tell there was an Incarcerous binding the sickly looking being, but something else was making him sweat... droplets of blood. In fact, his entire face was riddled with pinprick beads of crimson. Raising his gaze to the man, Snape recognized the ravenous hunger burning in the creature's eyes, his paper-thin skin so translucent the blue veins underneath were clearly visible. This dark being had been starved for a considerable amount of time and it was plainly evident he would be uncontrollable with his next feed.

"It is you I wished to speak of, Severus," the Dark Lord intoned ominously, interrupting Snape's pondering on the man situated between them. He then surprised the dark-haired wizard further by caressing his sallow cheek. "You have been very valuable to me... very valuable."

Snape gave him a slight bow of his head in acknowledgement. "My Lord knows I seek only to serve him." He tried to appease him again. "Let me go and find the boy. I know I..."

"I said no!" Voldemort roared, hissing at him with tiny, pointed teeth. He tilted his head and studied his servant for a moment before asking, "Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"

A frown creased Snape's brow. In the deepest recesses of his brain, he snidely thought, 'Because you wouldn't know how to handle a wand since you don't know how to handle a woman', but it was violently pushed aside. Instead, he replied, "I cannot answer that, my Lord."

Leaning close, Voldemort closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, opening them suddenly to stare straight into Snape's. "Can't you?"

Low growling issued from the man between servant and master, a sound as if it were a dog warning off an intruder from a prized possession. One look from the Dark Lord, however, silenced his complaints.

Returning his attention to Snape...who was staring at the creature licking his lips as its appetite grew...Voldemort continued on as if they had not been interrupted. "All this long night, when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here," he whispered heatedly, "wondering, wondering why the Elder Wand refused to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner..." He gave Snape a feral smile. "And I think I have the answer."

Thoughts raced through Severus' mind like Muggle electricity while he searched his considerable knowledge for why he was being detained and what that had to do with the Elder Wand. That piece of wood was simply the most dispassionate, the most ruthless. Though a witch or wizard expected a certain amount of loyalty from their wand, this particular one would only take strength into consideration.

With a regular wand, if the bearer were disarmed while carrying it...even if they lost a fight...it had to develop an affinity with the new master since it would not give up its previous owner very easily. There was the caveat that if a wand was properly won in an adult duel, then it might switch allegiance... but it was not so with the Elder Wand.

It knew no loyalty except to strength; it was completely unsentimental. It would only go where the power was greatest. Inevitably, it attracted wizards who were prepared to...and did...kill for it and with it. Snape knew that Dumbledore had possessed the Elder Wand until... He blanched considerably, his already pale face now marble white, as he fixed his gaze on his lord.

"Ah," Voldemort stated with a knowing smile. "Perhaps you already know the answer, then? You are a clever man, after all, Severus." His smile faltered somewhat when he glanced at the now panting creature off to his right. "You have been a good and faithful servant. I regret what must happen."

"What must happen?" Snape's eyes bulged. "My Lord..."

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master." Turning to the bound man, Voldemort cupped his chin, rubbing the traces of blood further into his skin. "The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner," he said idly, obviously enjoying the torment and suffering of the creature before him. "You killed Dumbledore. While you live, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine."

Sweat now gathered on Snape's brow, his breathing becoming shallower. How had this bigoted prick managed to stay in power this long? Either someone fed him

erroneous information or he was too arrogant to study the subject he was currently grousing about. To become the master of the Elder Wand, one had to win in a show of strength; a person didn't need to kill with it! If anyone was that damnable stick's master it was... Malfoy! It was now made all sickeningly clear.

"My Lord!" Snape protested once more. "I am not..."

"It cannot be any other way." Voldemort sounded almost sorrowful. "I must master the wand, Severus." His eyes began to glow again. "If I master the wand, then I master Potter at last!"

Swiping said wand, Voldemort pointed the Elder Wand at the creature and whispered, "Finite," then ordered him to kill the Potions master.

Immediately, the monster was freed and lunged at Snape, piercing his neck with elongated incisors, toppling them both to the dingy floor. Though Severus struggled, it was in vain; try as he might, he couldn't pry the deadly being off of him. Terrible screams filled the Shrieking Shack, while the Dark Lord dispassionately watched the mutilation of his most trusted servant.

After what seemed like an eternity, the muffled screams died to complete silence, save for the occasional snarl issued from the creature feasting at Snape's neck, the dour wizard finally lay still on the dirty floorboards. Voldemort, apparently sensing that it was time to leave, pulled his cloak around him and swept from the room without a backward glance, flicking the wand once more to take his beloved Nagini with him. He'd originally planned on using her to dispatch Snape, but when an opportunity too great to ignore arose, he used the Dark creature instead. It mattered not, however, since they would all bow before him.

Watching the serpentine lord disappear, the man gorging himself on blood withdrew, wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist. "Can you hear?" he whispered, shaking the raven-haired person a little to rouse him.

Gurgling was Snape's only response, for he couldn't articulate anything with his throat torn open. He did however, grasp hold of the man's shirt, clenching and unclenching his fist, moving his lips in a parody of words.

"Good," the creature whispered, taking his victim's movement as an affirmative. "I am Radu Novac," he said in hushed tones, sensing other humans nearby. "Rightful prince to the Romanian vampire covens."

Unwillingly, Snape closed his eyes in exhaustion, as his hand relaxed and dropped from Radu's chest. The vampire shook him once more, but his eyes refused to open, the blood loss too great. Even a harsh slap brought no response.

"Severus Snape!" Radu hissed in his ear, now smelling three other humans lurking in the shadows. The vampire noticed a wispy blue substance curling its way out of man's slack mouth, and frowned when it lingered above his head. Ignoring it for the time being, he pried open one of the unconscious man's eyelids.

"Listen to me, Snape." There was no reaction. "La dracu," Radu cursed. "Must do this the hard way."

Sinking his fangs into his own wrist, Radu watched as the crimson fluid welled on his pallid skin, waiting until there was enough gathered and then pressing it to the wizard's mouth. "Drink," he commanded.

Nothing happened. Growling in frustration, he lifted Snape's eyelid again, steadily gazing at the lifeless orb until he caught the lone spark of consciousness and grasped hold of it, luring the comatose man to do his bidding. "Drink!"

Reflexively, Snape began to suckle the life-giving substance, as Radu spoke to him hurriedly. "I don't have much time," he murmured softly. "It is dawn in an hour and I must be hidden by then."

Having lapped up a significant amount, Snape now latched on in earnest, nipping at the skin to produce more of the sweet nectar. His eyes slowly opened, so he could gaze at his murderer and saviour all in one.

"Nenorocitul naibii!" Radu snarled, squeezing his fist so his blood would flow easier for the prone human. "Incapacitated me and took me from my homeland, holding me ransom to my father when we would not join his campaign." He mumbled in Romanian then spat on the floor. "But my father is powerful, Snape. He could not willingly join such a crusade, for it would've given that monster such immense strength that you all would have been obliterated. We have tried to remain neutral for millennia, the vampire covens, but this act cannot be forgiven." He withdrew his wrist when he surmised the wizard had had his fill. "You will be our justice." Radu leaned over him and kissed his brow reverently, leaving a bloody imprint of his lips upon his skin. "You will be our wrath."

The vampire clasped Snape's face between his hands, gaze boring into him, commanding and seductive in turn. "Kill that which he holds dear: his pure-blood society." His attention was suddenly drawn to two males and one female that had emerged from beneath the floorboards through a previously unseen door. "Interlopers!"

"We mean you no harm," Hermione pleaded, hands raised in supplication. She looked between her former professor and the being hovering over him. "We need them," she said quietly, pointing to the silvery blue puddles lying scattered on the floor.

Radu considered her for a moment. Hesitantly, he nodded, indicating she could approach, though he warned her in low growls when she was moving too quickly for his tastes. While Hermione dropped to one knee and started scooping up the wispy strands, Ron and Harry took a step forward to help her, halting when Radu hissed at them dangerously.

"No! Only her!" he advised them in a threatening manner, crouched low as if daring the boys to come closer. "Only she is worthy to touch a Novăcești!"

Harry and Ron looked at each other in confusion, but stayed far enough away that the vampire stopped snarling at them. Hermione stilled until she felt it safe to continue then began frantically gathering the memories into her conjured flasks.

"Micuțo, you shake," Radu observed, wondering why she seemed on the verge of screaming. "I will not harm you, I swear it."

"I-I know," she stuttered, biting her lip. "I just can't think straight at the moment." She coaxed another memory into a blue jar. "And I feel exceedingly strange."

Snape, still incapable of speech, watched as she tentatively laid a hand on the side of his face, slipping her fingers into the damp tresses at his temple. "There's still one lingering here," Hermione told him softly, removing it to let it fall into her cupped hand.

His eyes followed her every movement, inhaling deeply of her scent when she smoothed back the inky locks from his brow and whining low like a wounded animal when she pulled away. Both Radu and Hermione looked at him with concern.

"What is it, copile?" Radu assured Severus. "She will not harm you."

The whining became panicky the further she withdrew. "I only took the memories," she explained, though Snape's whimpers were causing her eyes to tear up. "I didn't do anything else!"

"*Linışte, both of you!*" the vampire growled in a tone that brooked no argument, silencing them. "*Your name, my lady?*"

She made the mistake of looking into Radu's eyes and was immediately captivated by the indigo irises. "Hermione Granger."

"*What's he doing?*" Ron muttered to Harry, irritated with the situation.

Harry slapped a hand over Ron's mouth. "*Shut up and maybe we'll find out.*"

Ignoring the chattering annoyances in the background, Radu asked another question. "*Are you human?*"

"*Muggle-born witch,*" she answered somewhat lethargically.

"*Give me your hand.*"

Ron gave a muffled yell through Harry's fingers. "*Hermione, no!*"

This caused her to startle and the eye contact was broken. She gasped repeatedly, rubbing her eyes until they were bloodshot.

Rising slowly, Radu approached the boys at the back of the shack. "*Wag your tongue some more, dog, and I will cut it out and eat it for breakfast.*"

"*I don't think that would be a very wise thing to do... sir,*" Harry advised. He dropped his hand from Ron's mouth and held his wand aloft, pointing it at Radu. "*We're worried about our friend, seeing as you're so interested in her.*"

"*She is no longer your concern.*"

Both Gryffindors were aghast. "*She has been, is, and always will be our concern,*" Harry intoned, laying the tip of Draco's wand against Radu's neck, secretly hoping the thing would work for him when he most needed it.

The vampire smiled, showing his fangs. "*We shall see.*" Stepping back with his hands raised in surrender, he returned to his position beside Snape before glancing out the window at the slightly orange-tinged sky. "*Fir-ar!*"

Knowing that his time was limited, Radu knelt before Snape and Hermione, taking the witch's hand. His eyes suddenly flared an intense purple and he let go, gasping. "*Anhelo Nex!*" he whispered harshly, staring at her. He then grabbed Snape's arm and pushed up his sleeve, baring his skin. "*Touch him,*" Radu commanded her.

"*No.*" She retreated, refusing to look at either man.

"*Anhelo Nex, privește-ți perechea!*" he compelled her this time.

Hesitantly, she laid her chilled fingers on her professor's equally cold forearm. "*I don't understand what...*"

Her sentence was abruptly cut off when surges of something that she could only describe as raw energy coursed through her from the contact point on Snape's skin. Both were seized with a jolt, the force causing Hermione to arch her back and him to grind his teeth.

"*Enough!*" Radu pulled them apart, their anguished whimpers filling the room. Once again, the boys moved to assist Hermione, but the vampire stopped them in their tracks. "*Do. Not. Touch. Her.*"

"*She's my girlfriend!*" Ron protested with a scowl. "*I can touch her if...*"

"*Only if you want to die, tâmpitule.*"

Ron frowned and turned to Harry. "*What did he call me?*"

"*Something fitting, I wager,*" Harry answered impatiently. "*Look, sir, I think...*"

"*No, you will listen to me.*" Radu now stood before them, studying their weary faces. "*You are powerful, Harry Potter, but not as powerful as the Novăcești. And I do not tell you this lightly.*" He looked over his shoulder to where Hermione had Snape's head in her lap, stroking his brow. "*She is of the Anhelo Nex.*"

Harry and Ron stared at him uncomprehending.

Radu's lip curled in a sneer. "*An aleasă, a-a carrier...*" He was getting frustrated with their lack of understanding at what he was trying to say. "*A 'mate'...do you understand this word?*"

Ron's eyes widened and he made to lunge at the vampire, but Harry held him back. "*She's nobody's mate but mine!*"

Sinister laughter boomed from Radu. "*Foolish mortal.*" He leaned closer to Ron and inhaled. "*You have bad blood,*" he observed with disgust. "*You would not be able to keep her, even if you had her.*"

"*Why you...*"

"*Ron!*" Hermione's voice brought the ginger man to a halt. "*Stop your childish posturing, right now.*"

"*But, Hermione, he said...*"

"*I'm perfectly capable of hearing,*" she pointed out, then turned her gaze to Radu, "*and disagreeing.*"

A smirk broke out on the vampire's face. "*We shall see, micuțo.*" Birdsong started to filter through the grime-encrusted windows. "*But for now, you must listen.*"

She crossed her arms in defiance. "*You can't tell me anything that I don't already know about vampires.*"

Cupping her cheek, Radu let his thumb caress her skin, feeling the soft vibration of her blood just beneath the surface. "*You are naive to think you know everything.*"

Ron snorted. "*Obviously you don't know who you're talking to.*"

Hermione and Radu turned to stare at him, one in irritation, the other in contempt. Grasping her elbow, Radu moved the bushy-haired witch closer to Snape, who was still lying prone on the floor, unconscious once more.

"Stay with him," Radu instructed, nodding in the wizard's direction. "He is weak, disoriented, and will need to feed again soon. Then, a full night's rest before he attains his full strength."

"I-I can't," she countered in a frustrated tone. "Harry, Ron, and I have to finish this out... today!"

Stroking his chin, Radu weighed the risks. "Can you return when it is done?"

Her jaw dropped a little. "If I'm still alive," she said petulantly.

Radu looked at her as though he thought she'd lost her mind. "Of course you'll still be alive." He scoffed. "You are integral to his survival."

"Is he a full..." She swallowed thickly. "A full vampire, now?"

"As I said before, he will need to feed again and rest before he comes into his powers." He looked at her pointedly and sighed. "You must let him turn you before your twenty-first birthday."

"What?" she screeched, drawing the attention of her best friends back to them. "I have no intentions of becoming a-a..." She waved her hands in a flustered manner.

"A what, Hermione?" Ron asked, coming near and looking between the other man and his girlfriend.

"A vampire," Radu hissed through clenched teeth. He met Hermione's tearful eyes. "If you do not, micuțo, you will die."

"What?" Ron shouted, startling everyone. "Did you put a curse on her when you did that hand-holding thing?" He swung, intending to land a punch to the creature, who was currently smiling in triumph, but his fist landed in the palm of Radu's hand and was abruptly stopped. The impact sent a wave up his arm and into his shoulder, jarring his vision.

"Temper, temper." The Romanian's tone was taunting. "It will get you into trouble one day."

"Sod off!"

"Actually," Radu murmured, avoiding the sliver of sunlight that crept through the boards on the windows, "I think I will." He returned his gaze to Hermione. "Remember what I said."

In an act worthy of any Muggle magician, Radu Novac slowly dissolved into a misty vapour and slipped through the wooden floorboards, leaving the trio and his child in the shack.

They stood in stunned silence for a while before Hermione shook off her stupor and grabbed the boys, heading towards the trap door. "Come on, you need to look at these."

"What about Snape?" Harry pointed at the fallen man.

"Merlin," Hermione exclaimed in exasperation. "Help me move him into a dark corner, Harry."

"No, I'll do it," Ron volunteered. "Just give me Bellatrix's wand and I'll tuck him in. You need to get Harry back to the castle."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Ron..."

"What?" he said with a shrug. "I swear I won't harm him."

She pursed her lips, wanting to believe his sincerity. "Fine, but hurry up." She slipped the hawthorn wand out of her back pocket, handed it to Ron since his had been damaged, then opened the trap door and shoved Harry down, ignoring his protests. "And be careful. Death Eaters are everywhere." With one last look, she ducked down into the tunnel and disappeared.

Gripping the strange wand in his right hand, Ron approached the ghastly-looking professor, nudging him with his left foot. "Snape?" he whispered.

No movement.

"Snape?" he said a little louder, but still nothing.

"You miserable, greasy bastard!" Ron yelled at the top of his lungs.

Nothing.

Bending low, he laid the tip of the wand on the unconscious wizard's brow, just above his eyes. "I promised Hermione that I wouldn't hurt you." He smirked. "But memory loss won't harm you, plus it will keep her safe." He bent lower. "You'll never have her."

"Oblivate!"

~~*

He knew he was dreaming.

But each time he awoke with a gasp from the images he'd just beheld, everything faded, leaving an empty longing inside his chest...as if a large piece of his core were missing. Damnable dreams! Why couldn't he remember? Why couldn't he recall the reason he'd awoken in the Shrieking Shack to heightened smells and intense colours? How in Merlin's bones had he arrived there to begin with?

Throwing back the covers off his meagre pallet in continuing frustration, Severus Snape attended his toilette, preparing as best he could to appear presentable to the Novăcești. Once dressed, he nudged the man on the other side of the room until he was awake, though grumbling rather fiercely about being roused in the dead of night.

Tonight, he was determined to find the answers to the multitude of questions he'd had for the past three years.

Tonight, he would find out why his soul ached.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Severus Snape looked over his shoulder and pointedly glared at the redhead. "Yes, Mister Weasley." He returned his gaze to the colossal stone gate in front of him. There were multiple battle scenes carved into the granite and several gruesome executions depicted as well, the flickering torchlight causing some of them to take on a life of their own.

Charlie Weasley rubbed the back of his neck, feeling his uneasiness increase the closer they came to the fortress of the Novăcești. "Maybe I should wait here."

"Coward," Snape muttered. He laid his hand on the images, feeling the coarse grit that defined each character. "Afraid they'll eat you?"

"Would you let them?" Charlie stressed the challenge in his voice by crossing his arms. "And I'm not a coward; I'm just very much into self-preservation."

"As am I." Severus then paused for a moment. "No, I would not let them eat you." He smirked. "I would have that pleasure before they could."

"You almost did." The redhead lightly touched the marks on the left side of his neck.

Snape grabbed Weasley's chin and forcefully pushed it to the side so he could study the marred flesh. "I already told you," he huffed in exasperation, "I was not in my right mind when you happened upon me." He released the young wizard's freckled jaw and stepped back. "Be glad of the goat that nourished me beforehand."

"That was meant for Rhiannon, the Welsh Green," Charlie grumbled. "Not that you cared."

"Considering I'd been surviving on rodents or hares, you're right." Snape sneered. "I didn't care that the largest meal I'd found in weeks was meant for a reluctant dragon."

Letting out a long and heavy sigh, Charlie closed his eyes and wiped his face. "My boss is going to kill me."

"You Weasleys are so overdramatic."

"You should see our mother," the ginger dragon-keeper said, trying to stifle a snort. "We learned from the best."

"I knew your mother, though she was several years above me, and interacted with her during Order meetings," Snape mused idly, stroking his jaw. He smirked, knowing exactly what would rile the man. "It explains your siblings."

"Oi, you back off right there...*professor!*" Charlie snapped, ready to defend his family. "Bloody git, should've let you starve to death."

Folding his arms across his chest, Severus stared down the second-oldest Weasley child. "Yes, I'm curious as to that: why didn't you let me starve, knowing what I was?"

"Don't suppose you'd accept that my mother would have my hide if I hadn't helped you, would you?"

"Beat a few manners into you, did she?"

The murderous glint in Charlie's eyes showed he wanted to hit him. Hard. "You're an ungrateful malcontent, you know that?"

"And just whom do I have to thank and what do I have to thank them for?" the Potions master questioned snidely. "The last thing I remember is Lucius Malfoy seeking me out sometime during a night in May, and then nothing!" He spat the last word. "Next, I wake up in a filthy room, my throat raw, and my head feeling as if it'd been split in two. Naturally, I recognized the Shrieking Shack, but I'm so weak that I have to crawl across the floor that is littered with blood and footprints, and barely make it to the trap door." He began to pace back and forth in front of the gate. "Then, when I made it to the end of the tunnel, my only thought was to get back to my dungeon, back to my lab and fix whatever had befallen me."

"But no!" he hissed, his expression murderous. "No, I am denied exiting because of the waning sunlight still present outside."

"No one told you?" his former student asked meekly, having never heard the full story of how Snape came to be a vampire.

The dour man gave a short bark of laughter. "Ha! I waited and waited in that tunnel for someone...anyone...to come and find me, to tell me what was going on." He finally stopped pacing to stand once more in front of Weasley. "By the time night descended, I was ravenous, and I could hear creatures within the earth moving about, tempting me... making me hunger." Turning in shame, Snape eyed the gate. "I left hurriedly, bypassing Hogwarts altogether. I did not wish to risk the lives of the students should they happen to find me in that state."

"You ran," Charlie ascertained softly. "To keep *them* safe."

"And myself." Snape's lips pursed and he shrugged. "For all I know, they believe me dead." A sorrowful look flitted across his face but then returned to his neutral air. "And I prefer it that way."

"I could find out..." the other man hedged.

"No!" Snape's fury was immediate. "You will tell no one of my being here!" He stepped so close to Weasley that their noses touched. "You would not live long enough to sign your name to the parchment."

Charlie closed his eyes slowly, reopening them when they watered, and waved a hand in front of his face. "You should really brush your teeth."

The dark wizard stared at the man before him, nonplussed. "You are a strange, annoying, and off-putting boy."

"And you two argue like an old married couple."

Both men turned towards the stone gate...which had apparently opened quite silently...and beheld a tall, thin man with a long, straight mane of onyx hair, studying them

intently. He was dressed in black linen trousers and a white peasant-style shirt with flared sleeves. The latter was covered by a crimson vest, intricate black brocade imprinted upon it. Knee-high obsidian leather boots completed the outfit.

"We could hear you bickering once you set foot on the mountain pass." He approached them, his hands behind his back. "I am surprised the wolves did not make a supper of you."

"Not for lack of trying, mind you," Charlie countered, then pointed at Snape and smirked. "Seems they found him a bit too... repellent."

"I swear, if you hadn't..."

"Ah, but I did, dear professor. That means you owe me a life debt, doesn't it?"

"Silence."

Weasley and Snape obeyed without hesitation. The man stepped closer, sniffing the air around each of them, his shifting movements exposing him as a vampire. He turned to Charlie.

"Despite your lack of respect, you care for your companion."

The redhead looked at Snape, who wore an expression of astonishment, and shrugged. "He's an intelligent conversationalist. That's hard to find in the mountains of Romania, you know? Not exactly the soiree of the century out here."

"You're as deep as a shallow puddle, Weasley," Snape observed with a snort.

"And you..." The man's eyes widened somewhat. "Frate sau rudă?"

Frowning, Snape mentally cursed the fact that he knew little Romanian. "Pardon?"

"He said 'brother'," Charlie interpreted. Snape arched a brow. "What? I've lived here for years."

The man's tone and demeanour changed abruptly as he beckoned them through the gates. "Come, prieteni. You are welcome at Fortăreața Novăceștilor. My name is Bujor Novac."

~*~

Hermione rubbed her temples rather forcefully for the fifth time in the past two hours. She glanced at Bellatrix's wand, lying on top of the table she was sitting at, and contemplating if it would be a good idea to spell away the increasing ache in her head. After much consideration, however, she decided that it really wasn't wise to aim such an unpredictable and still lethal wand at her brain.

"You look like shite, Hermione."

She peeked up from her tome to glare at one of her best friends. "Thanks ever so." She winced when Ron turned on the overhead light in her kitchen and shielded her eyes against the bright intrusion. "Could you please turn it off?"

"Thought that's why you had a headache, because you were reading in the dark," he pointed out.

"For your information, it wasn't dark in here, Ronald," she huffed in irritation. "It was merely dim, and that wasn't the reason I have a headache." Seeing his confused expression, she rolled her eyes and closed her book. Pushing away from the table she opened the refrigerator to seek some sort of nourishment for the boy and hoping he'd go away afterwards. "I have leftover chicken."

"M not hungry," he said a little petulantly. "I came over to talk."

Laying her forehead on the edge of the icebox, she mentally groaned. She didn't need this...not tonight, not two days before her twenty-first birthday. "What about?" she murmured, still staring into the appliance as if it would produce the answer.

"You know what about."

"We're not having this discussion." She slammed the refrigerator door shut. "He's alive *somewhere*. I just need to find out where."

Not a moment went by that she didn't berate herself for leaving the professor in the shack, alone and defenceless. She'd promised the vampire that made him to watch over Snape if she survived the battle, and...damn it...she always kept her promises! When she'd been able to escape back to the dilapidated building almost forty-eight hours later, however, all she had found had been a few claw marks and signs that something heavy had been dragged away. Retreating to the tunnel, she'd followed it until it exited just under the Whomping Willow...which had sadly been destroyed in the skirmishes that had ensued. She'd noticed several holes that had been dug out along the wall and at least nine rat carcasses that littered the ground.

He'd been hungry, she'd realized, and the guilt had increased, causing her stomach to roll. Hadn't the vampire...she couldn't remember any name that he'd given her, so distraught was she at the time...instructed her that Snape needed to feed after awakening? Emptying the contents of her belly onto the grass outside of the tunnel entrance, she had lain there in the cool evening, letting the dew gather around her body, her tears adding to the moisture. Gone. He'd left before she had been able to return to him. Logically, her mind told her to give up and that whatever had happened to him, happened for a reason. But emotionally, she always came back to the look of desperation that had been in the vampire's eyes, making her feel as if she were vital to Snape's survival. She was not one to dwell on unproductive thoughts, and she was determined to find him, regardless if he needed her or not.

In the following days, during her darkest moments, she'd often wondered if he just hadn't wanted to be burdened with the annoying swot and had left before she could impose herself upon him. But some niggling doubt deep within her had told her those thoughts were unfounded. Harry, bless his cotton socks, had wisely said nothing to the contrary, even helping her search at night for the newly made vampire until he'd succumbed to sleepiness and collapsed. When they'd both been too tired to venture out one evening, Harry had shown her Snape's memories in hopes of finding a clue that would lead to his whereabouts. She'd wept for days, but it had strengthened her resolve in the search for him.

Ron was another story altogether. He had constantly scoffed at their efforts, going so far as to inform her that he *knew* Snape was dead...the kind of dead that doesn't kill the living...because he'd heard about a newly risen vampire that had been slaughtered in Wiltshire, and wasn't that where the Malfoy's lived? She'd immediately dismissed that speculation, refusing to believe it, most of all because her instincts had told her it wasn't true.

Her life soon became altered in that she slept mostly during the day and was wide awake and searching throughout most of the night. The inheritance she'd received when her parents passed away allowed her to live this way, and would do so for a great many years. Odd changes in health prevented her from working any length of time, as the blinding headaches, irritability, and sluggishness during the day caused her to be unfit for even the most mundane of tasks. Harry never tried to convince her that her illnesses weren't real, or of the fact that Snape might indeed, be dead... really dead. He'd seen what kind of person the former Headmaster really was, and he begrudged the man nothing, especially the peace Harry knew he sought. Ron's presence her life, however, started to suffocate her.

As the months passed with no sign of Snape...the closest to a trail they had was a decreased rat population in the southeast of England...Ron became increasingly intrusive. He would show up unannounced to the flat she'd recently purchased in Muggle London, making himself at home on her sage-green sofa, saying he would take her to the next game of the Chudley Cannons, or something else just as dull. She reasoned he stayed with her those times as consolation her for her parents' death...they'd

been killed before she could return to Australia and retrieve them...but that had been quite a while ago, and she had to wonder at his inclination to stand vigil a great deal of the time they spent together.

The first few times he'd popped by, she'd shrugged it off and tolerated his presence because he was her best friend, and sometimes best friends did things that irritated each other.

When it became a regular habit that he spent more time at her flat than at the Burrow, she'd put her foot down after a particularly heated argument about her nocturnal activities. She'd shoved him out her door, afterwards warding it so heavily that one touch would send him flying down the corridor, then curled up on the sofa he'd just vacated, sobbing and clutching at her chest reflexively. Once or twice soon after, she'd caught him sleeping on her doorstep, and that familiar feeling of guilt had overwhelmed her enough to invite him in to sleep on the couch.

Now, two years later, the only time he gained entrance to her flat was when she was thoroughly distracted and didn't bother with the wards. It should irk her that Ron wouldn't knock, instead inviting himself inside to have a poke in her cupboards or icebox and smiling hesitantly when she'd meander down the hallway to find him rifling through her kitchen. Most times she'd feed him and he'd chat a bit about Harry and Ginny...and their waffling attempts at a relationship...or George's slow recovery after the loss of his twin. Apparently, Ron had moved into one of the spare bedrooms above the shop and had a go at running the business on George's worst days. That explained why Ron always showed up hungry...Molly's cooking was famous throughout the Wizarding world and, living on their own, her children were hard-pressed to find any better.

At the beginning of September, in a last ditch effort to locate Snape, Hermione had written a missive to all the vampire clans known to the Wizarding world. Although they were not allowed to gather in large numbers in Britain, there were several 'covens' on the continent, Asia, and in the Americas, and she hoped that maybe one of them had a clue as to where Severus was, or a way to find him, since all her resources were exhausted. She'd hesitated to write them beforehand, not wanting to draw unnecessary interest that was deadly in the least...and beyond that, she didn't want to know...but her headaches nearly incapacitated her to the point of fainting, and she was now starting to hear sonorous echoes. So far, she'd only received one reply...from the Hikawa clan in Japan. They'd indicated that no, they had not come across such a man, but if they did, they would be sure to contact her. She'd heard nothing further. Knowing as much as she did about vampires and their culture, she knew she'd reached the end of her metaphorical rope in writing to them, but she had nothing left to lose and she was optimistic that she would hear from another coven.

"Why are you so hung up on this?" Ron asked, his voice laced with thinly veiled anger. "He hated us during school; why keep searching for the greasy bastard?"

Clenching her teeth, Hermione inhaled and exhaled deeply one time before she focused her attention on the man in front of her. "Because I made a promise, Ronald. That may not mean much to you, but it does to me."

Ron frowned heavily. "What promise?" He stepped into her path as she tried to leave the kitchen. "What're you on about?"

She tried to go around him, but he kept impeding her attempts. "It's none of your business. Now move, or I'll..." There was a harsh tapping on her window, and it drew her to the other side of the room, Ron forgotten in her haste to open the pane.

One of the blackest ravens Hermione had ever laid eyes on sat perched on her sill, a piece of parchment attached to its leg. It cawed at her, expecting her to take the paper and, once she did, it flew off into the humid night.

"What's that?" Ron peered curiously over her shoulder, brushing up against her.

Cringing at his touch, she quickly moved to the sofa and sat, breaking the red wax seal on the letter. When she read the contents, her eyes welled with tears, and she covered her mouth to muffle the sobs that threatened to escape.

We have that which you seek. Expect a visit.

There was no signature, no indication of which coven the missive was from, not that it mattered. Relief engulfed her. She folded the letter and pressed her lips against it, paying no heed to the man standing behind her and reading the same note.

The blow and the ensuing darkness caught her completely off guard.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

Entering the fortress and taking in the opulence surrounding him, Charlie Weasley issued a loud, appreciative whistle. "Riches do not consist in the possession of treasures, but in the use made of them," he quoted Napoleon reverently. He craned his neck to gaze at the fresco adorning the ceiling, but a slap to the back of his head made him wince in irritation.

"Eyes ahead, Weasley," Snape instructed. "Study art on your own time."

"Still rethinking that whole saving you situation," he grumbled, rubbing the stinging skin where he'd been smacked.

"Rethink all you wish; it's too late to retract your actions."

"I stand by my initial assessment of you being an intolerable malcontent."

The vampire walking ahead of them turned his head slightly and laughed. "He will make a good trimis for you, frate."

"Hold up a tic." Charlie came to a halt, refusing to walk further. "I'm no one's lackey."

Snape frowned again, but watched with interest as Bujor's eyes...which were normally brown...turned indigo and bore a hole right through Weasley. "Then, tânarul meu prieten," he said, laying a hand on Charlie's freckled cheek, "why are you here?"

Caught in Novac's hypnotic gaze, the redhead was compelled to answer truthfully. "To keep Snape safe."

"Is that all?"

"To satisfy my own curiosity about vampire life."

Bujor smirked, but did not alter the trance. "He is foolish and reckless, this one," he told Snape. "He possesses a tremendous amount of willpower and will not be easy to convert." Breaking eye contact, Bujor stepped back. "But once he finds a worthy goal with clear objectives, he will devote himself to success."

"Ah, frate Bujor! Ce ai..." Another vampire, dressed in much the same fashion as his counterpart, approached the trio from atop a set of massive marble steps, making his way slowly to the bottom.

"Copile?" the man asked softly, staring at the tall wizard.

He glanced between the men in hopes that someone would translate.

"You're his sire?" Charlie posed incredulously.

Never taking his eyes from Snape, the vampire answered the question. "I am Radu Novac, fifth prince to the Novăceștii clan."

"What happened to the other four?"

This earned Radu's attention and he turned to face the ginger man with a scowl. "I killed them."

"Right." The dragon-keeper swallowed thickly. "Shutting up now."

Radu narrowed his eyes, studying him. "You look familiar..."

"Don't recall seeing you or yours at any point in the past." Charlie leaned in. "Think I'd remember that sort of a meeting."

Tapping his forefinger against his lips, Radu studied him until comprehension flooded his expression. "Ah, yes, the wagging tongue!" He gave the younger man a feral smile. "Come to have it cut out, finally?"

"Not sure what you're on about, mate." Charlie laughed weakly, stepping away from the group. "And while my mum often scolded me for nattering too much, I'm not sure she'd take kindly to having said offending organ hacked from my mouth."

"Leagă-l," Radu hissed at the other vampire, but Charlie had already bolted down the hallway they'd just passed through. Bujor quickly disappeared in the same direction.

Moving to follow, Snape was forced to stop when Radu's hand pressed in the center of his chest. "Bujor will retrieve him."

"No harm must come to the boy," Snape ordered, trying to shove off Radu's hand. "He saved my life."

"Roșcatul saved your life?" He looked genuinely confused. "What has happened to you, copile?" Radu tenderly caressed Snape's cheek. "You are so malnourished. Has your Anhelô Nex not been a proper helpmeet?"

"My what?"

"Your Anhelô Nex?" Frowning in frustration, Radu tried to explain as best he could. "Your companion?" Nothing again. "The one to help you? She is a carrier of the antigen." A blank look was all he received. Searching his extensive memory, he sought a name the wizard would recognize, suddenly remembering the letter he'd received last week from Britain. "Hermione Granger?"

Snape scowled fiercely. "What does Miss Granger have to do with my condition?"

Fixing his penetrating glare on the thin wizard in front of him, he growled, "I am the one responsible for your *condition*, not the girl." Radu hissed at him, showing his fangs. "She is meant to help, not to hinder you."

The Potions master wanted to retaliate, his lip nearly curling into a sneer, but his sire's voice was compelling and demanded obedience. "I can't remember anything," he bit out through clenched teeth.

"That cannot be," Radu countered, shaking his head. "I told her of this, commanded her to return to you once..." He broke off, frowning in regret. "Unless she didn't survive." Immediately, he dismissed that thought due to the letter in his study, the one requesting information on his copile's whereabouts.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Severus reiterated in annoyance.

Laying both palms against Snape's temples, Radu peered into his eyes searchingly. "Arată-mi trecutul tău," he whispered.

Severus' mind was probed extensively regarding the missing night so long ago. With stunning clarity, Radu brought forth every moment that had been lost to him, including those leading up to his conversion. Snape wanted to scream in horror and anger at the memories laid bare before him, but, held captive by his growing fury for Ronald Weasley, he kept his silence.

When Radu retreated from Snape's mind, his face mirrored the Potion master's, though he didn't realize it. Cupping the shaking man's cheek, Radu wiped away the stray tears that had escaped. "We will make it right, copile."

Severus knew there was only one thing that would make this travesty resemble anything remotely *right*.

Weasley had to die... most horribly.

~*~*~

As if the throbbing at her temples wasn't bad enough, Hermione's head now felt like she'd taken a bludger to the brain... multiple times. Moving to sit up, she soon realized she was bound by restraints, and tried desperately to recall how she'd arrived in her bedroom trussed up like a common criminal.

"Stop fidgeting, Hermione," someone murmured in the darkness. "Even you won't be able to break that spell."

That voice sounded so familiar...but why? Her head was too fuzzy to distinguish the speaker. What was the last thing she remembered doing? Focusing her concentration through the pounding ache in her head was difficult, and she bit her bottom lip in frustration as tears welled in her eyes. "Please," she whimpered, hating the frail sound. Having considered this a dire situation, she'd gone for sympathy. "Let me go."

"Not likely." There was shuffling and another spell muttered to light the room with candles. "We'll stay safe and cosy for a few days. Then you'll see."

The tears that had already pooled at the corners of her eyes now seeped over when the meagre glow from the numerous flames became too much for her increasingly sensitive vision. She squeezed her lids shut and turned her face away when a pewter holder with a lit taper was shoved near. "Don't!" she hissed. "It hurts!"

"It's in your mind, Hermione," the person said with a task, as if they were disgusted with her behaviour. "You just need to be around people that love you. You're so obsessed with this... this..."

"Ronald?" she whispered incredulously. Only *he* would have trouble with her ongoing determination to find Snape and not be able to properly voice his thoughts on the matter. "Did you do this to me?"

"See? This fixation you have on finding a dead man just isn't healthy; it's made you completely barmy."

"Let me go. Now!" She tried moving her feet, but they were bound as well. "You'd better not be around if I get loose."

He cast long shadows with his tall frame as he approached her at the side of the bed. "Shhh. It'll be alright." Placing a palm on her brow, he shook his head with a worried expression. "You're really cold." He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. "And you're as white as a sheet."

"Get out!" she managed to scream, instantly regretting it. The sound of her voice roared in her ears, threatening to pierce her eardrums, causing her to sob in earnest.

Hermione closed her eyes and felt a dip in the mattress on the left side before Ron began caressing her face, pushing back the damp strands of her frizzy curls. "I can't, love." He pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I've got to show you that all this bloody nonsense is in your head, and that you're not on the verge of dying if you don't find that greasy bat."

She tried turning her face away from his attentions, but he gripped her chin and held her immobile.

So, she did the only thing could think of.

"Bloody hell!" Ron snarled, wiping the saliva she'd spat straight into his eye. He retaliated by casting *Silencio*, followed by a full Body-Bind. "It's a good thing I love you, Hermione." He breathed heavily, nose to nose with her since she couldn't move an inch. "Or I would've hexed your arse something fierce."

Unable to respond, but cognizant of all that happened, she felt her stomach threaten to rebel when he started placing what he probably considered 'love nips' along her jaw and neck, pausing once or twice to murmur something lewd about how he knew she was a dirty girl. *Dirty girl, indeed.* If she ever got free and he was within grabbing distance, he'd find out how pathetic that label was and go straight from 'dirty girl' to 'fucking evil bitch'!

"We'll get married in the spring," Ron mused aloud as he moved away and sat up, unaware of the boiling rage in Hermione's eyes. "The Burrow is just the place around that time of year. The cherry blossoms are right gorgeous, and Mum'll have the orchard all decked out like she did for Bill's wedding, though we'll definitely have more people there."

He glanced over at her still, prone body, and patted her arm. "Harry'll be back from his vacation by then to be my best man and Ginny can be your..." He gestured wildly. "I don't know... whatever you girls do during a wedding."

Her jaw began to ache with how forcefully she was trying to open it; she wanted desperately to break the hex he'd placed on her and then do unspeakable things to his person, maybe even an Unforgivable. Or two. His constant blathering irritated and worried her in turns; it seemed as if *he* were the one with a mental issue, not her.

"Mum'll make the cake, too," he continued, oblivious to her murderous thoughts. "You know, she wanted to make Bill's, but Phlegm would have only 'ze best Franch boulangères' bake it." He grimaced. "She's a right snob, that Fleur. Worse than the Malfoys, if you can believe it."

Merlin, his French was terrible! And sure, Fleur was a bit on the... persnickety side, but she was nothing like Draco or his father...not even close. Wait. Why was she justifying this conversation, even though it was completely one-sided and the other party was as deluded as Trelawney and her stupid Divination class? Mentally slapping herself, Hermione tuned Ron out and concentrated on nonverbally dismantling the hex he'd placed on her, hoping she didn't give up too easily from utter exhaustion.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

Snape licked his lips and sat back with a very satisfied groan. "That was excellent."

Radu raised his goblet in salute, crimson liquid filling it to the brim. "Only the best will do." He sipped leisurely, closely watching his child. "I saw your mind," he started hesitantly, "but I want you to tell me what happened, what you remember first hand."

Staring into his empty glass, Severus slowly rubbed his index finger around the rim and began speaking. "The first thing I remembered was that I was ravenous, like I hadn't eaten in months. When I realized I was in the Shrieking Shack, and covered in blood, I have to admit it was one of the few times I was frightened."

"But you had faced Voldemort numerous times, had you not?" Radu asked, curious as to what would terrify the man before him. "Did you not fear for your life during those times?"

"No." Having gathered the remaining blood from the lip of the cup, Snape slipped his finger into his mouth, licking the precious liquid that clung to his skin. "I was well-versed in his scare tactics, as I'd been on their receiving end more than once during my servitude. In fact, I was the one responsible for a number of raids that involved..." He swallowed heavily, but continued. "Less than savoury methods."

"Then what was the reason for the fear?" Radu murmured. "Though you were newly made, you had exceptional powers that ordinary wizards do not."

Snape did not answer for a long time. He searched within himself for the rationale that he would dread his awakening to a 'new' life, yet not the Dark Lord himself. "I thought I had passed on, as it were," he finally muttered. "And I knew that I could never atone for my betrayal or actions, so I immediately surmised that I had awoken in Hell."

"Ah, this I cannot understand, but I sympathize," Radu said. "Go on."

Running his tongue along one of his fangs, Severus tried to recall all that had happened in the past three years. "I was very disoriented; the last thing I remembered was Lucius Malfoy approaching me on the battlefield, telling me that I was to return to the Shack per the Dark Lord's request. Upon awakening, I dragged myself to the trap door and literally fell into the tunnel beneath, my energy practically nil at that point. When I reached the end under the Whomping Willow, I exited none the wiser, which I soon learned was a mistake." He glanced at the back of his right hand where a pattern of faint scars resided, evidence of his brush with his vampiric nature's limitations. "The waning sunlight immediately prevented me from traversing very far, and I quickly returned to the tunnel opening, confused as to why my skin burned. I calculated as many possibilities in my mind as it would allow in its fragile state, finally coming to the conclusion that I was Nosferatu, or vampire, due to the lack of a pulse and elongated canines."

"You did not realize before this? Fangs? Lack of pulse?"

Snape glared at him. "When I awoke in a run-down shack covered in blood, Novac, my first priority was to evaluate my environment to determine if it was safe. Then, once I found a means of escape, I took stock of my person to ascertain any life-threatening injuries. Realizing I had no pulse...and had been given other accoutrements that I *hadn't* previously owned...was not a priority at the time."

The vampire prince smirked, amused at his irritation. "Such a sharp tongue to accompany equally sharp teeth."

"As I was saying," Snape intoned snidely, "once I was in the mouth of the tunnel, I could smell blood that wasn't my own. It made the ache in my stomach increase and compelled me to search it out. By the time I was somewhat sated, I'd consumed a great many rats that had made their home within the tunnel walls."

"Ah, that explains how you survived without your Anhelu Nex," Radu mused aloud.

"What the bloody hell is that? You keep saying that term."

"All in good time," Radu promised. "As for the rodents, though they are quite rancid to drink from, they are most plentiful and will sustain you in emergencies." He studied Snape for a moment. "Do you wish to drink only from animals?"

Licking his lips, Severus shook his head. "I avoided humans at all costs in the beginning, but once I tasted Weasley's blood, it was pure ecstasy, addictive. I was a fool to think I could survive only on rats or small mammals for the remainder of my existence."

"I must explain to you the hierarchy of vampires, Severus, and perhaps this will help you understand what a great honour has been bestowed upon you...help you understand the blood lust." He rose from his seated position and leisurely strolled around the length of the dining table.

"There are two kinds of vampires: those that are born this way," Radu pointed to himself, "and those that are turned. Those who are born vampires do not truly comprehend the idea of Heaven and Hell, as we are supposed to have no souls with which to burden either place." He gave Snape a conspiratorial wink. "We let the misinformed believe what they will, for it perpetuates rumours and legends that keep us beyond the realm of existence for most humans."

"Those that are turned, such as yourself, are usually normal humans or what you would call... Muggles, was it?"

Snape nodded. "Non-magical beings. There are Muggle-born witches and wizards, of course, who seem to be increasing in number as the years progress."

Radu stopped his slow meandering and leaned against the edge of the table where Snape sat. "Yes, the vampire covens have noticed this fact as well." Crossing his arms, he looked at his child pensively. "Your Hermione Granger is one of them."

"She is not *my* anything," the dark wizard said in a drawl. "According to the memories you brought forth, she merely gathered the recollections of my past for Mister Potter to view, and..." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Provided ease when I was ill."

A snort of laughter echoed in the chamber, mirth dancing in Radu's indigo-tinged gaze. "My, my... you are a stubborn one." Laying a hand on Severus' shoulder, he gave it a gentle squeeze. "You and her are connected, copile."

"How so?"

"I told you that converting normal humans creates the second type of vampire, yes? Well, there are exceptions," he hedged. "It is forbidden to turn wizards or witches."

Snape frowned heavily. "Then why..."

"As coven leader, I must sometimes break our laws to ensure our survival," Radu quickly informed him. "I had been starved for over a week by the time I was brought before you. My father, who was placed in a position of offering his army to that overblown trãncãitor or suffer my loss, chose to wait out Voldemort's demands, as I knew he would." Bowing his head, he paused for a moment. "When I returned to find my father slain by a rival coven, I knew I had made the right choice in turning you." Bending low, he stared at the seated vampire with indigo now fully blazing in his irises. "You are unique in the vampire and Wizarding world, Severus," he whispered harshly. "We do not turn wizards or witches because their power would increase thirtyfold and most cannot handle the responsibility that comes with such a gift. This is why Voldemort wanted us to join his crusade: to create a new race that would obliterate us all. But you? Your control is infinite, your moral character, though self-centred at times, is also selfless, and your intelligence extraordinary."

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," he hissed, cupping Severus' cheeks. "Your wisdom would prevent this type of abuse." Closing his eyes, he stood and blew out a shaky breath. "It is good that I trust you."

A dark eyebrow rose in scepticism. "Why? You know nothing of me. I could be worse than Voldemort and Grindelwald put together."

Radu placed his hand over Snape's heart. "This is why I chose you," he stated simply, pressing against his chest. "You have the heart of a noble protector and a wise leader."

Inhaling sharply, Snape bit the inside of this cheek to keep from unmaning himself. No one had ever had this much trust in him. Not Voldemort and certainly not Dumbledore. It was a heady thing that was being presented to him on a silver platter. Was he up to the responsibility of so much power? Clearing his throat, he tapped the arm of the plush chair he sat in. "What purpose does Miss Granger serve?"

Returning to his relaxed stance, Radu smirked with a gleam in his eyes. "She is unique as well. The Muggles we turn all have what is called the 'Anhelu Nex' antigen within their blood. Normally, the selected humans are singled out early in their life by one of the covens, and followed until the right time to convert them. It is very rare to find a Muggle-born wizard or witch who carry such an antigen." He frowned for a moment to think. "I don't believe I've seen one in over four hundred years."

"What happens then?"

"In normal humans, the antigen acts as a homing beacon for our kind, an indication of who is suitable for turning as a companion, a lover, or mate." Radu stroked his chin thoughtfully. "In Muggle-born witches or wizards, however, to the vampire experiencing the attraction it is an indication of a true mate, or soul mate, if you will." He looked pointedly at Severus. "That is why they are so rare. Once bonded, mates will do anything to protect one another, and they must never be underestimated."

"So, am I to assume I still carry a soul, if I have this supposed mate?" The retired spy felt he'd given up enough of it during his service and it would be the height of irony if he lost it now.

Radu grew pensive for a moment. "As I said before, I am a born vampire; theoretically, I have no soul to gain or lose. I would like to believe that I have one for I feel things as most humans do...love, anger, hatred, passion." A far away look clouded his eyes. "I believe we do not lose our souls; we only think we do, and the idea that we are eternal makes us believe our actions will have no consequences. We think we are fallen and, therefore, act fallen. When you give someone extreme power and no

consequences, the way they act is usually contrary to the greater good. Hence vampires are considered soulless: not because they don't have a conscience, but because they have the luxury to ignore it." He smirked. "Maybe it is that we are not burdened with inhibitions. I feel no remorse when I feed, for it is what I need to do to survive. There are always larger predators in the world, copile, ones that would not hesitate to end you."

Thinking of Ronald Weasley, Snape's fury grew. "And what if I enjoy the kill, what if I revel in it? Does what I have left of my soul fracture and become irreparable?"

"Mindless killing is forbidden," the older vampire informed him imperiously. "Despite what the human society as a whole thinks, we do have a moral compass. It would be foolish to deplete our food supply, would it not? Though I doubt you will engage in this behaviour, let it be known that the punishment is swift and you will meet whichever deity you wish to believe in." He gentled his words. "To answer your question, though, perhaps it would be better to think of it as savouring a dining experience. You enjoyed yourself when you consumed solid food, yes?" At Snape's nod, he continued. "In reality, once your hunger is sated, the drive to kill is suppressed a great deal. If you were to persist in hunting for sport, it would be on your own conscience."

"I understand." Severus stroked the sire mark on his neck, which in hindsight brought him comfort in times of extreme distress. "Ronald will be a pleasure to end, but what of others?"

"All great princes or kings retained their rule due in large part to the rationale of killing their enemies before they had the chance to impart the same courtesy. It is a defensive strategy that has kept our clans and covens numbers at an acceptable level. Otherwise, we would be overpopulating the world with vampires... or corpses, depending on who carried the antigen." Radu grimaced somewhat. "All those who possess the antigen must be turned by their twenty-first birthday."

Snape gripped the armrest, slightly alarmed. "Why?"

Sorrow filled Radu's eyes, which had returned to their dark brown state. "If they are not turned, they start to deteriorate, as the antigen begins converting their genetic code, regardless. They must have an exchange of vampire blood before the third day after their birthday or..."

"Or what?" he growled when Radu did not continue.

"They die from haemolytic anaemia," the vampire answered quietly. "Sadly, more often than not this happens, as their mate may take longer to find them. It is a ghastly sight, and I do not wish it for your Hermione."

"You keep telling me she is *my* Hermione," he huffed. "Why is she mine? Why can't *you* turn her?"

Averting his gaze, Radu ached for his child. "I had a suspicion she was carrying the antigen while still in the Shack and confirmed it when I touched her skin; it has a distinct odour, like a pheromone. When I touched you both, I could actually *see* the bond between you. I cannot convert her...she is not my soul mate, and if I were to try, I would kill her in the process."

Severus snorted in disbelief. "She is nothing but an overachiever and know-it-all, with an unhealthy dose of officiousness. There is no bond between us other than that of student and beleaguered professor."

Radu shook his head. "You do not understand," he corrected harshly. "Having tasted your blood, I have shared your memories, your thoughts and wishes. As your sire, I will and do know things concerning your existence, such as your preference for those of Celtic descent whose blood warms you like no other, or that you find Muggle chess relaxing but hate Wizards chess because it is taxing on your frayed nerves at the end of the day. You have a deeply rooted sadistic side that you show only when your emotions run high, and your fingers twitch at the scent of Miss Granger's hair."

Paling further with every observation, Snape shoved his chair back, ready to rise and flee from the blatant intrusion into his privacy. Radu's hand on his shoulder prevented his movements.

"If you do not turn her," he snarled, leaning into his fledgling's face, "you condemn yourself to walk this earth alone... forever. No companion will ever be good enough, no lover's caress soft enough, and you will always pine and ache for her. If you thought the loss of your beloved Lily was excruciating, try multiplying it a hundredfold and add to that the guilt that you could have prevented such pain if you'd only converted her."

"How do you know?" the wizard countered with a sneer.

"Because my beloved died in my arms," Radu whispered hoarsely. "She refused to let me turn her, to taint her innocence with my supposed wretchedness." He closed his eyes in agony. "Not a day goes by that I don't wish I'd been selfish and converted her, heedless of her desires."

For the first time in his 'new' life, Severus regretted his thoughtlessness. Of course, he'd regretted many things in his human life, the loss of Lily's friendship being prominent among them. But when he realized what he'd become...a vampire...he'd taken it with a grain of salt and adapted quickly, as it was the means to survival. He hadn't lamented his situation or wanted to look a gift horse in the mouth, but he'd hated not having all the details. It's what had started his migration towards Romania, following his instincts, though it had taken him the better part of three years to arrive here.

He really was grateful to Charlie Weasley for finding him, drawing nourishment from a tethered goat that fateful night, unaware that the goat was supposed to lure a dragon from its lair. When the redhead had approached him, yelling at him to 'get the bloody hell away from the evening meal', Snape had followed his instincts and latched onto Weasley instead, drinking from his neck until the man had fainted. It had been the first human blood he'd tasted, and it had exploded with flavour and passion that had filled him with a compulsion to try it again, especially after the diet of rats and other small mammals he'd been living on since his turning.

When Charlie had awoken hours later that same night, Snape had quietly cleaned him up and promised the lad that he wouldn't take another sip, no matter how much he wanted to. This had caused the ginger man to faint once more and never wake again that night. Severus had stowed himself away in a hidey hole near what he'd assumed was Weasley's tent when twilight had graced the predawn hours. Not only had he been able to feel the oncoming lethargy from the sun's steady rise but he'd also sensed and smelled it. Living on lesser prey had clouded his senses, dulled his reaction time, so more than once he was caught out and about when the first rays had broken the horizon. With human blood in his system, however, everything had been heightened...taste, smell, sight, hearing... everything.

Apparently judging that he could trust Snape, Weasley had agreed to help him find any nearby vampire covens, disregarding his own work duties in the process. Had Charlie not agreed to help him, Snape would have possibly still been wandering aimlessly in search of his rightful coven.

"I regret my hasty words, Radu," Severus muttered, looking away.

Closing his eyes in apparent relief, the centuries-old vampire nodded. "That is good to hear. Blood is too precious to waste, and human blood is full of memories, hopes, and dreams; that is the reason it is so rich and sweet. When you 'blood bond' with your Anhelio Nex, she will come to embody all that you desire: physical, emotional, and sexual nourishment." He opened his eyes and gave Snape a wickedly sensual smirk. "She may even orgasm at the thought of your feeding from her."

If Snape had it in him to blush profusely, he would have. "Are you quite sure..."

"Yes," Radu cut him off in a tone that brooked no argument. "If you do not turn her, you condemn her to death and yourself to a lonely existence." Seeing his child squirm somewhat, he gentled his voice. "Is that what you want? To never know the connection of another?"

Contemplating his choices, Severus came to the conclusion that while he didn't relish the idea of being stuck with Miss Granger for time in memoriam, he also didn't think he could sentence her to death, especially if he were to be her saviour. She was too intelligent by half, though he loathed admitting it, and he probably would never tell her so. Well, maybe after a century or two had passed, *then* he might give her some sort of praise. If what Radu was promising was indeed fact, he could perceivably come to enjoy his 'after' life, even with Miss Granger dogging his heels.

"I will find Miss Granger and discuss this with her," Snape finally acquiesced.

"Excellent." Radu clapped his hands. "Now, to this business of that red dog in the Shack. He is the one that brought you here, no?"

"No, actually," Severus corrected. "Charles Weasley is Ronald's brother, and I daresay the most interesting of the lot of over-breeding nitwits."

"There is more than one of those ugly tâmpiți alive? Why did you not kill him?" Radu frowned. "Ah, but forgive me, you did not realize his deception until this evening."

"Yes," Snape confirmed, his eyes narrowing in building anger. "He Obliviated me to save Miss Granger from my dastardly clutches." A feral smile grew on his lips. "I will enjoy his evisceration."

"Have you given thought to the possibility that, if these Weasleys are so many as you said and one of them were to fall, another might take his place to exact revenge?"

Clenching his fingers into a fist until his knuckles were white, Snape's nostrils flared. "I will kill them all!" he snarled, his fangs descending, though his blood lust was satisfied.

"Patience, copile," Radu soothed. He cocked his head to the right as if listening for something. "You will have your chance momentarily."

Two minutes later, there was a loud thud, like a heavy door was slammed shut. Then a scuffle sounded in the immediate area, followed by several yelps for assistance, which were abruptly silenced. Bujor soon appeared, dragging Charlie Weasley behind him, tied up and sporting at least five sets of fang marks over various parts of his body, blood oozing from each bite.

"This pușlama was hard to track, stăpâne," Bujor panted. "For his bulk he is very agile."

"Sod off!" Charlie shouted. He tried a running head-butt since his arms were bound, but Bujor sidestepped him and laughed when Charlie went sprawling to land at Snape's feet.

"Well?" Radu looked expectantly at Severus with raised eyebrows. "He is one of *them*." He rose and walked over to the young man, bending low and picking the redhead up by the scruff of his sweaty neck. "Kill him."

Looking down his nose at the man who'd been his companion for the past few days, mindful of the life debt he owed the young man, Snape felt his anger abate somewhat. "Are there no other options?" he asked quietly.

"He has seen too much of our coven," Radu declared in a hardened voice. "There are only two options for one such as him."

Snape peered into his former student's eyes, seeking any malice or ill-will towards him as a professor... or a vampire. Though Charlie struggled against his captors, Severus only found that Weasley contained a good character and a loyal, if misguided, heart. "What are the options?"

"Go fuck yourself!" he growled at Snape. "Guess what everyone back home said is true: you can't be trusted and you're nothing but a coward."

Ignoring the man's outburst, including the word he hated most, Snape looked to his sire once more, waiting for him to explain what could possibly be Charlie's fate should he choose to spare him.

"Completely drained which would result in his death, or..." Radu paused to study the surly redhead, "a familiar."

"What is the purpose of a familiar?"

"There are some tasks that you will not be able to perform due to your vampiric nature," Radu explained, tightening his grip on Charlie's nape. "Familiars aid you in your night-to-night living...dispatching enemies, reconnaissance, handling duties that require discretion," he said with a knowing look. "Plus, they can be enthusiastically vicious minions with superior strength, able to vanquish your rivals."

Charlie began struggling in earnest now apparently against both ideas. Turning to Snape, he pleaded, "Just Oblivate me; I won't remember!"

It was the wrong thing to ask of the former Headmaster. A decidedly wicked smile spread across his face. "Familiar, definitely."

Rubbing his chin, Radu nodded. "Very wise." He barked some instructions to Bujor, who had been standing off to the side awaiting his lord's pleasure, and handed Weasley over to him. "Prepare him."

"No! Snape! You traitor!"

Frowning, the dour wizard-cum-vampire strode to where Bujor held Charlie restrained, stopping to wrap his long, calloused fingers around the redhead's throat and delighting when the young man's pulse hiked in response. "I'm repaying the life debt I owe you, Mister Weasley," he informed him in a deceptively quiet tone. "I'm keeping you alive to serve me, which is more than I can say for what will happen to your family."

What colour Charlie still had drained from his face. "What do you mean?" he whispered his voice choked with panic.

Threading his fingers through the spiky red hair, Snape gripped his locks until the young man gritted his teeth in pain. "Your foolish brother signed your family's death-warrant the moment he Obliviated me three years ago."

~*~

"And then, for our honeymoon, we can..."

Hermione mentally rolled her eyes at Ron's continuous droning. So far, he'd planned their wedding, went into great detail about the guest list, and explained how yellow would be a wonderful colour for bridesmaid dresses. Ha! What a horrid colour! Then, he'd proceeded to tell her how many children he expected them to have, and in how many years.

The arrogant prick! She felt ten kinds of foolish to have allowed him to sleep on her couch all those nights, to have listened to his sob stories about his family, Harry's frequent absences from the Wizarding world, and work, to have thought that he'd been any kind of friend to her. If only she could free herself, she would show him exactly what she thought of him... multiple times.

"We could live at the Burrow until we get a place of our own," Ron suggested. "Mum would love to have us."

Oh, Hades' toenails! She couldn't imagine any kind of life under the thumb of Molly Weasley, and she'd commit suicide before such a thing would ever come to fruition.

"Harry told me there's an entry-level position in the Auror department that I could apply for, and he'd give his recommendation to have them accept me. Can you imagine it, Hermione? Partners with Harry once again! Or when he gets back, that is."

In your dreams, you imbecile with the willpower of a marshmallow. Looking back on her years with Ron, she came to an interesting, but unsurprising revelation. He was a slippery, manipulative, unreliable reality-dodger with delusions of adequacy and an addiction to sentimentality and self-destruction. She should've detailed all his conversations with a Dictocord Spell, for anytime there had been anything mutually agreed on two minutes prior, he would utterly deny it a few minutes later, going so far as to say that he hadn't even been in the room when the conversation had taken place. He was nothing more than a weak-willed sensationalist with a penchant for

moaning about the intolerable pressure the world put upon him.

"After the fifth child, we can..."

There was a rather forceful knock on her flat door that interrupted his unrealistic musings.

"Huh... wonder who that could be," he said, frowning as he left her side.

Striding out of her bedroom, he rounded the corner and stopped to peer through the peek-hole in the door, dropping his jaw in shock. Unlocking the three Muggle bolt locks Hermione had in place and dismantling the wards, he opened the door to see his brother standing there.

"Charlie!" Ron threw his arms around the other man and hugged him tightly. "I haven't seen you in ages!"

Rubbing the back of his neck, Charlie grimaced but stepped over the threshold. "Well, you know what they say: must leave home in order to appreciate it."

"Too right." Ron glanced at Hermione's bedroom then back to his brother with a confused look. "What brings you here? I thought you would've headed to the Burrow?"

An intense look overcame Charlie, and he immediately straightened his posture, becoming rather imperious and overbearing in appearance. "You've been a naughty boy, Ronnikins," he hissed menacingly.

"Bloody hell, Charlie... what's wrong with you?" He started backing away, but the front of his jumper was snatched by his older sibling, who twisted the material in a grip so tight Ron thought he would pass out from lack of air.

"Nothing is wrong, Mister Weasley," drawled an ominous voice from the entryway.

Ron's eyes bulged in abject terror while he gasped for breath and tried to fight off his brother's hold. A dark wizard strode forward, dressed in something other than his usual black attire and a sinister smile etched on his dour face.

"Snape!"

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

"Observant as always," Severus stated, amusement lacing his voice. Removing his black travelling cloak, he laid it over the back of the sofa. Adjusting the form-fitting red brocade vest that covered his white dress shirt, he approached his familiar. "Charles, what do you think we should do with your wayward brother?" He laid a hand on the former dragon-keeper's shoulder.

"Destroy him," Charlie said in a menacing tone. "Slaughter him."

Snape patted his head affably. "There's a clever minion."

Ron became a whiter shade of pale. "What the fuck?" He tried kicking Charlie, but his brother caught his foot and twisted it until there was an audible sound of bones snapping, Ron's screams resounding throughout the flat.

"Confiscate his wand," Snape ordered.

Pulling his brother closer, Charlie studied him and then laughed. "He doesn't have it on him. *Accio Ron's wand*."

The stick banged against something and then slid from under a closed door, heading straight for the older Weasley, but Snape intercepted it. After examining it, he handed it to his minion then pulled out his own and aimed it at Ron.

"Silencio."

Walking around Charlie, Snape grabbed the shaggy locks of ginger hair on the youngest man, tugging them back until his neck was bent at an awkward angle. "One inch more, Mister Weasley, and any last words will have to wait until you reach Charon." He tightened his grip, delighting in the boy's soundless agony. "And even then, you will have to wander a hundred years due to your lack of tribute."

The pulse at Ron's neck was erratic, his skin covered in sweat, tears running down his cheeks. He mouthed the word *'please.'*

"Please what?" Snape asked conversationally with a cruel twist to his lips. "Please kill you quickly?" He snorted. "Highly unlikely."

Charlie turned Ron's broken foot a little more until another bone was heard cracking. "I could do this all night long," he said, mad laughter in his voice. "I can't believe I fought this!"

Arching a brow and shaking his head, Snape drawled, "Now you like your job?" He rolled his eyes and tsk'd. "Typical."

"Can I break something else?"

Ron's eyes widened comically and he began his struggles anew.

Snape immediately put a stop to it. "Where is Miss Granger?" he whispered menacingly in Ron's ear. "Why did she not answer the door?"

Due to the spell, anything Ron said went unheard, including several expletives that were, nevertheless, clearly understood through the hushed tirade. "Odd," remarked

Charlie, cocking his head and staring at his brother. "I never pegged him for the silent type."

Releasing the redhead's now damp hair, Snape was about to ask him another question when he sensed something, some smell or presence that indicated home and safety, making him hesitate to end the fool before him. "She's here," he murmured.

Charlie skimmed the area, frowning. "Where?"

Severus turned his gaze to his familiar. "Bind him."

Zeroing in on the closed bedroom door, Severus made his way there quickly and flung it open, aghast at the image before him. "Miss Granger?"

Lying prone on the sizable bed, Hermione was bound from shoulder to ankle with thin, wispy white cords preventing movement of any kind. She did not move her head, her eyes remaining open and frozen in a sightless stare. From this distance, he could feel the pull...the need to be near her almost as strong as his need to feed.

Slamming the door so hard it splintered at the edges, Snape crossed to her side, seating himself off to her left, in the spot Ron had occupied. Being this close caused his senses to go haywire, as if everything was amplified a thousand times, and it was a heady thing. Releasing the Binding Hex, and what he suspected was a Silencing Charm, he watched as she sagged onto the mattress, tears filling her eyes.

"Th-thank you." The words were whimpered. "I've been that way for hours."

He picked up her hand, noticing how graceful her fingers were, one smudged with black ink where she'd probably stained it while writing. Realising her skin was colder than his own, he suddenly became worried.

"You are unwell," he spoke quietly, stating the obvious.

She lifted the hand he wasn't holding and cupped his cheek. "Where have you been?"

Damn it! He wasn't supposed to lo...no, like... yes, *like* her touch; she was just his companion. His heart shaped-faced, mahogany brown-eyed, head-full-of-corkscrew-curls companion. Assessing her features, he realized that she'd grown into quite the beautiful woman, if a little on the scrawny side. But why was she wrinkling her pixy-like nose at him, like he'd offended her?

"Well?"

"Pardon?"

"Where. Have. You. Been?"

It was happening again, that overwhelming need keep her close and safe, to make a connection that would never be severed. Dear Morgana's lacy knickers! Was she meant to be this appealing, even when she was being a demanding little chit? He tried retreating from her caress, but the thought of backing away, even an inch, was like a dagger being thrust into his heart.

"Are you deaf?"

"I see you still have full use of your mouth," he grouched with a sneer. "How unfortunate."

Her hand abruptly dropped from his face, and he felt its absence keenly.

Pushing herself slowly to a sitting position, she raised her pyjama-clad knees and wrapped her arms around them to keep from touching him again. "Thank you for releasing me," she mumbled in a detached tone, placing her chin on the top of her knee to keep it from wobbling. "You can go now."

"Go?" he asked incredulously. "Madam, you are seriously mistaken if you think after travelling in the lowest form imaginable for our species for nigh on two weeks that I will just 'go' once I have arrived."

"You haven't changed one bit."

He gave her a languid perusal. "You certainly have."

"Lecher!" she accused, scooting against the headboard.

Snorting, he folded his arms across his chest in an age-old gesture. "Exactly why did you wish to know my whereabouts, hmm?"

Rubbing her tired eyes, she replied, "Because I promised the vampire I would watch over you, and then you left before I could come back, and I've been searching for you for almost three years now, and..."

Placing his fingers on her chapped lips, he silenced her rambling. "You've just proven my point that you retain the inability to keep your mouth closed."

He should've known she was planning something by the way her eyes narrowed. What he didn't expect was to have a rather small, but ornate cross shoved in his face.

"Back off, Snape!" she hissed, feeling ridiculous for doing such a thing, but if it made him move, then she would suffer the indignity of her clichéd actions.

Giving her a look that was a combination of irritation and amusement, he reached out and firmly grasped the religious icon at the crossbeams, smirking somewhat at her incredulous reaction.

"You're not burning!"

"Sorry to disappoint you." He tugged on the crucifix until she let go. Slowly, he opened his mouth and placed the gold piece on his tongue, promptly closing his jaw once the whole thing was inside and giving her a wicked smile.

She sat there in a complete state of astonishment, gawping like a dying fish at his actions. "You're depraved," she finally muttered.

Retrieving the icon from his mouth, he flung it across the room. "I didn't take you for one to put your faith in such tripe."

"How did you get in here?" She licked her lips. "I mean, don't you need an invite to enter someone's house?"

"Superstitious nonsense," he corrected her. "I also cast a reflection in mirrors, have no aversion to garlic...other than it is rather pungent for my heightened sense of smell...and have no compulsion to stand by and idly count a multitude of things that may be thrown in my path."

"What about Holy Water or stakes?" Despite her current predicament, she was still curious about the man sitting on her bed.

"Absolute drivel concerning the Holy Water." Damnation! His skin felt like it was crawling if he didn't touch her. He casually placed his hand on her bare foot. "Anything that pierces through bone and sinew will suffice; it need not be a stake per se."

"Are you really a vampire?" She took note of his thumb stroking the instep of her foot, the caress sending a frisson of pleasure straight to her core.

Leaning close, he allowed her to see his usually black eyes flare indigo and his fangs descend. It had the desired effect.

"Shite!" She retreated further on the bed, nearly falling off the other side before he grabbed her ankle, dragging her back to her original position.

But he was much closer this time. In fact, he was such an invasion of her personal space that she tried to push him away, succeeding only in making him more irritated. In the recesses of her brain, she acknowledged the fact that his growls and snarls were heightening her response, but for the life of her, she couldn't stop her rocketing desire for him. He made her head spin, but it was wrong... wasn't it? She was only supposed to take care of him until he got on his feet and could function as a proper vampire, right? It wasn't like she actually put stock in all that 'nexus' stuff the creature had been spouting that night, and it had been so long ago that she'd almost completely forgotten everything.

Well, he seemed to be quite efficient in the ways of vampires now, at least to her reasoning, so he didn't need her anymore. She refused to admit the deep pang that thought caused her; she was determined to ignore it. To throw him off guard, she let her body sag completely, relaxing in hopes that he would take it as a sign of surrender. When he finally eased up, she gathered what remained of her strength and gave him a hearty shove, sending him over the edge and onto the hardwood floor.

Turning on her knees to swiftly crawl to the other side of the bed, she landed one foot on the opposite side of the floor before he grabbed the other leg, pulled her to his side and dropped her with a thud at his feet.

Her thrashing excited him. It aroused the predator within, causing the small amount of blood he had consumed before arriving at her flat to flow and enhance his senses. "You sought me, Miss Granger," he purred, bending low to look her in the eye. "Now that I am here, you wish me gone." He grasped her chin. "Why is that?"

"You're only here because you *have* to be!" She spat the accusation through clenched teeth. There. She'd finally said it.

Glaring, he let go of her chin and knelt in front of her. "Explain yourself."

"I don't have to explain anything to you," she retorted with a mutinous glare. "You're the one who left, not me!"

"You're making this more difficult than it has to be."

"Oh, so sorry to offend your delicate sensibilities!" she yelled.

"Everything all right in here?" Charlie asked from the doorway, glancing between his master and... and his *whatever*. "Need me to bind her, too?"

"What're you doing here?" Hermione squealed.

"Not now, Charles," Snape said in a pointed manner. "Attend to your *plaything*."

Charlie smirked. "You sure? I could tie her up, real tight. You could have fun all night long."

This caused Hermione to scoot away quickly, but Snape latched onto her foot, dragged her back and tucked her safely underneath his body. "I'm quite sure...Stop squirming, you hellcat!"

"If you say so." Charlie shrugged and closed the door, whistling a jaunty tune.

Once the door clicked shut, she arched her back to throw Severus off since she was face down on the floor, but he didn't budge. Instead, he climbed up her body, pinning her to the hard-wood surface. Hands free, she reached behind her to claw at his shoulder or hair, anything she could lay her fingers on. Then she noticed something that sent lust flooding through her. The more she struggled, the more he liked it, if the erection pressing into her arse was anything to go by.

He grabbed her wrists, trapping them between his large hands and the ground. "You'll be twenty-one in two days, Miss Granger," he snarled in her ear, nipping the shell in reprimand. "You can either die horribly, or join me in eternity."

She tried bucking her hips again, but it only caused them both to moan. "Personally, I don't see the difference," she said drily, trying to maintain some semblance of control over herself.

Burying his face in the crux of her neck, he growled, "Will you always be like this? Will you fight me at every step and heighten our need for one another?" He didn't want to need her this much, it left him too vulnerable, but the more physical contact he had with her, the more this mindset fell to the wayside and his vampiric nature to dominate took over. When she fought him like she did, it made her blood that much more appealing, and his lust overrode his sense of control. Shifting his hips, he pushed his painfully hard cock into the cleft of her arse, groaning at the exquisite feel of her firm cheeks. "I can't let you get away, Hermione. This has to happen, and much though I'd prefer you were willing, I'll take you even against your wishes."

"You'll rape me?" she whimpered, tears filling her eyes.

Laying his brow on the back of her head, he sighed heavily. "No, never that." He relaxed somewhat, but didn't release her. "I cannot harm you." He nuzzled her hair, delighting in the scent. "I only mean to save your life."

Sniffing, she turned away from his advances. "By doing something you were *told* to do."

"That's not true," he whispered. Tentatively, he darted out his tongue and traced a path on the exposed skin of her shoulder where her pyjama shirt had dropped, all the way to just under her ear. "I *desire* to turn you," he confessed. "Plus, I am a selfish man. I have no wish to be as lonely now as I was in life." He tightened his grip on her again. "I dismissed the idea of having you as a lifelong mate before I knew what it meant, but now that I am here, I feel how right you are, how your blood sings to me in a perfect melody."

His words and actions inflamed her, but she tried one last resistance. "Why did you leave, if I was so important to you?" she murmured, fearful of the answer.

She didn't see him close his eyes in sadness, but she felt him tense. "Extraneous circumstances prevented me from returning to you. I will tell you about them... *after*." He gentled somewhat, sensing her insecurities. "I do promise, however, that my reasons had nothing to do with you, unlike the reasons that brought me back."

Her mind still demanded a more satisfactory answer, but something inside her, the same thing that had insisted she not let go of him for so long, made her choice for her. It might be wrong, but she sensed the only way to stop feeling the void inside her would be to give in to what her body craved. She couldn't help herself; he'd broken her last line of defence. Arching sensually against his chest, she bared her neck to him, no longer fighting him.

He didn't plan on forcing himself on her, despite the fact he'd been hard since he had first sensed her presence, but the creamy expanse of her swan-like column was too much to refuse. His fangs had remained visible the entire time they struggled, so he scraped them over her pulsing jugular, pleased at the gooseflesh that prickled her skin. "Resistance makes the blood sweeter," he purred sensuously.

Lust ignited inside her anew. She felt more alive than she had in years, and she didn't recognize the animalistic growl that escaped her lips when she pushed her backside against him. She groaned softly as his tongue traced the shell of her ear, whimpering when he abandoned it to repeat the gesture on the other, his breathy pants making her hair flutter.

Needing more contact, he released his punishing grip and turned her over, moving the curls away from her face so he could properly see her. "The first time won't be gentle," he said in warning, his lips a hairsbreadth from hers. "We've avoided the bond too long for me to be tender."

Staring him straight in the eye, she smiled slowly and seductively. "Then I guess you'd better get on with it." She was proud at herself for sounding so certain of what she wanted.

Letting out a feral growl, he started ripping off her shirt...no bra to contend with since she was in her sleep clothes...stopping briefly to gaze at her breasts for the first time. Tracing the dusky skin around her nipple, he smirked at how the soft tissue puckered from his touch. The ruched peaks begged for his attention, and he dipped low to clasp his mouth around the succulent flesh, inhaling her aroma.

"You taste magnificent, like the finest vintage," Severus whispered around her pebbled bud.

Threading her fingers through his silky jet-black hair, she revelled in the sensations his teeth were creating. "I-I couldn't give myself to anyone... it felt wrong," she admitted breathlessly.

This made him pause. Slowly, he raised his head and fixed his gaze on her mouth. "No one has touched you?"

Shaking her head, she licked her bottom lip, secretly thrilling in the fact that his eyes dilated at the small peek of her tongue. "I told you I was looking for you."

He contemplated all that her actions revealed, but pushed the intense emotion to the side for now, concentrating on her instead. Rising to eye-level, he ground his thick shaft into the apex of her thighs. "Mine!" he snarled.

Swiftly, he captured her mouth, nudging her lips apart, feeding on the sweetness behind them. He felt her surrender with a massive shudder, relishing the euphoria coursing through his blood when she twined her arms around his neck to pull him closer. Darting his tongue, he mimicked the sexual act itself upon her mouth, his hips grinding in tandem against her damp heat.

Pushing a hand between them, she found his hard length and squeezed, giving it a tentative stroke.

It sent him into a frenzy.

Uncaring if she valued her clothes or not, he tore her cotton bottoms and sensible knickers from her lower half, pausing for only a moment to admire her body that was curvier than he remembered it being when she was his student, which seemed an eternity ago. He then shed the clothes he'd been fitted with in Romania, kicking aside the black linen trousers and insinuating himself between her thighs. Running his fingers through the nest of trimmed curls hiding her sex to ascertain she was wet enough, he groaned when he withdrew the digits to find them coated with a copious amount of fluid.

Grasping her hips, he pushed her thighs open, allowing himself a look at the glistening petals of her quim. Taking his cock in hand, he brushed her nether lips with the tip, his irises colouring to a mixture of indigo and blue. Without preamble, he thrust inside her, breeching the barrier that kept him from her womb.

The burning pain of his intrusion made her gasp and clutch onto his shoulders in a desperate attempt to resolve herself to the stinging ache that accompanied the presence of his thickness. She tried quelling the tears, hating herself just a little for reacting this way, even though it was completely normal. When he pinched her clit, however, it made her core clench involuntarily around his length and the soreness eased somewhat. As he continued his ministrations, he thrust slowly until her pain finally lessened to the point of being altogether pleasant. After letting him see her agonized expression diminish, he began delivering fierce, fast strokes to her dripping quim...hard, long, and deep. They tore through her, spiking pleasure throughout her body as she felt something building within. She had the fleeting thought that maybe the fact she liked the pain Snape was causing her was something to be ashamed of, but he rolled his hips, and she forgot to worry about it any longer.

"Oh God, Severus," she moaned against his neck, pressing kisses to his jaw.

It was the first time she'd said his name, and it sounded *soright*. Laving the delicate juncture of her shoulder, he began nuzzling the throbbing vein, nipping lightly in preparation for something more. "I will never let you go," he declared boldly, increasing his thrusts to her welcoming heat.

Fastening his lips to her neck, he pierced the tender flesh and began suckling. The moment he took the first gulp, he was lost to the lovely taste of her. It was as if all his regrets, misdeeds, and sins had been washed away in the forgiveness of her blood offering. He immediately felt deep sorrow for Radu, who had been denied this with his own mate, for it was the most wondrous feeling he'd ever experienced.

What was left of his human self immediately rebelled at the idea that he had to drain Hermione completely to turn her. It burned his soul, making him feel as though he was suffocating, though that wasn't possible. Letting his jaws relax, he made to pull away, but her fingers in his hair kept his head in place as she continued her sinuous movements, impaling herself on his rigid cock again and again.

"Don't you dare stop, Severus!"

Unsure if she meant the pounding thrusts of his hips or the pull of his mouth on her neck, he decided he was beyond caring. Driving inside her again and again, he felt her weaken beneath him. Breaking away momentarily, he gripped her chin, staring into her drowsy eyes. "Stay with me, Hermione."

Cupping his cheek, she smiled languidly. "Best way... to die."

Quickening his pace, he returned to her bloody neck, lapping up the crimson that had dribbled onto her collarbone along the way. When his balls began to tighten, he pulled harder on her blood, snarling and rutting mindlessly.

Sensing her heart slow, she found it funny that she couldn't bring herself to care. Death had nothing on her...it couldn't scare her any longer, not when she'd experienced something as glorious as having sex with the man she lo... No, she wouldn't say that word. Digging the nails of her free hand into the wood floor to keep from telling him of her true feelings, she idly realized a nail broke, even though she didn't register the pain.

Suddenly, an erotic surge filled her with sublime rapture, as her body exploded in the most intense orgasm she'd ever felt, his roar of completion and warm, sticky seed pulsing into her, heightening the effect. Finally, her hand relaxed, and the passionate look in his eyes was the last thing she recalled before her own lids closed in darkness.

Panting, he pressed a soft kiss to her sweaty brow, murmuring his humbled thanks for such a gift of her virgin blood. When she didn't respond, he grew anxious and confused. Brushing away several stray tendrils, he listened, quickly rallying when he heard the faintest of heartbeats.

Lifting his left wrist to his mouth, he bit down savagely, blood pooling immediately, and he brought the offering to her lips. He coaxed the first few drops of the precious fluid down by caressing her throat, but once it was ingested, the lust took over and compelled her to drink heavily despite her weakened state.

It was like climaxing all over again. Each swipe of her tongue, each nip of her teeth was euphoric, and he hardened once more while still embedded within her depths. Her whimpers drove him mad, and he began driving his now rigid shaft deep into her core, unable to stop his thrusts just as she was unable to stop her suckling. When he reached his orgasm once more, clutching her pliant body to his, she finally released his wrist and licked her lips.

"So tired," she whispered, pressing a bloody kiss to his cheek.

He smiled against her skin. "Sleep, love." He returned the kiss to her temple. "I'll be here when you wake."

She didn't want to read anything into his words, but his actions spoke for themselves. Using the last bit of energy she had left to trace his dark eyebrows, she gazed at him in apprehension. "Promise?"

Cupping her jaw, he pressed his lips to hers in a heated exchange. "You are mine! Nothing will take you from me," he whispered when they parted.

Closing her eyes wearily, she smiled and drifted off. "Love you, too."

Staring at his sleeping mate, Severus blinked several times before absorbing the information she'd left him with, wanting to wake her and have her explain. But as he studied the smattering of freckles across her adorable nose... Wait. Did he just think her nose was adorable? Damn it, he did. Pursing his lips, he returned to the perusal of his beloved... Damn it! He did it again.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation at himself, he sat up and pulled her limp form with him, finally tucking them under the duvet on her bed for much needed rest. He ruminated over the state of his heart for a few moments more before following her into oblivion.

~*~

"If I have to be around *that* all the time, they'd better learn to use silencing charms *tout de suite*," Charlie grumbled, eyeing his brother's horrified expression.

Ron had given up struggling hours ago, knowing that, even in the worst of times, Charlie could beat the shit out of him without breaking a sweat. Currently, he was sporting several bruises on his rib area...one of them possibly having been cracked...a broken foot and ankle, a swollen eye, and a busted lip. All in all, he quickly gathered his brother had been holding back on his real strength.

Smirking, Charlie leaned in and studied Ron. "You were stupid."

The Silencing Charm was still in place, but Charlie could understand the words his brother mouthed. '*I love her*.'

"Not yours to love, mate." He glanced over his shoulder at the bedroom door then returned his attention to Ron. "Not sure what they got planned, but you'd best be making yourself right with whichever deity you believe in before they come out of there."

'*You're my brother!* Ron silently yelled. '*How could you?*'

Leaning back in the chair facing his captive, Charlie lifted his arms behind his head and laced his fingers, arching a ginger brow. "Very easily, let me tell you. I fought it at first; you know... that whole 'blood is thicker than water' cliché and such." Scratching at the mark on the back of his neck, he then glanced at his brother. "The power I've been given can never be used against them. If I even think about harming Snape," he said, suddenly grimacing and holding his breath. "See? If I even come close to... well, I think you know what I'm talking about; if I do that, the most god-awful pain courses through my body. First time it happened, I guess my bowels didn't like it so much...I woke up in a pile of my own shite." He frowned darkly. "It's psychological conditioning, and eventually I'll feel nothing when I carry out my orders, but there'll be some things I'll enjoy." His lips curled into a smirk. "I saw what you did to Snape."

Turning away, Ron focused on the miniscule kitchen, ignoring his sibling until Charlie backhanded him for his offense. The audible crack in his cheek brought tears to his eyes.

"Dear dim-witted brother," the older Weasley snarled. "Haven't you realized that it's unwise to fuck with me?" He laughed mirthlessly. "Oh, that's right! You haven't quite grasped the concept, being obtuse as you are."

Blood welled on Ron's skin where he'd been struck, and Charlie eyed it with something akin to hunger. "I wonder what they find so appealing about this stuff," he mused out loud. He scraped a calloused finger across his brother's cheek and stuck it in his mouth, sucking on the liquid that he'd gathered. His lip curled in distaste as he withdrew the digit. "It's not all that."

The bedroom door opened at that moment to reveal a very naked vampire.

"Merlin, Snape!" Charlie shouted, covering his eyes. "I certainly didn't want to know what you wore beneath your robes!"

Severus smacked the back of his minion's head. "Get used to it." Several weeks after he'd been converted, the dour wizard had lost most, if not all, of his inhibitions in order to survive. He wasn't about to cover himself to keep from insulting his lackey. Pushing on Charlie's shoulder, he muttered, "Move."

The seat promptly vacated, Snape sat in front of Ron, enjoying the horrified and now rather green look still etched on the boy's face. "Where is the rest of your family?"

'*Fuck you!*

Sneering, he shook his head. "No, I think not." He smirked. "I've had the most delectable time with my mate, you see, and you're just not my type."

Tears filled Ron's eyes. '*No!*

"Yes," Snape hissed. He stood and leaned over the bound man, grasping his hair, tugging his head back. "And you should consider yourself honoured."

'*Why?*

Licking the remaining blood from the boy's bruised cheek, he whispered, "Because you'll be her first meal."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

Warning - very squicky chapter. In fact, it just gets bloodier from here on in

Hermione was consumed by the most delicious sensations between her legs.

"Mmmh," a dulcet voice cooed, and the spiralling feeling increased, making her twitch.

When the pressure became greater than before, she arched her back and moaned, though her throat was parched. "Ahh!"

"There's a good girl." Wet probing soon turned into a gentle suction.

Her hoarse yell filled the room when something sharp was embedded just above her pubis. She kept her eyes closed for fear of waking from the dream of being pleased, but her hips undulated in time with the pulls drawn from her mound.

"They tell me that the blood resulting from a breached hymen is the sweetest of all," the voice purred against her skin. "I have to agree." There was another lap at her quim and then, a slight prick on the tight bundle of nerves sheathed within the hood of flesh.

Sitting straight up with eyes open wide, Hermione screamed out her orgasm until she almost lost her voice, clutching at the hair on the man between her thighs. His rumbling baritone hummed against her overly sensitized clit, making her legs quiver, and she tugged on his inky locks, pulling his face from her nether regions.

"Severus," she said, awe making her voice raspy. Her hands shook as she touched his cheeks. "You're here."

Drawing the thumb that was caressing his lower lip into his mouth, he bit lightly and gave her an indulgent smile. "Where else would I be?"

"Gone," she said so softly he barely heard her.

The forlorn look on her face made his heart ache. Soon after awakening, once he'd bonded with Hermione, he'd become conscious of something: a deep, emotional, spiritual and sexual connection had been forged when they'd exchanged blood...just like Radu had said would happen. Initially he'd scoffed at the idea, but when faced with the very real facts, he begrudgingly admitted that thinking of any kind of harm or unpleasant situations concerning his mate brought him great anxiety and even greater anger.

Releasing her tantalizing thumb, he backed away enough so that he could crawl up her body like a deadly panther, rubbing his nose on her abdomen and paying special attention to her navel area. "Precious Hermione," he said in a seductive rumble, "you are my home." He pressed a kiss just under her left breast. "You are the light to my darkness." Smirking, he darted out and licked her pert nipple. "You are the satiation to my hunger." Nuzzling his mark on her neck he inhaled and hissed out a tense breath.

Finally, he looked into her eyes, which were shimmering with unshed tears. "You are all that is good and just in this world." Placing a lingering kiss on her trembling lips, he gathered her close and rocked his erection against her inviting body. "There is no place I would not go, no length I would not journey to find you." Slipping easily into her warmth, he gently thrust until he was fully seated. "If you were to leave this plane, I would gladly follow."

"No." The words were sobbed, her arms tightening around him, riding the increasingly passionate maelstrom. "Stay safe," she pleaded. "Stay alive."

"I can't say the words...not yet." Grabbing her wrists, he raised her arms above her head to thread his fingers through hers. "But they are there, Hermione. They are there." He punctuated his last thoughts with a sharp twist of his hips, sending them over the precipice, both shouting their release to the world.

Or at least to the audience in her flat, as it were.

"Not again!" wailed a voice in the other room.

"Who is that?"

Withdrawing from her core, Severus sighed in irritation. "*That* is our familiar or emissary, if you will."

She tucked several loose strands of his hair behind his ear. "We have a familiar?" A frown creased her brow. "I didn't know they had vocal capabilities."

"This one unfortunately does," he grumbled. He sat up and pulled her to sit on his lap. "Hungry, pet?"

"Famished, actually." She peered in his black eyes. "Is this normal... *after*?"

He nodded and brushed her wayward curls off her shoulder, exposing his mark. "I was ravenous when I first awoke," he explained quietly, stroking the rapidly healing puncture wounds. "I think I was on the brink of starvation for many months before I was able to capture larger animals."

"I'm so sorry," she murmured, leaning her forehead against his. "I should've come back sooner; then you wouldn't have had to go through all that."

Pressing a fervent kiss to her neck, he embraced her tightly. "It's a moot point, Hermione. I wouldn't have known why you were there, and I probably would've greatly harmed you at that time."

Easing away from him, she took in his pensive expression. "Why? Tell me."

"It will change things..." He hesitated. "Change them in a way that I'm not certain you are able to handle at this moment."

She arched a brow and he was secretly proud that she did it so well. "Ah, I see," she drawled. "Now that I'm a vampire, I'm this fragile creature that can't adapt, is that it?"

"I know how perfectly capable you are, Miss Granger," he said impatiently.

"Stop," she chastised. "It feels wrong when you call me that." She began squirming to get off his lap.

"Settle, Hermione!" He snarled the words, tightening his grip. "I was only trying to point out the obvious." When her wriggling ceased, he cupped her cheek. "I'm saying that the reason for my absence will be troubling for you, since it involves someone you..." He swallowed thickly, hating his next words. "Someone you care for."

"Tell me the truth," she whispered, worried over his pained appearance.

And so he did.

~*~

"Such a brittle thing," Charlie mused, balancing Ron's wand on the tip of his index finger.

'*Not mine.*'

It was annoying that he couldn't give Ron his voice back, despite the fact he could converse with them in short phrases by mouthing the words, but to go against Snape's orders was tantamount to shortening his life span in a most hurried and undignified way.

"Really? Whose was it?" Bringing the stick to his nose, the older Weasley inhaled but drew back in revulsion. "Smells like the backside of a troll!" Coughing, he broke the fragile wood in two and tossed it to the side. "Just what have you been doing with it?"

'Peter Pettigrew's.' Ron glanced at the split wand and his lips thinned. '*Always smelled bad.*'

"Never could take care of your wands, could you?" Opening his navy-blue pea coat, Charlie withdrew his own twelve-inch ash wand, and kissed it. "Just like my first one, which you broke, by the way."

'Good for you.' Ron didn't outright antagonize his brother anymore. That would just lead to more cuts and bruises. He couldn't help but deviate his attention to the bedroom door when it opened, though, revealing a very pale Hermione standing there, wrapped in her familiar Gryffindor red dressing robe.

Seeing the obsessed look cloud his brother's eyes, Charlie leaned forward and thwacked Ron's nose with his wand. "Ah, ah, ah," he admonished. "For *his* eyes only, mate."

"Charlie?" she croaked. Closing the door behind her, she slowly walked to where the men sat.

Standing, Charlie moved to the side of the chair and gave her a mock bow. "At your humble service, milady." He winked.

Unable to help herself, she smiled. "Does nothing ever ruffle your feathers?"

Returning her grin, he shrugged. "Would I be me if I let it?" His features became sombre for a moment. "How much did he tell you?"

Closing her eyes, she swayed a little due to dizziness, but was grateful when he grasped her elbow to keep her from falling. "Everything." She opened them and gazed into his bright blue ones. "But I want to know why *you're* here."

Ron cocked his head to the side, to better listen to his explanation, beyond curious as to why a Weasley would go against a member of his family, even if said member had wronged someone.

Leading Hermione to the chair, Charlie made sure she was seated before saying anything. "I fought it at first...the *Arsurā* they call it." He lifted the ginger hair away from the back of his neck and bent low for her to observe the mark. "Once they branded his glyph onto my skin, my first and most overwhelming thought was to protect Snape."

The brand was actually quite beautiful. Two infinity symbols, one vertical, the other horizontal, lying atop one another at the base of his neck. It wasn't raised or scarred flesh, like with normal brands, but a pulsing, living thing that glowed deep green when she brushed her fingers over it.

"Did it hurt?"

Dropping his hair, he hesitated then nodded. "It was like a jolt of raw magic so powerful; I've never encountered anything like it." He rubbed it absentmindedly. "The first time he was cross with me, however, it knocked me unconscious."

"When does it activate?" she asked.

He glanced at the bedroom door. "When he's in danger, or needs something and can't get it due to sunlight or some such thing. Then it doesn't hurt, just a tingle to let me know I need to obey the compulsion. When he activates it in a foul mood, that's when it's like a lightning strike." He returned his attention to her, giving her a soft look. "It'll activate with you now, too, if you're in danger and he can't get to you."

She patted his knee. "I'll try to avoid that predicament." And she really would, as she didn't want him to suffer needlessly on her account. Severus had explained the issue with souls, and while she felt lighter and freer now that she was a vampire, she did understand the concept of killing for food or your enemies versus killing for the thrill of it. She took great comfort in the fact that she didn't like the idea of hurting Charlie, but wanted Ron tortured to the ends of the world for what he had done.

"Speaking of which," Charlie drawled, tilting his head in Ron's direction. "He told you about this, right?"

Her features hardened significantly. "Release him."

He frowned heavily. "Are you sure? I can..."

"Release him." She was seething. Her eyes were glowing that indigo hue he was so familiar with. "I can take care of myself."

"But Snape..."

"Said I must deal with this on my own, and I agree." She turned her attention to Ron. "He knows if he were involved in deciding his fate that it might not sit well with me afterwards." She smirked. "He wisely decided to let me do as I please."

"I'll just keep his royal dourness company then, shall I?" Charlie rose, muttered the counter spells to free Ron, and headed off to the bedroom to join his master.

"You..."

"Jesus Christ, Snape!" Charlie bellowed after closing the door. "Put some clothes on!"

Hermione chuckled lightly, but quickly fell silent as she studied her once best friend, who hadn't moved an inch. "You took him from me." She leaned close. "All that I'd gone through, all those years searching for him, and you knew all along what happened."

Clearing his throat, Ron whispered, "I love you, Hermione." Tears gathered on his lashes. "I had to keep you safe."

Frowning, she thinned her lips in anger. "Safe from what?" She stood, leaning over him to grab his mangled shirt. "My mate?" She wrenched Ron from the chair and threw him across her flat, watching him land in her kitchen and scatter her table and chairs.

Popping his head out, Charlie called, "Everything alright?"

Snorting, Hermione asked, "Silencing spell on the flat, please?" She would've done it herself, but she left Bellatrix's wand in the bedroom.

"Yes, ma'am." Charlie strode to the front door while Hermione made her way to the kitchen.

Ron lay unmoving amongst the rubble of her furniture. He had to have sustained a head wound, because blood was trickling down his forehead, finally dripping off his jaw.

The sight enthralled her and she bent low, licking the crimson trail until she reached the gash in his hair and began suckling on it to bring more of the nourishing fluid to the surface. "God," she said softly, "it's wonderful."

"You're... sick, `Mione," Ron slurred, trying to move away from her. "Let me... help you."

Things seemed clearer to her after her turning...not just her senses, but everything had a clarity about it. She believed with great certainty that she couldn't keep living in the past when she had so longed for a future, and the fierce protectiveness she felt over Severus made her want to disembowel anyone who thought of hurting him or tried to separate them. Her conscience had a different focus now as instinct overcame logic...her ethical compass pointed due North, to her mate, and all other directions were shoved to the side. Ron's actions had left her aimlessly wandering for years, and the more she thought about it, the more enraged she became.

"Done, as ordered," the elder Weasley announced, rounding the corner.

Hermione gave Ron a feral smile, but addressed Charlie. "Your little brother thinks I'm sick." She laughed and held out her hand. "Knife, please."

"Now we're talking!" Charlie lifted his left leg and pulled up the cuff of his jeans, revealing a holster.

Tugging on the Velcro flap, he unsheathed a deadly Bowie knife, which gleamed when he ran his finger along the back edge. It was probably damning to think of Ron meeting his end via his knife, but being Snape's familiar allowed him a freedom he'd never experienced before, not even with his dragons. Freedom was the most precious thing to him. His family was suffocating, clingy, and demanding, and while he didn't wish most of the harm, there were a few members that he would dispatch without much resistance, Ron being one of them.

"When you're done admiring your reflection, could I please have it?" she queried with a snort.

"Ah, yeah, right." He blushed, clearly embarrassed for having been caught gazing obsessively at his weapon. "The saw-tooth edge will cut through almost anything." He handed her the blade, hilt first.

Whimpering, Ron fixed his stare on Charlie. "You're going to Hell for this!"

Charlie crossed his arms and shrugged, unimpressed. "Maybe, but not before you." He looked at Hermione. "You know, I just thought of something."

"What?"

"The Family Clock," he muttered. "Not sure what mine is pointing at, but I'm guessing Ron's is centred on 'mortal peril'." He rubbed the back of his neck in what was becoming a familiar gesture of consternation.

"Is there any way to charm it to random positions throughout the day so they don't know what we're doing?"

"What *are* you doing?" Ron cried, grabbing her arm. "That's my family!"

Shoving off his hand, she slapped him so hard that a few of his teeth scattered on the tile floor. "You *never* touch me again!" she snarled.

"It means heading to the Burrow," Charlie said, less than pleased with the situation. "It means leaving you and Snape unguarded."

She sighed. "Check with Severus, but I think we'll be okay for the time you're gone. Owl us or Apparate back here when it's done."

"I'm on it." He left the kitchen and headed to the bedroom.

"Now, where were we?" she mused idly, tapping the clip point of the knife against her chin. "Oh, that's right..."

"Hermione, love, please..."

He never finished his sentence. In fact, Ron Weasley never uttered another word for the rest of his brief existence.

Pushing his lower jaw open, Hermione did as Snape's sire wished to do that day in the shack. She cut out his tongue, throwing the offending organ into the trash bin. "That should keep you quiet until Charlie gets back."

Ron coughed violently, hoarsely screaming as he clawed at his face. Grabbing his wrists, Hermione pinned them to the cupboard doors behind him, then proceeded to sup on the blood that poured from his mouth.

~*~

George Weasley sat in the kitchen of the Burrow, staring sightlessly at the half-empty bottle of Ogden's finest on the table, wondering why the ache in his chest didn't abate though he had been drinking himself into a stupor almost every night. Since his parents were out for the evening, he had access to the finest of a lot of liquors that his father had stashed away for when his mother would get in a tizzy and nag him to death. So far that night, he'd found three bottles of Ogden, one bottle of Elfish wine...which tasted suspiciously sour and he wondered how long it'd been hidden...two jugs of some Muggle stuff called Moonshine that had knocked him on his arse the moment he'd removed the cork, and two bottles of Ice Fire. He especially loved that drink, finding it fascinating that when poured it was electric blue in colour, but after a few moments...if not consumed...it turned bright red and burst into flames. It was tricky, but he'd only singed his eyebrows once.

During his current maudlin exercise in imbibing himself to death, he heard the loud crack of Apparition outside the house. Cursing, he vanished...he hoped...the remaining bottles of liquor to their respective hiding spots, then weaved his way to the family room to look bleary-eyed at the clock and see who was about to knock on their door. Leaning against the wooden entryway, he narrowed his gaze on two of the pictures: Ron on 'mortal peril', and Charlie on 'home'. Fred was permanently fixed on 'lost', and seeing it sent a fresh pang of sorrow through George so keen that he doubled over, grasping his stomach as he slid down the wall.

When the front door opened then softly closed, he only had enough energy to turn his head and stare at the cloaked intruder. "Charlie?"

The dark figure stopped suddenly. "What're you doing here, George?"

Sad laughter filled the room. "Don't know anymore." He hiccupped and pointed to the wall clock. "Ickle Ronnikins is in a right mess, looks like."

"I'd say that sums it up." Charlie approached him cautiously.

Tilting his head, George gave his brother a grimace. "You sure you're... *hic* not the Grim Reaper, come to cart me away?"

Charlie arched his brow in contemplation, though George couldn't see it. "Do you want me to be?"

Sniffing, the once practical-jokester wiped away the tears coursing down his cheeks. "Would you think... *hic* me bad, erm, sad... no, not that... *mad*, yes, that's it, if I said yes?"

Kneeling beside his brother, Charlie pushed the fringe of lank hair away from George's vision. Even in the low light, he could tell that his brother wasn't long for this world. His eyes were sunken and red-rimmed. The face that had once constantly been smiling was now hollow and gaunt. There was also a sickly pallor covering his skin, and he smelled like a sewer.

"What have you done to yourself?"

Grasping Charlie's arm, George pleaded. "Take me with you; take me home to Fred."

His brother was delusional, Charlie concluded, to the point that he thought him the angel of death. Glancing at the clock, he noticed George's picture was set at 'mortal peril', too...just like Ron's was. In the back of his mind, Charlie knew he'd be doing his brother a favour and saving Snape time on finishing his pet project. It wasn't that he lacked a conscience when it came to his family, as it flared briefly each time a relative was encountered, but his loyalty to his master and now his mate were paramount to everything else, including his kin.

Knowing he didn't want Ron's fate to befall George, Charlie sat next to him and pulled his younger brother into his lap, slowly rocking him back and forth. He began softly humming a lullaby that their mum had often sung to them when they were babes, pressing a kiss to the broken man's temple, surprised to find himself silently crying. He

sobbed heavily when George clutched at his cloak and murmured, "Thank you."

Continuing to hum off key due to his throat clogging, Charlie wrapped his hands around George's neck, and kneaded the taut muscles. Several bars later, he wrenched George's jaw violently to the right, hearing multiple snaps in the bones holding his head aloft, feeling the body sag against his chest.

Charlie continued to sit in the darkened room for a good long while, mindlessly rocking his brother's lifeless body, and still humming off key. When the picture of his parents on the clock moved to 'travelling', he quickly gathered himself and stood, leaving the body on the floor. Recalling all the charms he could use, he altered every picture hand except Fred's to reflect something other than 'lost' or 'mortal peril', regardless of the actual state of things. Once complete, he pulled George to a standing position, retrieved his wand, and whispered, "*Verto Lumen*."

Before his eyes, George was transfigured into a classy floor lamp, complete with a ginger-hued shade. It fit the décor of the room and if his mum questioned its appearance, he knew his dad would look it over and dismiss it as one of the Muggle items he'd acquired throughout the years. He chose the shape to honour his brother's memory, being as George had always had a sunny disposition, at least until Fred had died. The clock gonged, indicating that his parents were home, so Charlie gave the lamp one last look, then turned and Disapparated on the spot.

When Molly commented on the lamp the next day, Arthur did indeed shrug and tell her it was a result of his tinkering. She accepted this explanation, even going so far as to say that she actually liked it, because it cast such a warm glow upon the room.

~*~

Holding Ron's bare foot in her hands, Hermione sliced off his toenails one by one with the knife, listening to his croaking rasps as he'd lost the ability to scream an hour ago. Snape found her that way.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself," he commented idly, leaning against the doorway. "Need any help?"

She turned her blood-smeared face towards him. "You promised to let me do this by myself," she said a little petulantly.

Strolling over to her, he bent low and kissed her full on the mouth, licking at the red smudges. "Have to keep you looking presentable," he purred, rubbing his nose against hers.

Pouting, she stuck her soaked fingertips into her mouth, sucking them clean. "I'm just waiting on Charlie to get back then I can shower."

"I have another way to make sure you look pristine." He pressed his large palms to her collarbone and slid them under her robe, pushing the material off her shoulders. He nuzzled his mark on her neck and began slowly laving his way up her column of flesh, pausing only when he heard Ron groan.

"What's the matter, Weasley?" Snape inquired with a sneer. "Can't bear to see the woman you want seduced by the dreaded Potions master? Am I really that repugnant?" He broke three toes on the foot that still resided in Hermione's lap, smirking at the boy's weak moans. "Would you whimper like that if I fucked her, right before your eyes?"

"Hey!" she cried, slapping her mate's arm. "I'm right here!"

Looking somewhat sheepish, Severus caressed her cheek. "Sorry, pet."

Neither paid attention to the opening and closing of the front door until they heard Charlie clear his throat. "It's done."

Both vampires turned to him and froze. It was apparent he'd been crying; his nose was beet-red and his eyes were puffy. Rising from the floor, Snape thanked Charlie and wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

"Finish it," Snape commanded, leading the familiar away from the kitchen.

Slumped on the tile, Ron showed no reaction to his death sentence. He also did not move or make a sound while Hermione stripped him of his clothes. He did, however, grunt when she took his flaccid shaft in her hand and began stroking it.

"You took everything away from me," she hissed in his ear, then abandoned her ministrations, leaving him somewhat hard despite the blood loss he'd already suffered. It sickened her that despite everything, he responded to her touch. "So I'm taking something from you." Taking a firm grip at the base, she used the saw-tooth edge of the blade and hacked off his penis. Standing, she took the misshapen organ and dropped it down the sink, and then turned on the garbage disposal. Once the grinding of the gears lessened, she turned it off and returned to the flailing man on the floor.

Grasping the hair at the edge of his scalp, she pulled it taut and started cutting through to the skull, peeling back the flap of skin, in essence scalping him bald. He struggled at first, but quickly tired, the blood loss too great to facilitate much movement.

"When I'm finished, I will stitch a cloak... or a rug from all of the Weasleys' hair." Having scraped off the last bit of stringy flesh from the top of his cranium, she held up her prize and examined it. "You should've really used conditioner, Ron. Your ends are split."

Because the skin of Ron's face was not stretched tight over his head any longer, it sagged significantly, making him look many years older. Flinging the scalped hair to the side, she began making her way down his lax body, letting her fangs descend and embedding them in his femoral artery, drawing the life-giving fluid gulps at a time. When she was sated, she licked her lips and returned to look at the man she'd mistaken for her friend, propping one of his eyes open with her fingers.

"Sleepy?" she asked innocently. There was no response, but she could detect a faint heartbeat and knew that he was mere moments from expiring. Taking the knife once more, she trailed the tip of the blade down his chest and positioned it over his heart.

"Hear me now, Ronald Bilius Weasley," she intoned in an unearthly voice. "You do not deserve a quick death and I hope you have suffered the last hours you drew breath. Know that your family will meet you in Hell shortly, for you'll be there to greet them!"

With all her might, she shoved the blade deep, feeling it pass through bone and sinew to insert itself in the floor beneath his body. Tears welled in her eyes as she watched his frame shudder then grow forever still.

Ron did indeed greet many people in Hell, but George Weasley was never among them.

Chapter 7

Severus Snape has stared death in the face many times, too many to count, in fact. When the newest threat changes his existence completely, and is further complicated by a jealous Weasley, it's up to Hermione Granger to make sure he survives and adjusts. If they can quit their bickering, shagging, and quell their wilful natures, they just might fall in love in the meantime... along with exacting a unique brand of revenge.

"Here," Snape ordered gently, "drink this." He handed Charlie a vial of dark blue liquid.

Charlie didn't even ask as to the contents of the proffered glass tube, taking it and knocking it back quickly, gagging from the taste. "What was in that? Tasted like rat piss." He coughed.

Arching a brow, the Potions master smirked. "And how would you know what rat piss tastes like?"

"Sod off," the redhead muttered, handing back the empty vial. He then yawned widely and sat on the edge of Hermione's bed, rubbing his gritty eyes.

"Lie down and get some rest."

"Don't wanna," he slurred, doing as his master asked him to do, contrary to his words of protestation.

Dragging him further up the bed, so he could be covered with the duvet, Snape bade Charlie rest once more, before the former dragon-keeper succumbed to the Calming Draught he'd been given to drink.

Snape had been able to tell something had been horribly wrong when the younger man hadn't even commented on his state of nudity, instead allowing himself to be led around and obeying without resistance, not that he ever offered much anyway.

He had to give the boy credit, really. He had secured them passage from Romania to Britain via boat and rail, since Apparating and Disapparating were difficult for a newly made vampire, even a wizard one...something to do with molecules and dead matter, and the very high possibility of splinching. Severus had wisely taken Radu's advice to travel by conventional methods the first time around, until the nuances of being a vampire *and* a wizard had become second nature to him. In the course of their travels, Charlie had stayed awake at night and slept little during the days, and the toll of that was now becoming apparent. When they returned to Romania, Snape would have to ask Radu how a familiar was supposed to function with little sleep, when what sleep he did get was provided by sleeping draughts or something else just as addictive.

Thinking to stay longer with the Novăceștii than he had, as when he had arrived it was a mere two weeks before Hermione's birthday, Snape hadn't had that much time to learn all that encompassed vampire behaviour. Radu had given him as much information as he could, before sending him and Charlie on their way back to Britain with the promise they would soon return to the safety of the coven. So far, they'd been in London for a night now, and if the itch crawling up his spine was anything to go by, it would be dawn in about an hour.

Glancing at his unconscious familiar, Severus retrieved the black travelling cloak he'd arrived in, wrapped it around his pale body, and stepped out of the bedroom to make his way to the kitchen. "Hermione?" he called, stopping in the entryway.

"Severus?" she whimpered from her curled position on the floor next to Ron's body.

He advanced slowly, as if approaching a wild animal, and bent low to scoop her up in his embrace. She went willingly, wrapping her sticky arms around his neck and burying her face against his collarbone. He then strode down the hallway until he found her bathroom and opened the door, closing it quietly behind them with a nudge of his heel. Depositing Hermione on the toilette lid, he began running hot water into the large, claw-foot tub and selected lavender-scented oil from amongst her cache of bath items. Once the water filled the tub halfway, he turned off the taps, and pulled Hermione to a standing position, disrobing her in the process. Then, he shrugged off his own cloak and picked her up, stepping into the relaxing warmth both of them needed at that moment.

Sinking low, he lay back and brought her to rest against his chest, sluicing cupfuls of hot liquid over her blood-matted tresses. Sitting up a little, he sampled the smells from the shampoo bottles gathered along the ledge of the tub, choosing one that he closely associated with Hermione's own unique scent. Pouring a generous dollop onto his palm, he started massaging the long curls into a thick lather, and dug his fingertips into her scalp. When she moaned he pressed a kiss on the nape of her neck.

"Perhaps it was not wise for you to handle Mister Weasley by yourself," he offered softly. He twisted her soapy strands and piled them atop her head. "This life is still new to you." He plucked a blue flannel from her stack of linen, wetted it, and squeezed a creamy liquid onto it, rubbing until it resembled the foam in her hair. "You haven't had time to deal with the consequences of taking a life, like I have." Gently, he pressed the cloth to the skin on her shoulder and began a circular massage, to remove all the traces of her former best friend's blood from her skin.

"I don't regret taking his life," she whispered, leaning forward to rest her cheek on her raised knees. She closed her eyes and sighed in contentment the lower his strokes went. "It needed to be done for many reasons."

He paused for a moment, but finally pressed on. "Then why were you crying?"

She watched her pale fingers move underneath the water as they touched his left leg, idly caressing his calf. "You were never there to see, but I cried when I was first kissed, when I was accepted to Hogwarts, when anything significant happened in my life." Lifting her hand from the water, she studied the still light skin, somewhat amused that it hadn't turned red from the heat. "I guess the last three years caught up with me, and I broke down."

Severus carried on with his ministrations, unsure of what more to say. His previous belief...that Hermione would be a burden to live with for the rest of his unnatural life...had been proven wholly unfounded; he truly cared for her. It might have taken an exchange of blood, him claiming her as a bond mate and converting her in the process to bring his emotions to just below the surface, but, in retrospect, he would not have changed his fate. Unable to voice his sympathy, he showed her, through soft and lingering touches, the heightened sense of smell that invoked pleasant memories, and the comfort of being in one another's presence.

The water was now tinged a dark pink from all the blood that had been washed from her body, so he began kneading the taut muscles at the juncture of her neck and shoulders, helping them both relax. "Charles is asleep in your bed. Is there another place we may rest that is free of sunlight and surprises?"

Tilting her head back at his insistence, she closed her eyes when he poured clean water over her hair to rinse out the shampoo. "There's a room I use for storage down the hall. It has no windows and we can ward the door."

He placed his hands on her hips and turned her to face him. "What do you want to do about Mister Weasley?"

Blowing out a heavy sigh, she grimaced. "Can't we let Charlie take care of it?"

His brows drew together. "I don't think we can ask that of him, Hermione." He pushed several already frizzing strands away from her face. "He may be my familiar, and compelled to follow my orders, but I *do* have a heart." He gave her a wink. "Contrary to popular belief."

She nodded, closing her eyes. "Severus?" she mumbled. "Why am I so tired all of a sudden?"

Rising from the tub, he grabbed a towel and wrapped her hair in it before lifting her from the basin. "It's dawn," he said, patting her skin dry with the other linen. "Vampires tend to doze off without much warning when the sun hits the horizon."

But she didn't hear his explanation. He felt her go completely lax and chuckled to himself, remembering that he'd done the same thing for months before he began to

anticipate the coming dawn or evening hours. Seeing that she was sufficiently free of any remaining fluid, he took the towel, which had absorbed any moisture, from her head and picked her up, cradling her close as he went in search of the room she'd mentioned. Once he found it, he groaned when he spotted nothing in the room but heaps of old clothes and a moth-eaten overstuffed chair.

He closed the door and settled on the chair with her in his lap, fighting the drowsiness that was quickly making its way into his limbs, nonverbally Summoning several articles of clothing and covering them as best he could before passing out himself. After warding the door, he buried his nose in the crux of her neck and promptly succumbed to his need to sleep.

~*~

The pounding in his brain wouldn't stop.

"Sshurt mup."

It just got louder, accompanied by a yell that annoyed his arse like no other.

Molly Weasley.

"Ronald Weasley?" the matriarch shouted from the corridor that led to each flat. "You'd best be at the store! George's taken ill again."

Unsure of whether to answer the door or not, Charlie wiped his face, glanced at the bedside clock that read just after noon, and rolled off the bed, running his fingers through his spiky locks. Meandering out into the sitting room, he looked around the tiny area. It wasn't too bad, but if a person went anywhere near the kitchen they'd see splatters of blood on the walls, floor... not to mention the dead body that was starting to smell rather pungent.

"I know you're in there with that scarlet woman!"

He rolled his eyes at his mother. She had never given up the attitude that Hermione was stringing Ron, if not all the men around her, along and that she would never commit to anyone. All because of that Skeeter bitch in her fourth year and that stupidly ill-timed photograph of Hermione hugging Harry before the first task.

He honestly couldn't wait until Severus, or even Hermione, took a bite out of her nagging arse.

"If you don't open this door in two seconds, I'll..."

"Hello, Mum."

Surprised to have the door open and her second child appear, Molly pressed her hand to her chest. "Charlie!" She smiled, then immediately frowned. "What are you doing here?"

Smirking, he licked his lips. "Shacking up with the scarlet woman."

"Charlie, for Merlin's sake, be serious for once." Her hands rested on her round hips. "George has done a runner again, and no one's opened up the shop." She looked over his shoulder into the flat. "Is Ron sleeping on her sofa again?"

Biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing, Charlie shrugged. "He's lying around here... somewhere."

"Well, let me in! I've got to wake him so he can..."

"Sorry, Mum," he said, blocking her path. "It's not my place, and you're not an invited guest, so I can't let you in."

"Nonsense," she barked, barrelling her way past him. "He's my son, and she's done using..." Her words died in her throat the moment she took in the state of the kitchen.

Before she could let out the scream that was welling in her chest, Charlie clamped one hand over her mouth, shutting the door with his wand and reinforcing the silencing spells and wards. Stuffing his wand in his back pocket, he pulled his mother close, tightening his arm around her.

"Oh, Mother dearest," he drawled sarcastically. "Ron was pathetically deluded in his infatuation with Hermione." Leaning to the right, he grabbed the material of his mother's calico skirt and tugged it upwards until her holster was revealed, so he could slide the nine-inch springy reed wand from its sheath. "I'll just keep this for now." He tucked it away next to his own.

"Now," he said, pushing her closer to the kitchen, "let's get some things straight, shall we?" He practically shoved her when she struggled and began screaming behind his hand. "She never used him and she never encouraged him."

Unexpectedly, Molly kicked him on his shin, breaking free of his grasp. "You monster!" she shrieked and pointed at the mangled remains on the tile floor. "How could you do this?"

Snorting with laughter, Charlie shook his head. "I didn't do that... Mummy."

Reaching out her hands, she cupped his face, tears coursing down her cheeks. "What did she do to you, baby?"

"Do?" he asked, confused. "She didn't *do* anything to me." He forcibly removed her hands.

"But I don't understand." She was weeping. Turning away from Charlie, she made her way into the kitchen, her shoes squelching in the sticky puddles of blood that remained on the floor, and knelt next to Ron. "He was such a good boy."

"Then you're as deluded as he was."

There was a loud thwack, and Molly joined her son on the floor, unconscious.

~*~

Stretching, Hermione groaned when the muscles in her back protested. "Severus?" She could see in the pitch blackness, but she still wanted the comfort of his voice.

"Mmmh."

"Wake up." She prodded him in the side, giggling when he growled at her. "I'm hungry," she said meekly.

Yawning, he arched his back as well, nearly dumping her on the Berber carpet. "Well, shouldn't keep Princess waiting, should I?"

"Well, being the wife of a grumpy vampire does require a great deal of sustenance."

Both stilled at her words...he from shock and she from feeling she'd gone too far, too fast.

"I-I'm sorry," she backpedalled, moving from his lap.

His hand caught her wrist and tugged her back to straddle his thighs. "What are you sorry for?" Caressing her skin, his fingers made their way up her arms, until his palm cupped her cheek. "Do you not want to be my wife?"

She threaded her fingers through his, capturing his palm, and nuzzling it. "Aren't we more than husband and wife now?"

Bringing her face down, he met her mouth with his for a heated kiss. "Much more." He shifted his pelvis, rubbing his hardened shaft along her moist nether lips.

"Are you two decent in there?" Charlie asked with a knock. "If not, you'd better be by the time I open this door." They could hear him fiddling with the knob. "One... two... "

"I swear, one of these days, I will kill that boy myself," Severus said with a snarl.

"Three!" Having dismantled the wards, Charlie popped open the door and stood there, smirking at the two vampires who were completely nude and, from the looks of things, about to shag. "Rise and dine, sleepy-heads." He snorted at their aroused state. "I have the best timing."

Hermione dissolved into a fit of laughter while Severus threw a jinx his way, but Charlie side-stepped to the left just in time to miss it. "Why are you barging in on us, anyway?"

Charlie immediately sobered. "We have a visitor."

~*~

"I Imperiused her to a write letter to Dad, telling him she was taking care of George for the evening, and not to wait up," Charlie explained to his master. "He'll do as she says."

Molly had been restrained much the same way Ron had, complete with silvery cords and a Silencing Charm.

"Her wand?" Hermione asked. Both she and Severus had dressed to deal with the problem, she in faded blue jeans and dark green jumper, and he in the black linen trousers and white dress shirt.

Charlie handed it to her. She looked it over. "I like this; it's light."

Severus frowned. "Where's yours?"

"It was taken by Snatchers when we were hunting for Horcruxes."

"That was years ago!" Snape attested incredulously. "What have you been using since then?"

Withdrawing the angled hawthorn stick from her wrist sheath, she held it out to Severus. "Bellatrix's wand." When he continued to stare instead of taking it, she huffed. "I had to make do when we escaped the Malfoys."

He took it from her, sneering in revulsion. "Ronald Weasley cast his Obliviate on me with this."

"That explains quite a few things," Hermione confirmed, and Charlie agreed with her.

"Yeah, that thing's fucked up to begin with." He snorted, shaking his head. "Imagine what it could do in the hands of someone incompetent."

Lips thinly pursed, Severus pocketed the stick.

"Hey!" Hermione protested. "That's mine!"

"No, it was Bella's, and it shall remain Bella's."

"Oh, so it's *Bella* now, is it?" she seethed, jealousy apparent in her tone. "Guess we know what you were really up to at those Death Eater revels!"

"You do not, nor will you ever know, what went on," Severus hissed, his eyes flaring indigo as he stared her down. "It's Dark magic, Hermione. It will taint you."

She crossed her arms in defiance. "How do you know it hasn't already?"

Unbidden, he glanced at the body in the kitchen. "I can't say that it hasn't."

"Why you..."

"Ahem!" Charlie cleared his throat. When they were both silent, he continued, "Now, if you're done acting like spoiled children..."

"I beg your pardon?" Snape huffed in an affronted manner.

"Beg all you want, *Master*." The redhead had a decidedly mischievous look about him.

Snape moved to throttle the young man, but Hermione put her hand on his chest, stopping him. "He's poking at you," she illuminated with a chuckle. "He's just saying he loves you, that's all."

Both men looked at her like she'd grown four heads. She shrugged. "When you've been around the male species long enough, you learn to decode their actions and words."

Shaking his head in exasperation, Severus turned to their captive. He removed the Silencing Charm, but kept her bound. "Why are you here?"

"You're supposed to be dead!" Molly screeched, hurting the vampires' ears. "We all saw it: the blood on the floor, Lucius confirming he sent you to the Shack...all of it!"

Leaning closer, Severus inhaled deeply, his mouth watering. "Lucius is alive?" That did not sit well with him.

"That whole rotted family is still alive," Hermione offered when Molly refused to answer him.

"Charles, in my leather case there is a small green vial of clear liquid. Fetch it for me."

After Charlie left, Hermione laid her hand on his arm. "We can't let her go." She nodded in Molly's direction.

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he assuaged her worry. "She won't be going anywhere, but I want some answers." He patted her hand. "I've been away for three years, and there's much to learn."

"But I could tell..."

"Hermione," he spoke her name sternly. It sent a prickle up her spine and she felt compelled to obey. "You have been searching for me these past years and have been somewhat of a recluse, if what Charles has told me is true. You do not know the state of things at this time." Seeing her crestfallen expression, he chuckled her under her

chin. "It's not personal, believe me."

She didn't answer until Charlie came back bearing the bottle Snape asked for. "Snitch," she muttered.

"What did I do?"

"You told me of her life up until last night," Severus informed him with a smirk. "She feels you betrayed her."

"I couldn't exactly help it, you know. I mean, Mum was writing me constantly about how you and Ron were for all intents and purposes, 'living in sin'." He gestured with air quotes.

"Harlot!" Molly cried and spat on Hermione's pant leg.

There was a loud crack when the back of Severus' hand landed across the Weasley matriarch's cheek. "*Never* call her such a thing again!"

Molly sobbed from the pain of the very broken bones in her face. "Murderers," she slurred.

"Undoubtedly." Snape prodded her mouth open and poured half the contents of the vial down her throat. "Now, Madam Weasley. Where is your family?"

Hermione had to give her credit as the old woman tried to resist the effects of the Veritaserum.

"Go... to... "

"Madam, I have been living in Hell the last three years because of your son!" Snape thundered. "Now, tell me, where is George?"

"I don't know," Molly spluttered.

Charlie laid a hand on Severus' tense shoulder. "I know where he is," he said softly with a catch in his throat. "He won't be an issue."

Turning his attention to his familiar, Snape used Legilimency, and...just as Radu had said...the power was increased exponentially. The ease with which he slipped into Charlie's mind was frightening and exhilarating all at once. He didn't have to search for the information, as the boy's memories...all of them, every blessed single one...were laid bare before him.

"Yes," Snape murmured, patting the hand still residing on his shoulder. "He won't be a problem."

"Where *is* George?" Molly beseeched.

"Gone," Hermione surmised between the anguished look on Charlie's face and the regret on Severus'.

"My Georgie!" Molly wailed, thrashing side to side to get free. "My babies!"

"Silence, woman!" Snape's fangs had descended, and his nostrils flared upon scenting the adrenalin-infused blood flowing through the portly witch. "Where is William?"

"Sh-Shell Cottage, with Fleur." Tears swelled in her red-rimmed eyes.

Nodding, he began licking his lips. "Percy?"

"Aide to Kingsley Shacklebolt," Charlie murmured when he saw that his mother was trying to fight the compulsion.

"Ministry, I assume?" Snape directed his question to Molly. "Is he glued to Shacklebolt's backside like he was with Fudge?"

"Y-Yes!" she screamed.

Leaning closer, Severus allowed her to see the dark and menacing look that had overcome his features. "Ginevra?"

"Not my daughter, *not my daughter!*"

"Most definitely your daughter," Hermione piped in. "If anyone were a scarlet woman, it would have to be her."

"Bitch! You lie! My precious baby girl would..."

"Your precious baby slept with all the players in the Penzance Pirates Quidditch club." Hermione crossed her arms and curled her lip. "And, not that it's any of your business, but I was a virgin until last night."

Charlie smacked Severus on the shoulder. "You sly dog, you!"

"Shut up!" both vampires ordered in unison. Severus raised a brow. "Well? Ginevra's location, if you would."

"She's a Quidditch announcer for the Salisbury Slingers," Charlie commented. "I've heard she spends a lot of time with Malfoy Junior these days."

Of course Molly had denied it in the past, saying that Ginny had been meant for Harry Potter, but since Harry hadn't been heard from in months, the girl had had to look at other prospects before she lost her flawless beauty. Hermione, in a lucid moment between stupors and sleepless nights, had spoken with Harry shortly before he'd 'disappeared'. He'd said he was going to travel and see the world...looking for signs of Snape along the way...and experience life like he'd never had the chance to do before. She sincerely hoped that he was sunning himself on a tropical beach somewhere, drunk on Cuervo, and chasing after pretty girls.

"And last, but never least," Severus drawled, pushing the collar of Molly's shirt away from her throbbing pulse, "Arthur, if you please."

Hermione's eyes zeroed in on the woman's thick neck and she practically drooled. "Severus," she whimpered. "I'm so hungry."

"Soon, love. Soon."

"Ministry, but should be home now," Molly sobbed. She started struggling anew. "You're all damned for this! Especially you, Charles Gaylord Weasley!"

"I *hate* that name!" Charlie snarled. "I swear, your nagging is what drove George to drink!"

"George didn't drink!" she vehemently refuted.

"You live in a constant state of denial, don't you?"

Unable to help herself, Hermione sniggered. "Gaylord."

"Don't."

"Sure... *Gaylord*."

"And you said / acted like a child?" Snape drawled. "Hermione, you're starting to shake. You need to eat."

Without warning, she punched a hole in Molly's throat and ripped out her windpipe. "There, Charlie," Hermione said casually. "She can't nag you anymore."

Once Severus saw and smelled the blood, the lust flooded his system, as he and his mate latched onto either side of the Weasley matriarch's neck, gorging themselves on the copious amounts of crimson liquid that gushed forth from her mortal wound. Molly lasted a few seconds before her heartbeat slowed to nothing.

When the witch's skin was marble-white, having been drained of all her blood, both vampires sat on the floor, bloated. Smacking her lips, Hermione tasted something off, and then remembered that Severus had given the woman the truth serum before killing her. Her previous insecurities compelled her to question him.

"Severus?"

"Mmmh?" he grunted.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes," he immediately said without thought. Wait. "Bloody hell, Miss Granger!" he growled, knowing what she was up to.

She giggled and crawled on her hands and knees to sit in his lap. "It's okay." She rubbed soothing circles on his full stomach. "I love you, too."

"I'm going to get cavities from all the sweetness," Charlie observed with a fake gag.

"Why are you still here?"

"What? No thank you, Charlie, for bringing us our evening meal?"

"It was your mother," Hermione said. "How hard was it?"

"Quite hard, if you ask me." He sat on the sofa and glared at the vampires. "You didn't have to sit and listen to her nag for six hours."

"Why didn't you just silence her then?"

"Because if I let her run her mouth, she wouldn't move her legs, which...even with the Body-Bind...she kicked me in the bollocks twice!"

"Aw, poor Charlie," she said in mock sympathy. "Do you have bruised balls?"

Snape snorted.

"Ha, bloody, ha!" The redhead stood and pulled up the body of his mother, now significantly lighter. He started dragging her to the kitchen when Hermione stopped him.

"Wait! I need to practice my stitching."

Cocking his head to the side, Severus studied his mate. "What are you planning?"

"You'll see," she promised with a wicked grin.